‘How do you fact that?’:
The status and efficacy of Aboriginal oral histories

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1998
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Aboriginal oral histories

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BA Hum, DipEd (Bris).

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Education (Honours),
Faculty of Education,
Northern Territory University
February, 1998
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Ngalap Topsy Secretary, Johnny McMahon and Prince Mitbul at Kalalak for the sharing of many years of knowledge, humour, stories and relationship.

I am very grateful to my academic supervisor Dr. Michael F. Christie for guiding me through the process and for his ‘hard’ and constructive comments regarding my writing.

I would also like to thank Ian Alexander for his diligent proof reading and my wife Zenaida Jaravata Heffernan for her invaluable support.
Declaration

I declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master of Education (Honours) at the Northern Territory University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged.

I certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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August 1998
Abstract

In relation to Aboriginal peoples colonial historiography is a story of conquest in itself. Histories of culture contact and of Aboriginal cultures and customs were too often seen through the eyes of the victor and written mostly by white academics about ‘Aborigines’. Indigenous voices were rarely heard in this rational, objectivist text. Aboriginal history was appropriated, controlled, conquered.

In contrast, postcolonial historiography has provided a platform for previously unheard voices, for example - women’s, workers’, immigrant and more recently Aboriginal histories. Aboriginal oral narratives, such as that related by Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary (Juwaning), may be regarded as a postcolonial historical text. These narratives both challenge conventional history and offer different ‘truths’ which relate to land, culture, black/white relations and historical events.

In this thesis I use Topsy Secretary’s narratives as an exemplar of the indigenous voice and argue that indigenous voices enrich and problematise the writing of histories in which Aboriginal people feature. I also analyse a number of key issues relating to Attwood’s notion of Aboriginalism and the role of the white historian as co-author of historical texts that deal with Aboriginal people and culture. In my conclusion I argue that a broader representation of indigenous voices in the production of Aboriginal histories
acts as an antidote to the earlier appropriation of their words and actions by colonial historians.
Introduction
Introduction

This thesis looks at the writing of history and, in particular, at the collaborative process involved in writing a history based on oral interviews. It raises questions about the difference between mainstream, archival-based histories and such 'oral histories'. It investigates the validity of both forms and it uses, as its primary focus, an oral history entitled Gweyelgwa ngayuboeno, gwoyalwa nganigi: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country'. This text is based on oral interviews I recorded with Topsy Secretary (Juwaning) over a two year period.

Topsy Secretary is the most senior traditional owner of Larrikiya country, including Darwin and the Cox Peninsula of the Northern Territory of Australia. With her brother Bobby Secretary, throughout the 1970s, she fought for the title to the land of Kalalak, located in the heart of Darwin, along the coastline in the suburb of Coconut Grove. This was a protracted struggle and is well documented in Bill Day's publication Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement. A small group of Larrikiya, including Topsy's family, received a 'Special Purpose Lease' for this land in the late 1970s and now the title is termed 'Crown Lease in Perpetuity'. Topsy and her family have lived permanently at Kalalak since the early seventies. Legal proceedings for title to Kalalak began in 1975 and the Special Purpose Lease was formally granted on 25th August 1979.

In 1991 I met Topsy Secretary through my work as a curriculum writer for Greening Australia (NT). I needed to consult her in order to incorporate local Larrikiya knowledges and stories into curriculum documents developed for the subject areas Social Education and English for the level of Years 8 to 10. In my role as a Curriculum Officer for Greening Australia
I produced a handbook and curriculum materials for schools, based upon the Rapid Creek (Gurrumbay) local environment; a major saltwater/freshwater system running through Darwin. Part of this project involved researching Larrikiya history for the Rapid Creek area and for Darwin. In order to research Larrikiya history and check all gathered information I worked closely with Topsy. Out of this collaboration was born the idea to 'write' her 'life story'.

Over the eighteen months I consulted Topsy a close relationship developed. As a secondary teacher I was aware of the dearth of local Aboriginal historical writings suitable for use in Darwin High Schools, particularly in the subject area of Social Education and English. I became interested in writing a Larrikiya history book for secondary schools and in writing Topsy's life story. I chose to document Topsy's life because of the close relationship we built up over this period of time. As an outsider or newcomer to Darwin I was generally amazed at the lack of recognition and knowledge of Larrikiya culture and of Topsy's status by the wider Darwin audience.

While recording her story I came to assume some responsibilities to Topsy and her family. This took the form of providing bangbang (tobacco), majawa (meat/fish), mayuma (other forms of food) on a regular basis and providing lifts for them around town when needed; mostly to go shopping, to the social welfare office or to purchase such things as a fishing net. More importantly, I am meant to take care of Prince and to occasionally drive him across to Belyuwn, (Mandorah, Cox Peninsula), to visit his country, his younger brother - Johnny Singh and an old dancer man who has since passed away. Prince also accompanies me from time to time to the soccer, the movies, barbecues and to the homes of friends.
At Kalalak they call me the ‘taxi driver’ because of the frequency with which I perform this function for the community and, more often, for Prince Mitbul. Prince is in the same totem group as Topsy, namely the Danggalaba (‘crocodile’). He calls Topsy ‘sister’ because of this. I call Topsy ‘grandmother’ or Ngalap in Larrikiya and I call Prince ‘Daddy’ or Derriba. I also call Topsy’s ‘husband’ - Johnny McMahon - Derriba or ‘Old Man’.

They call me beliya which is a Larrikiya term for ‘young man’ although in terms of Larrikiya culture and learning I am really a nimba or ‘young boy’. I think I am called beliya or ‘young man’ out of respect for my age. I am in my late thirties and cannot really be called ‘young boy’, having not gone through ceremony yet. I suggested to Topsy and her family jokingly that they should call me by an Irish term - manin which means ‘boy pretending to be a man’ because it seemed to be more appropriate.

Another indicator of my relationship to the community of Kalalak is that every year on St. Patrick’s Day they help me to celebrate. They share fish, usually salmon, and drink with me. I supply the Irish drink - Guinness. There is one man named Sonny whose birthday falls on Paddy’s Day. I always give him the first drink for luck. On Patrick’s Day 1995 Kenny Storer, a man staying at Kalalak, put his arm around me and proceeded to sing two or three traditional Irish songs, word for word. I was a bit stunned to see an Aboriginal man singing Irish songs until he told me that when he was a boy he visited old peoples homes around Darwin singing these songs. He explained that there were a number of Irish people in these homes and that his singing would bring ‘eyes to their tears’ (sic).
My father Patrick Heffernan came out from Castlecomer, Kilkenny, Ireland after the Second World War. To stay in Kilkenny, Ireland meant that there were very limited opportunities in terms of employment. At this time there was a very high unemployment rate in the Republic of Ireland. One option remaining to my father was to work in the Castlecomer anthracite mine, a very unhealthy occupation. There were none of the health safeguards and awareness there is today. Paddy enlisted with the Royal Australian Air Force with promises of pilot training ringing in his ears. When he got to Australia he ended up working in the Darwin Air Base Mess as his first posting.

I was brought up with a keen sense of my Irish heritage, listening to Irish music every evening, going to the Queensland Irish Club with my elder sisters every Saturday and witnessing them learning Irish dancing. While they were doing this I was circling the bar looking for near empty Guinness and beer glasses to drain the final contents. Even while attending a Christian Brothers College in South Brisbane I had a feeling of difference from the other boys. I was also brought up with an understanding of Irish political history and, in particular, our stormy relationship with the English and the Protestants of the north. A lot of this information and understanding was passed on to me through song. My father used to listen to Irish music every night while I was growing up.

When I was twelve years old I went with my father to Ireland and had a fantastic holiday with all of my family there. It was like entering a dream world, an Irish summer complete with long evening twilights, soccer on the roads, banshee stories, tales of witches and headless coachmen in my home town of Castlecomer. I loved the ‘chat’ and revelled in the late
nights, the fun, the leg pulling, the *craic*. I found it very hard to readjust to the severe discipline of the Christian brothers and discovered that what was applauded, celebrated during my summer holiday in Ireland was not so appreciated in the classroom. My chat usually ended in the application of the strap!

I was brought up in Australia in the Irish Catholic tradition and in the development of my relationship with Topsy Secretary I became much more aware and in touch with this aspect of my personal history. She would always be entertained with my retelling of stories from my life as an altar boy and choir boy and of how Catholicism deals with death and superstition, to name a couple of our conversation topics. Not only did the recording of her oral accounts reveal much of her ‘accommodation’ or of her drawing common links between *Larrikiya* traditional practices and *Barragut* religion but also my daily interactions with her, doing the shopping, going to a party or sitting around chatting, drinking cups of tea entailed much informal exchange. It was and continues to be this informal exchange where the ‘real story’ is passed on to me.

My father also found it very difficult adapting to Australian life early on and missed his homeland of Ireland very much. He especially found the rarely documented prejudice against the *Micks* in the 1960s in the Commonwealth Public Service very stressful. So, I grew up with a sense of not quite fitting into the mainstream of Anglo-Australian society and, in part, I think this also contributed to my attraction to other cultures, such as the *Larrikiya* and to ‘marginalised’ people, in general. I felt drawn to Topsy, to *Kalalak* and continue to feel at home with her and her family’s style of communication which is very similar to the Irish *craic* that I mentioned above.
After consulting and working with Topsy Secretary over the eighteen months to two year period on the Rapid Creek (Gurrumbay) Education Project, I initiated the oral history project with Topsy's agreement and full co-operation. Topsy was very clear and articulate regarding the importance of recording her story, her knowledge and of the educative role it is meant to play. She was also quite adamant that she needed to be paid for her time and sharing of knowledge. We agreed to the AIATSIS prescribed rate of $15 per hour. Quite often she would call the project 'language' because the maintenance of Larrikiya language is vitally important to her. A linguist, Mark Harvey, is, at present, working towards the development of a Larrikiya vocabulary and dictionary.

From 1992 to 1994 I co-authored Gweyelgwa ngayuboene gwoyalwa nganigi: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country' with Ngalap Topsy. It is, largely, a collection of stories told by her to me. The text was gathered from a series of oral history interviews (24 hours) that I conducted with Topsy over a period of some 18 months. The full text comprises the major part of the Appendix to this thesis. When talking of putting her story down Topsy stated that 'you want a story about me. It IS important. Larrikiya and Barragut (Whitefellas) to know what history about... Larrikiyas' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4). She also described the collaborative process as 'you learning me and I am learning from you' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4).

Throughout this thesis I will be quoting from this collaborative work to underscore my arguments relating to the value of Aboriginal oral histories. I maintain that they:
belong to a separate domain from 'conventional history' (it is an area worthy of study in its own right),

differ from conventional history in relation to knowledges, content, ordering of place and time and preoccupation with identity and

are capable of transforming the ways in which history has been written by challenging its foundations and processes.

Secretary's narratives belong to the domain of postcolonial historiography, and are part of the struggle for 'truth' between Indigenous and European versions of history. This is a contest between literacy and orality (Arthur in Carley 1992: 10) and, as Muecke maintains, involves a struggle over land.

Such histories as Topsy Secretary's ask deeper questions, such as, what is history? Is it an empirical, verifiable academic study or a form of literature? Is it an objective or a subjective view of the past? Is any historical account solely an attempt to interpret the past and, therefore, always inherently 'flawed'? Is history a craft whereby the historian as detective seeks out the 'true facts' and documents an history? Or can it be something else? Where do Topsy Secretary's narrative accounts belong in the continuum of oral and conventional histories? What is the value of such Aboriginal oral histories? What are their respective strengths and weaknesses? How do they challenge the colonial and conventional historian's text? These questions are explored in this thesis.

I will argue that there is a fundamental chasm between two historical traditions in this country: the conventional white history and the newly emerging Aboriginal histories. These Aboriginal histories differ from
traditional Aboriginal oral histories that sustained the clan-based culture of community life. The text Topsy and I have collaborated on is an example of a new form of history. However, at present, Topsy does not wish to see this text published because of the intense conflict between rival 'Larrikiya' family groups over the Kenbi Land Claim. She fears that some of her 'enemies' may use the information contained in her narratives to demonstrate their traditional knowledge and so establish the validity of their claim. However, it remains an invaluable family historical resource.

I will maintain that Aboriginal historiographic forms are gradually winning this struggle and that this is demonstrated in the increased publication of such historical texts. This thesis itself is further evidence of this because it involves a form of writing that displays the conventions of orthodox history but investigates and focuses on Aboriginal oral histories.

I will argue that both forms of historiography have strengths and weaknesses and that they are themselves different interpretations of the past. This difference in interpretation is premised upon differences in language, culture and world view. The question may also be posed: 'Is there any chance of these two historical traditions merging?' What we may see in the future is a trend towards history incorporating, to greater extent, literary devices. The new domain may encompass plays, novels, poetry and, indeed, any form of writing or art that seeks to 'interpret' the past, either 'objectively' or 'creatively'.

In this thesis I tentatively define Aboriginal oral histories as narratives of the past recounted by Aboriginal people themselves. This does not preclude an Aboriginal narrative from having an interpretative, critical
element. A written text may incorporate the use of such narratives and retain the label 'oral history' if the oral testimony itself forms the greater bulk of the text. Other more conventional historical writings may use oral testimony but still not be described as 'oral history' if the majority of the text relies on documentary sources. Royal Commission and Select Committee Reports contain oral testimony but are not oral histories in their own right. The context within which this testimony is gathered is a formal, specific one and the result is an official document often favoured as a key source by conventional historians.

Chapter one of this thesis deals with the historical background to the ongoing struggle between conventional history and Aboriginal owned histories; chapter two explores the various definitions and major characteristics of Aboriginal oral histories; chapter three explores the strengths of these forms of histories; chapter four addresses criticisms generally levelled at the practice and authenticity of oral history, and chapter five looks at issues that arise from the collaborative nature of such texts which utilise oral historiographical type research. Throughout the course of this thesis I will alternate between the feminine and masculine terms of 'she', 'her' and 'he', 'him' to avoid sexist and clumsy language. I also prefer to use the term 'Aboriginal' instead of 'Indigenous' or Aboriginal and Islander people. Torres Strait Islander people have said in the past that they do not wish to be referred to as 'Indigenous' and the term 'Aboriginal' is less cumbersome than 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'. I will also use a number of interchangeable terms to refer to people of Aboriginal or European descent. I am conscious that such terms can go in and out of fashion and wherever possible have used the most acceptable contemporary terms.
Chapter One
1 The Struggle For Land, The Struggle For Text

1.1 'Writing the country'

In terms of cultural politics, the struggle for space is crucial, both in terms of real space (for instance land rights) and the more metaphorical space of representation (whose 'image' will count?) (Muecke 1992: 2).

Since the British first colonised this continent over 200 hundred years ago Aboriginal and Europeans have endeavoured to maintain their particular world views as it relates to the land. Muecke argues that 'there were two different forms of writing in colonial Australia, Aboriginal versus European and that these forms of writing were competing for the major resource, the land' (Muecke 1992: 7).

The Aboriginal one [semiotic system] was divided again into at least two parallel semiotic systems: meanings as encoded in spoken language, and meanings as pictured in designs (carvings in wood or stone, sand paintings, body markings and so on). The European one used a form of writing - the alphabet - that represented the sounds of the spoken language... The difference is of crucial importance to understanding the way that Aboriginal meanings lined up against European meanings as they both struggled to 'write the country'. The fact that Aboriginal writing systems did not record the sounds of language enabled the colonisers to assume that there was no writing at all, whereas in fact this writing resembled a writing system like Chinese. The colonisers' assumption was that alphabetic script was the only real form of writing (Muecke 1992: 7).

Muecke goes on to assert that because of this Aboriginal people should not be called 'illiterate' but, perhaps analphabete (meaning 'not having
the alphabet'). This is a significant point to consider when we have our attention drawn to the postcolonial upsurge of interest in Aboriginal writers and artists; to realise that this creative tension was always there, that it didn't just spring up after 200 years of 'oppression' or non-expression.

From 1992 to 1994 I co-authored a text with Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary, namely, Gweyelgwa ngayuboeno gwoyalwa nganigi: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country'. It is, largely, her life story told in her own words in response to my questioning. Her narratives and other such Aboriginal oral testimonies contest with white histories for textual space.

This site of struggle and the lack of recognition of Aboriginal writing or 'truth', a term Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary uses when talking of Aboriginal history from her perspective as a 'traditional, rightful owner of the country' is reflected upon when she talks about the need for her story to be told:

But the book like that you put 'im in the library, you know, it, you got a put true story. Larrikiya tribe born in Darwin and nothing written down... no story written down because no one used to ask them questions, never bothered to ask them question, all sorts of stories (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4).

Historical texts such as Powell's The Far Country record the story of the development of Darwin as a European township on the tropical frontier. Such mainstream histories have taken precedence over the recording of the history or histories of the Larrikiya people. 'No one bothered to ask them questions' about the Larrikiya historical experience because the
colonisers were intent on imprinting their meanings onto the landscape and into historiography. Aboriginal people were structurally excluded from access to the means to influence that dominant history. 'Aborigines had been blocked by poverty and discrimination' (Goodall 1987: 17).

In addition, Topsy’s comment that ‘no one bothered to ask them questions’ is delivered in the modern day context. A context within which she still feels a great degree of non-recognition of her community’s historical experience.

In this chapter I will place the development of Aboriginal oral histories into a historiographical framework and discuss some of the reasons for its emergence.

With the colonisation of the Australian continent came urbanisation and the new settlers imprinted upon the country - 'cottages, streets and gardens' (Muecke 1992: 4), a way of life which reflected order and control. Muecke believes that this was a 'shoring up of familiar and comfortable British-style meanings - the way they talked was like the way they lived' (Muecke 1992: 4) This was the colonisers’ side of the dialogue to Aboriginal Australia. The primary concern was to impose a European order, to make the country familiar and secure, not of 'reaching out to the Other' (Muecke 1992: 4).

Literary critics, such as Attwood (1990), Fielder (1990), Morris (1990), and Neumann (1992) use the word 'conventional' to describe how Australian history has been traditionally written. I use the term 'conventional history' to refer to the chronologically consistent, rational, ordered, authoritative style which typified colonial Australian historiography.
This concept encompasses an attempt to own the continent, the land. Carter labels this form of history as 'diorama history - history where the past has been settled even more effectively than the country' (Carter 1987: xix) and elsewhere as 'imperial history' (Carter 1987: xvi). He states:

Such history is a fabric woven of self-reinforcing illusions... The primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate... Hence, too, it's preference for fixed and detachable facts, for actual houses and boats at anchor. For these, unlike the intentions which brought them there, unlike the material uncertainties of lived time and space, are durable objects which can be treated as typical, as further evidence of a universal historical process (Carter 1987: xvi).

This style of historiography was part of the struggle for space, metaphorical representational space as discussed earlier by Muecke. It was an assertion of authority over the indigenous owners of the country and even though the 'sword' played its role in beating back Aboriginal claims of ownership to the country, so did the 'pen' in 'writing the country' European style and, in so doing, superimposing European concepts of space over Aboriginal space and, of course, Aboriginal text.

Dale asserts that this contest is a 'struggle within and between competing versions of place' and 'is ongoing and is not only physical. It was and is conceptual' (Dale 1987: 3-4). 'The colonial enterprise is a struggle for power not only over place, but over language and concepts of place' (Dale 1987: 5).

Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994) draw on Carter (1987) to argue:
For Australia the European naming and mapping of the zoological, botanical and geographical features of the land was itself an act of remembrance, self consciously etching the social and natural worlds of Europe onto a new landscape (Carter 1987). Naming was also, of course, an act of erasure: both a deliberate non-recognition and a deletion of the existing Aboriginal history and inscription of the land (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994:3).

This non-Aboriginal writing of Australian history became the dominant discourse. Since colonisation historians have highlighted the European experience of settling and conquering the land. Because this discourse had no meaningful input from the Aboriginal perspective it can be argued they were written out of the history books. In terms of the struggle for metaphorical textual space, Aboriginality had been delivered a severe blow. Rose (1989) refers to the 'tyranny of facts', a term I appropriate to denote a key feature of colonial, conventional Australian history. These kinds of 'facts' as represented in the coloniser's texts reduced the Aboriginal experience in the settler's eyes to one of insignificance (Rose 1989:146).

They [facts] are given a privilege which is greater than our own lived experience. Facts tell us what the past was really all about, regardless of our memories, our knowledge derived from older people, our experience of how things work. Wielded by the powerful, facts tell us what matters, rather than allowing us to decide what matters (Rose 1989:146).

Lowenthal compares this form of historical writing as a means of controlling historical memory. He posits:
Big Brother in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* controls the present by controlling the past. Since 'past events... have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories', it follows that 'past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon', and therefore 'whatever the Party chooses to make it... (Lowenthal 1985: 190).

The concept or the 'fact', that there is 'one true white history' of this continent since colonisation/invasion, is a key feature of colonial Australian history and, according to Barwick (1981), the notion of homogeneity was perpetuated until the mid 1950s.

Until the 1940s a virtually homogeneous and monolingual immigrant population could assume that Australians who work and worship alike will think alike. Historians intent on nation-building ignored the uncomfortable past of Aborigines and other minorities and deliberately encouraged an already deep-rooted majority belief that maintenance of group boundaries by people of different origins is improper and divisive. Post-war policy and propaganda aimed at migrant assimilation further emphasised this ideal of homogeneity. Because such views were perpetuated in school texts they were learned early and held with unquestioning tenacity (Barwick 1981: 81).

Aboriginal experience and representations of their world view or history were not accorded the same status. It may be argued that they were not even peripheral but non-existent. In chapter three I will discuss further how oral histories may be employed to 're-create memories, resurrect the silenced past and fashion a distinct Aboriginal culture' (Neumann 1992: 293).
Healy (1991) and Neumann (1992) both refer to the 'silence' of Aboriginal history and its struggle with colonial historical writings. As Healy observes, Stanner described Aboriginal people in the 1960s as being the subject of the 'Great White Australian Silence' (Stanner in Healy 1991: 27). Healy also argues that this 'Silence' contained 'two aspects; a refusal to speak about conditions of life imposed upon Aboriginal people and a refusal to hear, effectively a silence imposed by a European culture of deafness' (Healy 1991: 27). Non-Aboriginal audiences were presented with 'the Aborigines' as a well preserved, one dimensional artefact; much the same way as a hunting trophy; an admired beautiful wild specimen but, nonetheless, tamed. I prefer to shy away from using the term 'silence' when discussing the absence of Aboriginal voices in northern Australian historical discourse simply because, in terms of volume, there has not been a great deal written within this general field. I prefer to focus on what information, themes and perspectives oral histories or 'new histories' are capable of revealing which conventional history is not.

Neumann (1992: 293) states that colonial discourse made 'the Aborigines' and Attwood argues that the 'making of the Aborigines' was 'a process determined more by Europeans than by Aborigines' (Attwood 1989: x).

Out of the exchange or dialectic between the dominant and the dominated there came a transformed consciousness, one shaped both by a European culture and by their own - and so their part in becoming Aborigines was both determined and determining (Attwood 1989: xi).

Muecke (1992: 20) expresses this colonial discourse simply as 'European ways of talking about Aborigines' and stated that this 'limit[ed] their [Europeans] ways of knowing what Aborigines might be'. He observes that
'individuals are born into language and have had no immediate say in its formation; they are formed by language, and in particular by its discourses' (Muecke 1992: 22)

The discourse that denoted colonialism was the Aborigine as the Other, the primitive, pristine savage. However, it should be noted that the 'Aborigine as a pristine savage' was a revised version of the 'Aborigine as beast or animal'. Conquest of Aboriginal Australia took place at different times and in different locations. At each stage of frontier conflict language played its part. At the height of conflict the Aborigine is a 'beast', an 'animal', 'vermin'. At the conclusion of conflict, in a mood of nostalgia, the remnant 'full blood' Aborigine regains the 'noble savage' image (Christie, M.F. 1979: 199-200).

Muecke discusses the anthropological writings of R.M. and C.H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, and Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, to highlight the Aborigine as the Other or as the 'noble savage'. The Berndts in *The World of the First Australians* maintain 'the Aborigines' as the Other and attempt to answer the question 'who are they?' (Muecke 1992: 26). It is by intent an 'authoritative, objective account' (Muecke 1992: 26). Daisy Bates personified the Romantic perception of Aborigines as helpless children and the whites as their protectors (Muecke 1992 : 30). Her text, *The Passing of the Aborigines*, reflects 'a combination of the Racist, Romantic and Anthropological discourse' (Muecke 1992: 30).

The exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from conventional white history meant that non-Aboriginal Australians had a very limited notion of the nature or culture of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people and
communities had no control or input into this discourse and, hence, no
voice in the domain of Australian historiography.

Goodall (1987: 20) believes that Aboriginal historiography was affected by
colonial domination and, more specifically, by the way both settlers and
government controlled records related to Aboriginal issues. When
referring to this control of information she states:

This was done by a number of processes, one being the state's control over the
flow of information, very obvious in the 'apprenticeship' scheme when
Aboriginal people were denied information about their children's location or
given information only selectively to mislead them when trying to find their
children. Another process has been the coloniser's power to say whose story is
'true', through the interaction of government statement, 'expert views', the
press and, most broadly, settler 'public opinion'. The victors do indeed write
the history, denying validity to the claims and perceptions of oppressed peoples
(Goodall 1987: 20).

History as told by the victors was, and some would argue still is, 'the
history'. When talking of official histories, Murphy (1994:119) states that
they 'wield substantial discursive power' and can 'claim the sanction of a
lineage of historians and so mobilise the power of tradition'. Murphy
now raises the question at the end of the twentieth century as to whether
it is still possible to write official history.

It wasn't until the emergence of alternative histories and the many voices
of postcolonial Australia that this perspective began to be challenged.
Hamilton (1994: 24) discusses the shift in history writing itself and the
change in the historian's role in the late twentieth century. She sees the
academic historian's role as changing since the 1960s, arguing that their 'cultural authority has been gradually eroded'. Hamilton refers to Robert Young when she states:

History is no longer a single discourse... In recent years, there has been a return to the storytelling function in history, a celebration of the imaginative elements in historical reconstruction, a greater awareness of history writing as a literary practice (Hamilton 1994: 25)

1.2 Memory and 'story'

When talking about changes in the role of history and the historian Hamilton refers to the increasing emphasis being placed on memory. She cites the work of Nora when arguing that the dominant conventional history meant the destruction of memory. History and memory are seen to be in opposition when viewed through the lens of the conventional historian. This is because memory cannot be reduced to a single truth. Hamilton explains:

The historian's commitment to an abstracted narrative beyond the reach of 'subjective' recall has meant an ever-widening gap between what is understood as collective or popular memory and the formal narrative of history that is written by professional or academic historians. History and memory are therefore seen to be in opposition (Hamilton 1994: 9-10).

Nora believes that the postcolonial obsession with memory and 'its reconstruction beneath the gaze of history generally reflects a loss of spontaneous memory' (in Hamilton 1994: 11). Nora further argues that 'the emergence of history as a profession with a body of codified
knowledge was a deliberate attempt to obliterate memory' (in Hamilton 1994: 11).

Hamilton poses the question as to why 'memory' has become a subject of intense scrutiny at this time (Hamilton 1994: 10). She cites the introduction of the term 'popular' or 'counter memory' by Foucault in the 1970s and argues that this concept assumes that memory is separated out from dominant versions of the past and is wholly unified' (Foucault in Hamilton 1994: 18). The emergence of memory as an important area of study coincides with the change in the role of the historian in the late twentieth century.

1.2.1 Did it really happen? Is it a true story?

Trinh Minh-ha, in such books as: Woman, Nature, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism and When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics, explores notions of what we regard as 'knowledge'. She does this by examining 'story' as a form of 'truth'. Trinh Minh-ha sees the changing nature of historiography as being reflected in the resurfacing of the value of 'story' and examines how 'story' came to be regarded as being unreliable. The word 'memory' could, just as easily, be substituted for the word 'story'. Trinh Minh-ha states:

When history separated itself from story, it started indulging in accumulation and facts. Or it thought it could. It thought it could build up to History because the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related.... Story-writing becomes history writing and history quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction, literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction, not infrequently,

Muecke's table of various colonial/postcolonial oppositions helps to clarify the different underlying characteristics of colonial and postcolonial historiography. These oppositions may be viewed as the organising concepts of the respective writing domains.

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(Muecke 1992: 11-12)

Along with the development of postcolonial historiography, oral history has emerged as a vehicle through which regional Aboriginal histories and previously ‘silenced’ (Neumann 1992: 293) or unacknowledged voices may be heard.

Until recently, Aboriginal people have generally not been represented as speaking subjects in the literature of Aboriginal history, anthropology, or even
biography. This situation has changed considerably during the last decade. 'Oral history' has now become respectable among the world community of academic historians (Muecke, Rumsey & Wirrunmarra 1985: 83).

Brock emphasises this point when saying that 'the Aboriginal view of their own past has become more readily available through the publication of Aboriginal writing' (Brock 1992: 147). Not only has the emergence of oral history coincided with a need for the expression of Aboriginal voices in text but it has occurred through the development of social need created by technological change in the wider non-Aboriginal society. This may also partially explain why non-Aboriginal people are interested in Aboriginal oral history.

Walter Benjamin has argued that modernity destroyed the art of storytelling in western culture: that the unimaginable rapidity and scale of social and technological change combined to devalue direct experience. If twentieth century technology has made redundant particular ways of transmitting social meaning and expressing experience, it has also created possibilities and new crises for collective memory (in Darian-Smith 1994: 3-4).

1.3 You got a put true story

Neumann (1992: 286) argues that the newcomers to this continent have to look towards the indigenous people for solutions to problems arising from the fast pace of technological change in modern life. Perhaps Neumann would argue that indigenous culture is capable of teaching non-indigenous people about the value of traditional storytelling and by so doing effect a 'cure'. He focuses on the historical relationship between Aboriginal and European people, that of oppressor and oppressed, as the problem. The colonial relationship is like a disease that affects both
colonisers and colonised. For a cure the colonisers turn to the colonised, to whom they attribute healing powers' (Neumann 1992: 286).

If the disease refers to the distortion or bias of colonial historiography then possibly Aboriginal oral histories represent one form of 'cure' in terms of Aboriginal people rectifying the historical record by getting their voice into the historiographic domain. These oral histories are also an important example of postcolonial historiography. The writing of conventional colonial Australian history did not recognise, credit, or provide the scope for such representations of Aboriginal histories, traditions and relationships to country. This kind of knowledge was not presented to school children or the Australian population.

Anti-colonial historical scholarship with regard to Aboriginal Australians did not take off until the 1970s. At first it reconstructed a hitherto hidden past marked by oppression; then it began to empower the colonial subjects by attributing agency to them. At first such scholarship was produced by whites, but more recently Aboriginal Australians have written histories that fit more or less into parameters established by white historical scholarship. Increasingly, the academic production of histories of Aboriginal Australians has been monitored, scrutinised, questioned and challenged by Aboriginal Australian intellectuals. Clearly, colonial history needs to be decolonised (Neumann 1992: 281).

Heather Goodall (1987: 19) points to the Working Party of Aboriginal Historians in their desire to have Aboriginal history understood and respected on its own terms. Their paper Preparing Black History demanded that 'Aboriginal history be understood in terms of its own
frameworks, knowledge bases, values and priorities, as well as within the conventions of oral performance' (in Goodall 1987: 19).

There are many published examples of Aboriginal oral performances or texts which incorporate the use of oral testimony, (eg Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Gularabulu*, Bill Rosser's *Dreamtime Nightmares*, Stephen Muecke's work with Paddy Roe, and Sally Morgan's *My Place*). There are complex issues involved where non-Aboriginal co-authors and publishers work alongside or independent of the oral performer and these will be addressed in chapter four.

Attwood states that for much of the eighties it has been Aborigines themselves who have been responsible for educating the rest of the Australian population about the Aboriginal past (Attwood 1990: 123). He further argues that this form of writing contrasts with standard academic texts in content and form. Attwood believes that 'Aboriginal writings about the past reflect an emerging historiographic tradition which is very different to prevailing conventional histories' (Attwood 1990: 123).

Barwick (1981) talks about the two kinds of history that Aboriginal children grew up learning. Firstly, the 'humiliating textbook history taught in schools which denies the realities of their past and present' and secondly, the 'memories preserved by their families' (Barwick 1981: 75). She talks about the growing awareness of Aboriginal writers who are dissatisfied with 'alien interpretations of their experience' who are 'aware of regional differences in Aboriginal society' (Barwick 1981: 75). It is probably to this alien interpretation of Aboriginal experience and to this denial of Aboriginal reality that Topsy Secretary addresses herself when advising me strongly of what she wants done with her published life
story: 'but the book like that you put 'im in the library, you know, it, you got a put true story' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4).

The 'true story' is the untold story of those whom Topsy claims are 'the rightful owners of this country' (Darwin or Bordaan). She also talks about the non-recognition of the Larrikiya world view and their relationship to country in Darwin. When talking about a major sacred site within Darwin - Derriba Nungalinya - Topsy emphasises the potency of such knowledge and the possible ramifications of ignoring it:

It's not a superstitious (sic) story. It's a real story! It's [he's] a human himself. If he move away some other places, we don't know what going to happen to Darwin (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 19).

This 'true story' is not available to the reader of conventional history nor can it be told by the conventional historiographer. Western education cannot give us the knowledge that the 'earth' has, a knowledge formulated by generations of Secretary’s ancestors. Here she cites her authority to speak as a traditional owner, criticises the limits of western education and, finally, points to the dangers of disregarding this important truth.

My father was boss to the tribes... he was a Secretary to the tribe and he call himself. That's his name now. He was Secretary, like Chief to the tribes (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 43).

My ancestors, they was telling stories from stories from stories to us now and from me, I am telling stories and stories about old Darwin again! From
ancestors! They can’t change it because it too dangerous, Darwin! It too many sacred sites (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 16).

God, [Gulpa], put it all over the world too and a people who first ancestors know, see. But this new generation, this 1994 universe now, they think they got more brains than what the earth is! You understand what I am talking? They [think], just because they went to university school, they know the sacred site and all that. But the thing [Derriba Nungalinya], what the God, [Gulpa], put it there, that thing will destroy them (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 15-16).

A major component over the struggle for both land and textual space has been the demand by Aboriginal people to tell their own story or the right to tell their own history as evidenced by Topsy Secretary above (Goodall 1992: 106).

The hunger for this 'untold' or 'true' story of Aboriginal biography and history is a characteristic of postcolonial writing. Why is this? The answers lie in what these forms of history are capable of revealing as opposed to conventional histories. They are usually personalised, regional accounts woven into a narrative structure. The nature of oral history will be discussed further in chapter two.

One strand in the development of new forms of history, is what Goodall (1992: 106) calls the 'new social history'. She argues that social history 'encouraged research on previously neglected sources such as oral ones' (Goodall 1992: 106). Other neglected sources include histories relating to women, labour or the working classes and migrant studies. Rose and Lewis, as articulated later in this chapter, highlight future directions in the domain of new social histories characterised by 'multiple histories,
multiple meanings, multiple uses and interpretations of place which different people have brought to their shared lives' (Rose & Lewis 1992: 27)

The emergence of oral histories and of an Aboriginal historiography has also been influenced to some extent by the growing discomfort of historians with a 'single authoritative truth' as represented by conventional history (Goodall 1992: 109). Goodall claims that conventional history has been 'challenged by demands, arising from separate impulses in postcolonial, feminist and poststructuralist work' (Goodall 1992: 109). Overall, she argues, it means there is a 'more sophisticated appreciation of the fragmentary nature of our evidence and understanding of the past' and so, there is a questioning of the aspirations of history to tell a single, simple 'true' story (Goodall 1992: 109).

The rise in prominence of the life history method in the area of social psychological research in the past twenty years has also helped to show that the 'statistical' method of conventional histories was too narrow. Bruce Shaw (1980: 227) quotes Allport when he says that 'the personal document is capable of supplying what the mind craves in both its nomothetic and ideographic moments' (in Shaw 1990 : 227). Part of the postcolonial attraction to the local oral historical text is the personal element and particularly to the personal narrative. If we accept Walter Benjamin's arguments of how the modern, technological society has overtaken 'direct experience' then we can understand the desire, both in a communal and a personal sense, for this form of knowledge because it is personal, immediate and 'could happen to me'.

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Darian-Smith and Hamilton point to a trend among historians to explore relationships between place and the past. They believe that historians no longer assume that 'geography is simply the ground on which events took place' (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 5).

When I first set out to record Topsy Secretary's 'life story' I attempted to organise it within a chronological structure. Very quickly I came to realise that her stories needed to be organised within a framework based upon place. This was because events that were significant were always related to where she was living or to some important site on her country. The stories interweave in and out of 'places' or sites on her traditional country of Darwin or the Cox Peninsula and also in and out of different periods of time. This interweaving nature frequently meant great leaps in time but always the thread of her story travelled a recognised path from place to place and within time, both present and past. In the end her stories were organised according to various sites of residence throughout her life. This gave the story its own inherent chronological structure.

Within Topsy's stories can be seen a broad exploration of the relationship between place and time. Her story is an excellent example of what has become fashionable in postcolonial discourse; histories that reveal 'local knowledges, narrative constructions, difference and region' (Muecke 1992: 11-12) and so it clearly typifies postcolonial historiography.

The Northern Territory experience

In the context of the development of Aboriginal oral historiography the Northern Territory is special due to the enactment of the Land Rights Act in 1976. The land claim process has meant the employment of mainly white anthropologists, historians and lawyers by Aboriginal land councils.
in order to document historical and cultural information relevant to the various claims. For the first time a large body of historical material based on interviews with traditional Aboriginal people was created. The style and language of these reports is still mainstream but the information generated relies on Aboriginal as well as archival evidence.

Some anthropologists, such as Deborah Bird Rose, have spent extended periods of time in Aboriginal communities recording and documenting oral testimony. *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, is a text produced by Rose based upon her fieldwork with the Yarralin community of the Victoria River Downs. It is something of a landmark text in that it is one of the earlier and more popular volumes which utilises the oral history interview as a principal device in the construction of a 'black' history. This text is also put forward as a book worthy of study in the Bachelor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies delivered at the Northern Territory University. Rose continues to be an advocate of the development of 'new' or 'alternative' histories and offers fresh perspectives on research in this area.

There has been a 'blurring' of the boundaries between disciplines, particularly history and anthropology, which in part can be attributed to the land claim process. It needs to be noted that it is in relation to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act that Topsy Secretary's narratives need to be placed. This is because she is a senior claimant in the Kenbi Land Claim. This claim is over various sections of the Cox Peninsula and in the history of the operation of the Land Rights Act it is the Northern Territory's longest running and, arguably, most political land claim. The Kenbi Land Claim was first lodged in 1978. It is within the context of the
Aboriginal history of the Northern Territory that I will, largely, mount my arguments regarding the relative strengths relating to Aboriginal oral histories.

1.4 'Unsettling the past'
The new histories of the postcolonial era appear to aim at including those categories of people who have formerly been denied visibility (Rose 1989: 135). This denial of visibility occurred, as discussed earlier, because of the structural exclusion from the ability to influence the dominant history.

Rose takes this a step further and talks about the capacity of these new histories to 'undermine the authority of histories constructed around class, category and national interests, and to link experience with the social and cultural processes which temper those experiences' (Rose 1989: 135). This point of view aligns with Hamilton's argument that 'memory is capable of successfully unsettling the past' (Hamilton in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 14).

Carter seems to agree with this stimulus to 'unsettle the past' when he asserts:

"We have, in fact, to make cloudy again the line between language and space, to turn a barrier into a road, to recover the sense in which language did not simply delimit but made a difference. We have to disperse the myth of spontaneous, theatrical settlement and linear progress, and to demonstrate the dialectical nature of foundation, the sense in which the new country was a rhetorical construction, a product of language and the intentional gaze, not of the detached, dictionary-clasping spectator (Carter 1987: 36)."
Rose and Lewis believe that the development of the new history writing was 'a separatist movement that sought to write history from a woman's or an Aboriginal point of view' (Rose & Lewis 1992 : 27). They see the emergence of a new historiographic tradition or traditions as providing a large challenge to conventional historiography as 'it required that many of the basic premises of historians understanding of the world be reassessed' (Rose & Lewis 1992 : 27). Rose and Lewis then point to future debates and newer emerging strands of history writing and argue that the 'newest approach is primarily theoretical and aims to analyse the relationships of exclusion and oppression' (Rose & Lewis 1992: 27).

Another strand of this third wave is more thoroughly grounded in social life, focussing on studies of interactions between Aboriginal Australians and settler Australians...we can call this strand the post-modern tendency in public history...this strand is marked by the recognition and celebration of multiple histories, multiple meanings, the multiple uses and interpretations of place which different people have brought to their shared lives in one place and time (Rose & Lewis 1992: 27).

Opponents of postmodernism (Windschuttle for example) see the new histories as a direct threat to the discipline. In chapter three I will engage with this debate in highlighting the strengths of oral histories and the contribution they can make to reinvigorate Australian historiography.

In this chapter I have examined the historical background to the emergence of Aboriginal oral histories or the 'new histories'. Topsy Secretary's narratives are placed within the context of the struggle for land and the struggle over metaphorical representation. Colonial and conventional histories have predominated over the Larrikiya voice in
order to legitimate the settlement of Australia at the expense of Aboriginal peoples. Topsy's statement that 'you got a put true story' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4) highlights her preoccupation with claiming a past and establishing her community's 'truth'. Aboriginal historical 'truths' challenge the foundations and structure of Australian historiography.
Chapter Two
2 The Nature of Oral Histories:  
Some Definitions and Major Characteristics

2.1 What is oral history?
Attwood while referring to Frisch (1990) states that oral history may encompass 'any historical work which draws upon oral sources that provide information for the historian intent on reconstructing the past in order to verify what actually happened and why' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 195). He cites Thompson (1978) to argue that oral history can add to and be 'corrective of the written record' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 195) and can 'offer new insights, thus providing the historian either with a truer account of the past or another perspective' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 195).

Shaw uses Allport as a guide to assess the 'non-quantitative indications of validity' of an oral history. Allport's criteria, within the domain of life history writing in the field of anthropology, are:

1) the *ad hominem* test of general credibility and honesty,
2) the narrative's plausibility as it relates to our past experiences, and
3) the general test of internal consistency.

(Shaw 1980: 228)

Shaw expands upon these criteria to outline the various elements that most oral histories or testimonies have in common.

1) they emphasise the importance of the teller's sociocultural milieu,
2) they focus on the perspectives of one, unique individual,
3) they have a time depth, so that a personal history reveals also matters relevant to a region or group's local history,
4) they relate that local history from the point of view of indigenous narrators.

(Shaw 1980: 229)

The oral narratives text that Topsy Secretary and I collaborated on belong to a genre commonly known as 'life history'. Somerville quotes Prell to define life history as a form of writing where 'two stories together produce one' and where 'a speaker and listener ask, respond, present and edit a life' (in Somerville 1990: 29). Langness uses the term 'life history' to describe 'an extensive record of a person's life as it is reported either by the person himself or by others or both' (in Ellerman 1995: 12). It can be written by the informant or transcribed from interviews. In chapter four of this thesis I will discuss the nature of Secretary's and my text and delineate why it sits very uneasily within the domain of 'life history'.

Earlier views of oral history or ethnohistory saw oral recollections as being flawed in terms of accuracy and that they could only be useful if they were purified of these 'biases and inaccuracies' (White 1991: 3). These flaws were seen as the outcome of the subjective nature of this genre. However Portelli maintains that it is in the 'divergence' from facts that the 'importance of oral testimony' may be revealed (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 206).

Attwood refers to some of the ways in which oral historians have defended their craft. He asserts that they do not perceive written history as a neutral practice because it has its own particular biases contributed by the writer who has to continually select and censor what is included in the text (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994). Just as the subject in
the oral history interview selects, interprets and arranges his/her material for an audience so does the conventional historian when organising his/her writing after researching various documents. However, as Hamilton argues, individuals and social groups organise and reconstruct the past in very different ways to that of the historian (Hamilton in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994). In contrast to conventional history, oral history provides knowledges which are firmly associated with actual experience (Morris 1990: 91).

2.2 The role of memory

Goodall (1992), Attwood (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage and Stokie 1994), Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994), Morris (1990) and Vansina (1985) all talk about the important role of memory in relation to oral history. Goodall depicts the shift away from a focus on 'facts' as it pertains to the oral history interview as a movement towards exploring the wider terrain of the processes of memory. Memories of particular interest are those of individuals and communities especially within the context of their engagement with the past and present (Goodall 1992: 109).

Attwood regards memory as an active process whereby meanings are constantly being reworked in the present. He goes as far as to say that this active dimension to memory is its most fundamental characteristic (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994). Lowenthal also refers to the importance of memory when he posits:

All awareness of the past is founded on memory. Through recollection we recover consciousness of former events, distinguish yesterday from today, and confirm that we have experienced a past (Lowenthal 1985: 193).
Human beings are continually involved in making sense of their lives on a daily basis and to do so may even include acts of omission. With sympathy for this view, Morris (1990: 83) points out that 'the production of historical memory is simultaneously an act of forgetting'. I would claim that this is an active function of memory in that the observer or narrator selects what events and knowledges have importance to him or her and, therefore, warrant retelling. Another decision to be made by the narrator is on the mode or style of recounting the event.

Lowenthal (1985: 205) writes that 'memories must continually be discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order' and that 'revision is often unintentional as forgetting' (Lowenthal 1985: 207).

Goodall claims that there are at least three elements to consider when reflecting on this process as it applies to oral history and especially Aboriginal oral history.

First, the initial observation of events, with its associated emotions. This can no longer be considered as if humans observe in any simple way, but rather the cultural context in which our sensory perceptions occur shapes our perceptions of the material world. Our expectations, our prior experiences and our 'common sense' understandings of what 'makes sense' all contribute to our recognition and labelling of observations, the 'empirical' data of our memories. Second, the process of analysis or the way in which people make meaning from their observations, as individuals or as groups... Third, the retelling, a process of remembering in relation to others (Goodall 1992: 110).
Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994) isolate memory as a vital component of oral history by stating that:

Memories link us to place, to time and to nation: they enable us to place value on our individual and or social experiences, and they enable us to inhabit our own country (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 1).

2.2.1 Shared memories and conflict

Darian-Smith and Hamilton explain that shared memories can be a source of great conflict (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 1). This is evident in the contrast between the memories of Topsy Secretary and the memories of other Darwin Larrikiya who have a different and separate life history to Secretary. In Secretary’s narratives the idea that memories can link people to place, to time and to culture is plainly evident. She locates herself as part of a long line of Larrikiya ancestors who inhabited and knew intimately the same country as her; that of Darwin or Bordaan in the Northern Territory of Australia. Bordaan is an Aboriginal English word for Darwin. It originated as a mispronunciation of 'Port Darwin'.

Topsy's retelling of family's stories reveal narrative accounts that depict community 'cohesion' but, in addition to this, they are accounts that reflect conflicts of perception within her own language group. These conflicts pertain to differing views of the past underline the fragmented nature of the Larrikiya language group. This fragmentation has occurred as a result of the settlement and subsequent urbanisation of their traditional country.

In the 1970s when Topsy Secretary and her family were fighting for the land at Kalalak she became embittered because of the lack of support from
other Larrikiya families around Darwin. She accuses them of having no culture because their families chose not to fight for their land and chose instead to live like the Barragut, the 'Whitefellas'. She feels aggrieved at what she perceives to be disrespect from these people for her elder status when it comes to making decisions on how to contest the Kenbi Land Claim. When referring to this group she scathingly states:

But they don’t know anything about a’ culture, Aborigine’s culture, these coloured people. They Larrikiya but they different colour o’ black. That’s why they’re half white an’ half black (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 63).

Topsy’s bitter memories of fighting for land in the 1970s puts her in conflict with other Darwin Larrikiya. She is not so critical of their decision to live a ‘white’ lifestyle, with ‘house and job’ (Secretary pers. comm. 1994) but is when it comes to their claiming traditional ownership of the Cox Peninsula within the terms of the Land Rights Act. Undoubtedly, these Darwin Larrikiya would not look harshly upon their forebears for decisions they had to make during a time when survival in the broader white urban culture was imperative. Some of these people were prepared to live with arrangements made in the past, even though those arrangements were the result of accommodation with white society at a time when to act otherwise could bring harsher treatment upon themselves. So, in this instance, there are contrasting accounts between the families involved as to the reasons for their respective actions.
2.2.2 Narrative, memory and the structure of oral history

Dening believes that 'we make a narrative of the past in our mind, in our conversations' (Dening 1996: 35) and Attwood echoes Le Goff in highlighting narrative as the most crucial aspect of memory. Memory allows us to access the past through the medium of stories.

Narrating is the fundamental mnemonic act. We remember the past by telling stories. Without narrative, the past is unintelligible; recollections need to be arranged or organised into a story in order that they become comprehensible or meaningful (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 203).

Conventional, objectivist history tends to be reductionist in that it attempts to elucidate a 'correct' history, that is, 'what really happened' as opposed to the multiple experiential nature of oral history. This is not a novel concept. Ranke in the 1830s asserted that the role of the historian was 'simply to show how it really was' (in Carr 1961: 8). This form of history fails to take into account the subjective nature of memory with all it's complexities and contradictions.

As Morris argues, oral history does not seek to essentialise difference or marginalise significance (Morris 1990: 88). Rather it is more able to reveal difference, subtlety and nuance. Mudrooroo Narogin (1988: 365), otherwise known as Colin Johnson, emphasises the 'multiplicity of dialects and voices rather than... a single authoritative one' as being a distinctive 'marker of the postmodern in Australia'. Attwood explains further that memory is subjective and interpretative and that it originates in oneself, and refers to the internal worlds of cognition, perception and emotion, rather than those which are objective and external,
thus offering a hermeneutics of the self. Oral sources, then, 'tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did' (Portelli [1981] in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 204).

Morris (1990: 89) posits that in the domain of oral history we are always dealing with 'an act of interpretation' which I would argue puts it alongside conventional historiography to some degree. Conventional history present us with writings that are themselves 'interpretations' made by the author/historian. Morris also draws parallels between oral history and general historiography by articulating that both utilise similar practices. Morris speaks to this point:

Yet, perhaps, paradoxically, this radical work reproduces itself within the conventional structures of historiography. By this I mean history as a practice organising past time into an archive of stages leading to a celebration of the present: a documentary style historicism which demarcates a chronology of events or acts leading to the present (Morris 1990: 83).

This argument would not necessarily apply to Aboriginal oral histories or to, say, poststructuralist or postmodern approaches to historiography where a chronologically, hierarchically consistent method would not be its chief organising precept (see chapter four). Aboriginal oral histories utilise different foci around which events, knowledges and other information are arranged. Time is not necessarily a primary organising precept in this genre.

Topsy Secretary's narratives tend to wind around concepts of time and rely on 'place' for their anchor. Some stories revolve around people or
personalities that she is reminded of when she associates them with, firstly, a particular place and, secondly, to a particular time.

For example, when I first started recording Topsy’s story with her I naively attempted to start at her time of birth and proceed from there. I quickly learned that she had her own sense of organising time in relation to her stories and that she required me to pick up on experiences that were of importance to her through her intimations of emotion. My initial attempts with her to look back somewhat robotically in a sequenced time structure and to entice her to then recount ‘what happened’ quite often proved fruitless.

Hamilton in Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994:12) prefers to stress the integral relationship between memory and history as an essential interdependence even though tension and conflict between the two may exist.

2.3 Oral narratives: the past and the present
Reimann (1990) cites Tosh (1984) by stating that the 'voices of the past' are also voices of the present. On this point Vansina posits:

Oral traditions are documents of the present because they are told in the present yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions of the past at the same time... Oral traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single breath (Vansina 1985: xii).

Attwood refers to the relationship between the past and the present within oral histories in a slightly different way. He argues:
Jacques Le Goff reminds us that one always reaches the past 'by starting from the present', but in the case of oral narratives this is especially so since the past is subsumed in and subordinate to the present (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 203)

Attwood emphasises this point by saying that the oral narrative is 'the subject's attempt to elucidate the time of speaking rather than the time of which he/she speaks' (Weintraub in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994:203). He stresses this view by asserting that to advocate that history is generally about the past is 'naive and ingenuous'. Vansina expands this point when he states:

any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication. The characteristics of each rendering will differ according to its position in the whole process (Vansina 1985: 3)

Vansina also argues that eyewitness accounts are not entirely trustworthy in terms of their veracity. He believes that perception is mediated by memory and the accompanying emotional state. The narrative is brought into being by these two factors. In addition,

memory typically selects certain features from successive perceptions and interprets them according to expectation, previous knowledge, or the logic of 'what must have happened', fills the gap in perception (Vansina 1985:5).

Vansina believes that oral narrative is not a passive process but an active creative activity by the narrator who experienced the relevant events.
Topsy Secretary demonstrates an involvement in text creation while drawing upon her cultural knowledge and personal experience. Within the text of her life story she underlines the importance of the present as a paramount principle when talking of Cyclone Tracy and the reasons surrounding its coming to Darwin. She has a number of explanatory stories for why the Cyclone hit Darwin. The particular cause of its arrival depends upon the time she is speaking, whom she is speaking to and what is happening to ‘country’ at this time. Each explanation, according to her, is valid and important. Here are the explanations:

**Story 1**

*Do Larrikiya people have an explanation for why Cyclone Tracy happened?*

Yeah, because everybody, no matter what tribe, I believe on the Larrikiya people when they said:

“Oh yeah, somebody went and might be fishing there or might be hit [Old Man Rock] on the head with heavy sinker and made him wild, you know”.

So, he start to get and make the sea fight against one another, rolling one another and all that. Then the cyclone start, then the rain start and the people say:

“Yes, he’s start now. Somebody was mucking around with him.”

So, he destroyed Darwin. Ho, it was going to cover the whole of Darwin if the tide was coming in. The tide was right out when the Cyclone Tracy came. We got lucky that tide was long way when that Cyclone Tracy came. If it was here [Topsy indicates a high tide] Darwin will wash away. Too many sacred site where God put it. You’re not supposed to touch that, them kind, you know (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 14-15).
**Story 2**

I don't know how many times I told people not to go near that Old Man. First time they was sitting down there and drinking cans. On top him! And a Cyclone Tracy came then. And they took the little rock in the Nungalinya College. Gee, my brother went mad. He said:

"Somebody touched that. If the tide don't come, well, we going to have a big wind blow".

*But didn't they find out that that rock was from down south?*

They reckon from south. It wouldn't come from south. It was from there, Old Man Rock [said crankily]! That's where the Tracy been hit Darwin (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 16-17).

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**Story 3**

Well, one day my brother ask them, the Government, they came there to Kalalak. And he ask them:

"I want this land now. Give me, I can stay here cause when I was a little boy I used to come an' climb up coconut".

And the Government think hard. They said no to him.

"Alright, you people don't want to give me this home. One day you'll see that Darwin will destroy!"

And it was. That Cyclone Tracy came, just for Kalalak see, he been want it.

So, he said:

"I can't have a home in desert or somewhere else's places. I never come from there. I come from here!"  "See", he said, "this is my country, gwoyalwa darrinigi".
That mean 'this is our country'. And then they were thinking hard, you know, them Government people.

"We'll have to give him. Otherwise might really true come."

It was! So, they gave him and, next minute, the bloody Cyclone Tracy came then! First, he [Bobby] was talking to Old Man Rock. He went over there. In language:

"They don't want to give me land, father. They want a put all the

**Barragut** in now. Where I gunna stop?"

He talk like that in language. So, next minute they heard that Tracy was coming. He did destroy the whole Darwin like atom bomb (Topsy laughs). The people won't listen [to] old people, you know, when they ask. The real traditional owner of the country, you know (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 138-139).

The common feature present in all of these accounts is the importance of 'country' to Topsy and the *Larrikiya*. When Topsy told me the third version of the coming of Cyclone Tracy she was very disturbed about the lack of Whitefella respect for a *Larrikiya* sacred site - *Derriba Nungalinya* (Old Man Rock). Around this time divers carrying out research for the Northern Territory Museum off Casuarina beach, near Old Man Rock, disturbed him and so he filled their boat with water and capsized it, according to Topsy. While telling the story of Cyclone Tracy, it was very important to Topsy that she also imparted a message regarding the dangers of ignoring the traditional owners of Darwin and the sacredness of their country, in the present.

Central to all three accounts is the involvement of Old Man Rock (*Derriba Nungalinya*). He is either disturbed by a man fishing or disturbed
by the news which Topsy’s brother, Bobby Secretary, the big traditional boss for Darwin, brings him. This news is that the Barragut are not respecting the traditional owners, the traditional owners whom the Old Man - Derriba Nungalinya protects. At the heart of all versions of the reason for Cyclone Tracy visiting Darwin is the importance of ‘country’ and the dire consequences that may result if country is damaged.

A lot will also depend on Topsy’s relationship with the listener in terms of what information or what story she will tell. From my own personal observation it seems to me that Topsy will not impart the more intimate and personal account of Story 3 if she feels that the listener does not understand the history of her family’s fight for the land of Kalalak. It is almost as if this is an ‘inside’ story. She activates her right to speak, her authority as an elder either when she feels comfortable to do so or ‘pushed’ to do so by significant damage being done to country. It must also be noted that Story 1 and Story 2 were told to me at a very early stage in my relationship to Topsy Secretary. When I had known her for a number of years and there was more trust between us, she told me the third account (Story 3). Each account is meant for a different audience and often when questioned by a person she doesn’t know Topsy will refrain from speaking.

Consideration of Bain Attwood’s argument is important; that the speaker, in this case Topsy Secretary, is elucidating the time of speaking rather than the past. However, it can also be argued that Topsy’s stories evoke more information and understanding regarding a past event, the cyclone. The interesting thing about Topsy’s stories are that they touch on the cause as well as the effect of the Cyclone. White residents of Darwin also tell about Tracy from their particular perspective and memory of the
event but never question the cause. Topsy's accounts demonstrate a qualitative difference in Aboriginal oral histories. They can challenge the scientific, rational basis on which conventional western histories rely.

It is true that she tells her story very much from the vantage point of the present but significant moments of her life and of her ancestors are not solely imbued with present importance or meaning. Her insistence of having to 'tell the truth' about Larrikiya history and culture characterises all her stories of the Larrikiya past and dreamtime. The events that have occurred in the past inform Topsy Secretary's narrative. Dening believes that 'there will always be some claim that one type [of history]... is 'real history' (Dening 1996: 49) and he observes that:

The present moment is always the latest sentence in a never ending discourse, the latest line of a songline whose beginnings we could not trace and whose ending we do not know (Dening 1996: 223).

2.3.1 The 'Aboriginal' present and the 'past' - the Dreaming
While arguing that oral narratives are primarily accounts of the present Attwood fails to understand that the 'Aboriginal present' relies to a large degree on past events for it's construction. These past events are what makes up what Topsy calls 'the truth'. The 'dreamtime' or the 'dreaming' best signifies this point. In the dreamtime the country is created and totem clan groups founded. In an Aboriginal sense, this belief frames all knowledge and the importance of the 'present' in story-telling relates to the veracity or faithfulness of the narrative being recounted as it pertains to the original narrative.
Muecke describes the importance of a truthful narrative as it relates to the past in the Aboriginal story-telling context.

In story-telling situations there is also an explicit positioning of the listening subject, whereby this subject is linked to an (eternal) re-enactment of the story, mythological or mundane. The circumstances of the present telling of a story must be as close as possible to the 'original' telling of the story: 'what is happening now' is equated with 'what happened then' (Muecke 1992: 85).

Dening posits that 'we make sense of the present in our consciousness of the past' (Dening 1996: xv). And Lowenthal asserts that 'pastness is integral to our own being' (Lowenthal 1985: 185). This is because centuries of tradition underlie every instant of perception and creation, pervading not only artefacts and culture but the very cells of our bodies' (Lowenthal 1985: 185). It may sound attractive for Attwood to postulate that oral narratives are more to do with the present than the past. However, this position needs to be reconsidered if one concentrates on perceptions of the past as it relates to the Aboriginal story-telling context. The 'past', the 'dreaming', Topsy's 'truth' underpin all her narratives.

Lowenthal also states that some people 'are so enlivened (or oppressed) by remembered or imagined pasts that all present experience resonates with memories of them' (Lowenthal 1985: 186). This may be an extreme statement but there is some value to it when applied to Topsy Secretary's testimony. Her family's and her own historical experience or 'past' shadows, informs and colours all her stories.

Quite often Topsy will preface her accounts with an utterance which serves as an assertion of her authority and places current day events in
relationship to the past. The past is powerful. An elder is a 'big' person in his or her community because he or she is older or has a 'bigger past', if you like. Topsy is a 'big boss' of the Larrikiya because she too has a 'big past'. It is not only 'big' in terms of time but also in terms of 'dreaming' and 'culture'.

These qualifying statements usually occur when I inform Topsy Secretary that other 'Larrikiya' people may contest her accounts. This is because of the conflict among rival families in Darwin regarding 'who is really Larrikiya?' and 'who holds the greater cultural knowledge?'

_They reckon I should not put your story into a book because I'll be changing the way you speak, because you don't write it down yourself._

_I am right to talk about my country and myself and my family._

_You only just came to Darwin._ We right to learn [teach] what I am saying (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 6)

_and_

_When I finish your book some people may criticise me. I have to stand up and speak strong to tell them._

Yes, you will have to because we are telling the truth. I am telling the truth in Darwin. _Where you was [were you] in my ancestor [day]? People was here. You wasn't._ You don't know nothing about the native way. You the only one that come here ask the question and I tell you the truth (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 6).

Topsy Secretary appeals to her 'past' as a frame of reference for her narratives and again for her cultural authority to relate the story when
she remarks that 'my ancestors, they was telling stories from stories from stories to us now and from me, I am telling stories and stories about old Darwin again! From ancestors! (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 16). There is a strong linkage made to the past, to her ancestors and, inherent to this, her culture and 'Dreaming'.

Topsy Secretary locates herself in a long line of Larrikiya ancestors. It is this powerful connection and 'big past' with which she identifies herself. Lowenthal confirms the essential nature of the narrator's relationship or, in this case, Topsy's relationship with the past, when he posits:

Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity... to know what we were confirms that we are. Self-continuity depends wholly on memory; recalling past experiences links us with our earlier selves... (Lowenthal 1985: 197).

We can take this sentiment a step further and argue that memory not only links Topsy with an 'earlier self' but also with her ancestors, her traditions and her culture. This is not to suggest that the past is static but to realise that in the Aboriginal narrative context the past is very important; a defining construct. Muecke expands on this argument:

Aboriginal narratives are reflexive... a distinct world view is presented, one which sees people as being in a permanent relationship with an otherness which is discursively constructed as 'the Dreaming'. For didactic purposes it can be invoked as a kind of personal power that, through transformation, marshals a structural demonstration of 'the Dreaming' as a justification for the rule of elders (Muecke 1992: 83-84).
Crawford discusses the relationship between the functions of the present and the past in oral historiography when she reviews Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

Sally Morgan's book is a history, but one that is freed from the constraints of academic history. Told as a series of stories, it interweaves between past and present, showing how the unacknowledged past continues to shape the present (in Crawford & Gare 1987: 82).

It is too simplistic a notion to regard oral narratives as being totally preoccupied with the present. The relationship between the past and the present in Aboriginal oral testimony is too complex to make definitive statements about it. There is certainly an interweaving or communicative relationship between the past and the present. Crawford alludes to this difficulty by arguing that the past is 'part of our present' and that in Sally Morgan's it is presented 'as layer upon layer of a living daily life' (in Crawford & Gare 1987: 82). E.H. Carr wrote of these matters in the 1960s when he cited Collingwood to highlight the relationship between the past and the present in historiography.

The philosophy of history is concerned neither with 'the past by itself' nor with 'the historian's thought about it by itself', but with 'the two things in their mutual relations'... 'The past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present.' (in Carr 1961: 21-22).

However, Carr, like Attwood and Dening, gives weight to the view that history evokes the present more so than the past when he asserts that 'history is not the past: it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes' (Carr in Dening 1996: 72).
Muecke sees the relationship between the past and the present as a dynamic one.

So, there is a kind of rhythmic alternation, an oscillation in oral narrative, between speech and silence, between 'me' and 'you' (narrator and listener), between 'then' and 'now', between dialogue and narration, performance and story (Muecke 1992: 77).

Oral narratives do take place from the viewpoint of the present and they continually revisit the past to reposition and reinterpret events. This brings me back to Vansina's previously cited comments that 'oral traditions' reflect both the 'past and present in a single breath' (Vansina 1985: xii).

2.4 Oral history, oral history, 'oral histories'

I remain slightly uncomfortable with Attwood's argument that oral history primarily evokes the time of speaking rather than the past because I fear he seeks to add force to his argument that oral history cannot stand as a substantive form of history on its own.

Oral history is capable of revisiting historical events, analysing, redefining and reinterpreting them. Is not that what people do everyday of their lives in coming to terms with the past as seen from the present day? This is despite Attwood's claim that oral history does have its own unique features separate from history. He states:

I believe that the term oral history as used by oral historians has no validity because it is not distinct from history. This is not to argue that there are no
substantive differences between oral history and history, but rather to note that most of its champions have failed to delineate what these are, let alone practise oral history on this basis. Yet I will argue that oral history does have certain peculiarities and that these are more than sufficient to justify it claiming distinctive status (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage, & Stokie 1994: 202).

Attwood cites Frisch again when he comments that oral history does deserve special status but only when the oral historian is engaged in understanding the relationship between the past and the present and when the focus of study is memory (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994). He further argues that 'oral history is a distinctive form of history' (in Attwood 1994: 206). According to him

it is a scholarly analysis which seeks to understand the subjective relationship between the present and past contained in an oral narrative or in any autobiographical account which originates with the spoken word (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 206).

Oral history is capable of encompassing knowledges and understandings which are incomplete, open, shifting and amenable to change (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 215). To the conventional historian, oral history is not credible but rather something that needs to be verified by 'objective' sources. Because it does not accord with the traditional, objectivist tradition, it is seen by conventional academia as unreliable. Attwood believes that to deny oral history its rightful status as being a distinctive form of worthy study is to refuse 'to reflect seriously upon the nature of history' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994).
2.4.1 'Oral histories' versus oral history

I will now seek to outline the basic characteristics that set 'oral histories' apart from conventional history. It is appropriate to use the term 'oral histories' rather than 'oral history' to emphasise the complex array of knowledges, time and narrative constructions it embodies. In other words, if there are such constructs as 'oral histories' then they are constructs that cannot be organised into one integrated whole. That is, it cannot be arranged to form 'Oral history'. The underpinning precepts of these histories are what Muecke calls 'oppositional critique', 'local knowledges', 'narrative constructions' and 'margins' among others (Muecke 1992: 11-12).

I would argue that Attwood and Goodall (1987) perceive oral histories as part of the mainstream historiographical process. For them oral histories are to be utilised in conjunction with other historical documents. They are to be used for very specific purposes to provide information normally unavailable to conventional historians. Attwood and Goodall suggest that oral histories should be incorporated in mainstream 'History' and value it as only having authority if it is subsumed into the historian's craft or as an adjunct to traditional historiography; that is, as an addition to already collected information and knowledge, in order to show variance and divergence.

If 'oral history' is only to be used in addition to other documentary sources to build a broader or more 'authoritative' picture then we must ask ourselves what is this broader picture we're seeking to build and why? Does it do oral histories a disservice to view it in this way? Does it not
dilute and diminish their real value? Their true worth is based upon different organising precepts to conventional historiography.

Goodall and Attwood appear to travel down a well worn path in search of a 'correct history', an 'authoritative history', one account that is unassailable, indisputable. Oral histories are too complex to be seen solely as a means of verification of other historical sources, although this could be a legitimate and sometimes necessary use of such knowledges. Morris addresses this point in the following manner:

If one were to adhere to an empiricist position, such material could, of course, be dismissed as simply rhetorical (inauthentic) or apocryphal. In such a view, objectivity, reliability and representativeness would take on a more privileged position: a view that such statements are more figurative than factual would be retained. But as Murphy (1986) has recently argued against just this view, oral testimony can too easily be reduced to the generation of 'verifiable facts'. He argues that oral history should be considered as one particular mode of historical memory, a specific 'mode of remembering' which, like all knowledge, is a social and cultural product (Morris 1990: 89-80).

Murphy (1986) asserts that oral history gravitates toward generality rather than detail by stating that

oral recollection inclines towards the figurative rather than the specific, to tropes rather than to facts; consequently the oral history method, as the memory of the past condensed, leads us back to language before leading forward to the meaning of the past in the present (Murphy in Morris 1990: 90).
It is at this point that we can return to Topsy’s varying accounts of the different reasons why Cyclone Tracy visited Darwin. Seen through the eyes of the empiricist or objectivist historian Topsy Secretary, as a witness, is discredited, deemed unreliable because she presents different accounts at different times. But when viewed as a 'social and cultural product' the stories are seen to serve a different purpose than what the conventional historian would require of them. Common to each account is Topsy's ire at the lack of respect shown by the Barragut for a Larrikiya sacred site. She goes further by claiming that the event itself, Cyclone Tracy was a result of disrespectful actions. That these sentiments are delivered in a forceful manner further underline Topsy's message - 'Darwin will be destroyed if you don't respect country and the traditional owners'.

Morris' arguments further endorse the view that oral histories are a worthy area of study in their own right, to be seen as separate from orthodox history. It could be argued that to even perceive oral testimonies as 'history' is to diminish their inherent strength. 'To call oral narratives 'History' then is already an act of interpretation or assimilation. It is to incorporate one form of ordering of sociality into another' (Morris 1990: 92).

Attwood himself distinguishes between 'history' and oral accounts when he claims that oral narratives can never be anything else but 'presentist' because it is the making of sense of the past in the present. In contrast, orthodox history will of necessity be present minded or present oriented but it need not be present centred (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 217). So, Attwood is advocating that there is a distinction between 'history' and 'oral narratives'. Morris appears to strongly support
this stance by arguing that the integration of oral narratives into the domain of 'history' is assimilationist.

Goodall (1987), while citing Yeo, asserts that oral history should stand alone as autobiographical statement, valued for its insights, its own frameworks and for its political role in working class peoples' reclaiming of rights over their own history. However, she too arrives at the point that oral history requires secondary analysis, that it should not be excluded from historiography. Secondary analysis was necessary, according to Goodall, in order to more fully understand 'the frameworks and priorities of the speakers, to see beyond the individual consciousness and to overcome distortions caused by the hegemony of dominant ideological constructions' (Goodall 1987: 19).

She explained how, as an oral historian, she came to feel the need to incorporate analysis as part of the whole process of working with the people who were participating in recalling their own histories (Goodall 1987: 19). This perspective, in seeking to place oral accounts within a social and political framework, can be a valuable one in determining an overall picture. Again, the inherent danger here is to minimise difference and to ignore the poststructural argument of appreciating varying experience and memory rather than funnelling the multiplicity of oral narratives into the single cup of 'oral history'. Certainly, I would accept that there are specific reasons to adopt an analytical approach in order to discover trends, similarity or differences of experience and to evaluate causes or reasons behind particular events.

Muecke, Rumsey and Wirrunmarra address the issue of what happens to narrative once it becomes a publication and enters the realm of
historiography. As soon as this takes place it becomes something 'other'; it takes on a distinctively different form.

Strictly speaking, no such publication is itself an *instance* of oral history, since the medium is print rather than talk. To the extent that we are willing to call such productions oral history, this is presumably because they start from spoken accounts... (Muecke, Rumsey & Wirrunmarra 1985: 84).

In relation to this Vansina (1985) states that oral traditions or histories reside in the minds of people and the telling is 'transitory'. He explains:

Oral traditions make an appearance only when they are told. For fleeting moments they can be heard but most of the time they dwell only in the minds of people. The utterance is transitory, but the memories are not - Tete are ne nne - 'Ancient things are today' (Vansina 1985: xi).

Somerville (1990: 86) maintains that anything that takes the form of a written history contains an unstated message that it must be true. Converting oral narratives from specific contexts of places and time into the historiographic field brings with it the concern that the historian is attempting to fix this knowledge in print and, in so doing, is removing the stories from their rightful arena.

2.5 Identity

Portelli points out that the importance of oral history lies in its ability to diverge from the so called 'facts'. Attwood quotes Portelli while articulating this very argument:
as Alessandro Portelli notes, 'the importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in... [and] 'errors' sometimes reveal more than factually correct accounts' (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 206)

When I gave a paper entitled *You got a put true story* at the *Australian identities* conference held at University College Dublin in July 1996 a medical doctor stood up, introduced himself and said regarding Topsy's stories: 'your paper sounds very interesting but it is simplistic and more like folklore and really you are not able to prove any of it are you?'. In response I simply said that Topsy had narrated stories throughout the six years that I had known her with consistency and with a sense of coherence. I also added that, given that my education and heritage was markedly different to Topsy's, I also was, on occasions, disturbed and challenged by her accounts. On reflection, I wished that I had not actually fallen into the trap of defending Ngalap's credibility but had instead encouraged the doctor to look at her narratives as existing outside the boundaries of Western, empirical knowledge, the tradition in which he was schooled. Her stories are able to convey a Larrikiya cultural perspective of the world and underscore Topsy's and the Larrikiya identity. She is firmly rooted in her own traditions and culture and in an intimate relationship to her country. These narratives set her apart from the Barragut.

Perhaps Western historical scholarship is uneasy with the examples of Aboriginal knowledges found in *Gweyelgwa ngayuboenee, gwoyalwa nganigi*: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country' because, it cannot be 'proven' scientifically. Topsy related the story of the museum
divers at a Kenbi Land Claim hearing in 1995. Their boat sank near Casuarina Beach because they disturbed the important Larrikiya sacred site Derriba Nungalinya (Old Man Rock). At the conclusion of her narration Topsy posed a question to the judge, lawyers and anthropologists present. She exposed the limitations of western scientific thought by asking 'how do you fact that?' (For the Office of the Aboriginal Land Commissioner Justice P.R.A. Gray, Re: Kenbi [Cox Peninsula] Land Claim No. 37 Traditional Evidence, Heard At: Bakamanadjing, 16th October 1995, p2978). This question goes to the heart of the need for Australian academic historiography to broaden its terms of reference in order to embrace Aboriginal forms of knowledge.

Topsy Secretary’s narratives stand on their own for herself and her community. For them it is a substantive form of history, connecting them to their ancestors, to their land, their dreamings, law and to the happenings of the present day. It may not meet the needs of Western rational, analytical historiography but it does go some way to answering questions of difference, of margins, of giving examples of ‘oppositional critique’. In other words it does find a home within the sphere of postcolonial historiography. White (1991) says that ‘histories told and remembered by those who inherit them are discourses of identity; just as identity is inevitably a discourse of history’ (White 1991: 3).

Further on he adds:

Stories about the past are an important, universal vehicle for self definition. Whether we call them 'social history', 'life history' or 'personal stories', retrospective narratives create the present through idioms of remembrance (White 1991: 4).
While I would endorse White’s view I would also argue, along with Attwood, that the observer, Topsy Secretary, is an active participant in the whole enterprise and not simply a vessel inheriting an oral tradition handed down. Rather, she inserts herself into the text.

Shaw quotes Vansina when he says that 'a testimony... is the tradition as interpreted through the personality of the informant, and is coloured by his/her personality' (Vansina in Shaw 1980: 228). In terms of oral histories it can be assumed that the ‘preoccupation with identity is a preoccupation with claiming a past’ (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 2). Topsy not only claims her 'past' but uses it as an authority to speak. Her narratives are reflective of her culture and her personality. They are not simply an embodiment of verifiable facts. They are much more than that. Oral histories present real life experience, 'different' knowledge, the identity of the subject and utilise memory to challenge the objectivist tradition on which conventional Western historiography depends.
Chapter Three
3 The Strength of Aboriginal Oral Histories

Introduction

Oral history delineates variable features of individual lives and individual communities’ histories. The theme of 'accommodation' and cultural exchange between Aboriginal people, more specifically the Larrikiya and the Barragut (Whitefellas), will be frequently visited in this chapter to highlight the strengths of oral histories. Oral histories provide a different quality of information. They present Aboriginal voices and Aboriginal identities and reveal new information through the use of metaphors and stories. They also play a major role in sustaining Aboriginal community and culture.

3.1 'Accommodation', cultural exchange, 'shared experience'

Regional histories help us deconstruct the frontier paradigm. This paradigm, put forward by Henry Reynolds (in Attwood 1990: 124), is dominated by conflict, by European violence on the one side and Aboriginal resistance on the other. Attwood argues that historians, such as McGrath and Fels, point to other patterns, such as collaboration in the coloniser/colonised relationship, but that these are overshadowed by the conflict scenario. The frontier paradigm pays little attention to notions of cultural exchange or difference.

Carter contests Reynold’s analysis, describing it as a form of 'frontier rhetoric':

Reynold’s assumption that Aboriginal history can be treated in the same way as white history is itself a form of frontier rhetoric. For, unintentionally no doubt,
it has the effect of suppressing the difference of Aboriginal history - a
difference not simply of content but of form (Carter 1987: 160).

Attwood states that this ‘frontier’ perspective showed little regard to
'settled' Australia where very different patterns arose after the initial
contact (Attwood 1990: 124). In particular, he cites the regional histories of
Ann McGrath and Marie Fels to support his view. These histories deal
with notions of 'accommodation' between the colonised and the
colonisers. On scrutiny, the more complex relationships posed by these
writers moderate the overwhelming importance that Reynolds places on
'violent conflict' as a determining factor in black/white relations.

McGrath's text Born in the cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country best
characterises the regional history portrayal of 'accommodation'. McGrath
writes about the experience of Aboriginal people and communities in the
cattle industry of the north of Australia. She states that 'Aborigines
wanted their story told' and that their oral traditions reflected 'group
memory of regionally specific experiences of colonialism' (McGrath 1987:
viii-ix).

Muecke draws attention to the 'regional' and 'specific' nature of
Aboriginal ownership and affiliation to country and social groupings.
Oral histories capture the regional and the 'particular' in story because of
its focus on the individual. Muecke explains:

In Aboriginal Australia there was no idea of geographical unity; there was no
'capital', no centre or cultural superstructure. Groups had some things in
common, but it was more a case of gradual variations from one group to the
next... (Muecke 1992: 5).
Elsewhere Muecke reinforces the importance of the 'region' in the postcolonial domain when he states:

This 'going to the city' story [Paddy Roe's story] can be used to bring out a philosophy of postcolonialism: an approach to culture which starts to see things a little less from the point of view of metropolitan centres, in terms of settlement, capital, and singularity, and a little more in terms of a regional and itinerant philosophy of the bush (Muecke 1992: 47).

In contrast to this, the conventional historiographical form tends towards the unification of sites, stories and ideas.

Barwick (1981) discusses the shortcomings of 'ethnographies' of Aboriginal history which emphasise the central importance of indigenous religious belief and ritual. Barwick argued that these accounts seemed to steer well clear of the impact of missionaries, administrators, police, pastoralists and politicians and were more intent on capturing an Aboriginal pristine past (Barwick 1981: 81). To extend this argument a little further, it could be said that anthropologists and conventional historians were really not all that interested in urban Aboriginal culture. Their preoccupation was with the 'pure' Aboriginal and the ceremonies and myths of remote communities. Anthropologists virtually ignored the southern communities (Barwick 1981: 82). Even historical writings referring to the Top End and Darwin, such as Powell's *The Far Country*, almost totally disregard the importance of the Aboriginal experience.

Sansom discusses the high value Aboriginal people place on 'shared experience' (Sansom 1980: 4). He carried out field work among Aboriginal
fringe camps in Darwin in the 1970s. His book *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin* could be termed a regional work or a 'miniature'. This book is a rare example of a text that uncovers the high value Aboriginal people place on cultural exchange or 'accommodation'. He portrays Aboriginal interaction with the 'Australian economy' and the employment sector, that is, 'Darwin-centred cattle stations'. Sansom describes an Aboriginal urban or fringe experience rich in culture, social organisation and ritual.

Oral histories such as that of Topsy Secretary also de-construct the 'Anthropological' myth that urban Aboriginal people have no culture and, instead, present an experience rich in 'transformation' of culture. I employ the word Anthropological with a capital 'A' in the same way Muecke uses this word to denote the Anthropological discourse surrounding the traditional Aboriginal as 'pristine noble savage'. Muecke maintains that 'the Racist discourse...allows free rein to the obsessions of the speaker, as in exaggerated descriptions of ferociousness or cannibalism' (Muecke 1992: 30). Implicit in this depiction of the traditional Aboriginal is a racist, romantic view (Muecke 1992: 30).

Barwick argues that this 'Anthropological' perspective filters down to the education system. The result is that simplified school texts imply, that because some Aboriginal groups have lost their ceremonies and 'language', they have also lost their culture (Barwick 1981: 82). Healy posits that 'when confronted with Australia's creole past, listening [by historians to the real Aboriginal experience] becomes an acute problem' (Healy 1991: 28). Topsy Secretary's narratives turn the table on the frequently held myth that urban Aboriginal people have no culture; a myth sustained by ignorance and lack of cross-cultural contact or dialogue.
Carley (1992) argues that oral histories assist in facilitating 'rememory' and that this is necessary in order to deconstruct "Aborigine" and redefine notions of "Aboriginal" experience and identity (Carley 1992: 36). Deconstructing 'Aborigine' means, in turn, a re-evaluation of a diverse range of Aboriginal experiences, histories and voices.

The 'broad continental canvas' (Attwood 1990) that Reynolds paints on is unable to capture the nuance and subtlety of a regional or local history. How could it? A history that attempts to reflect historical relationships between Aboriginal people and the 'settlers' on a national scale can only show patterns through related examples. It presents the 'big picture' and not the miniature of a regional history.

_Gweyelgwa ngayuboenoe gwoyalwa nganigi_ exposes an historical relationship between the Barragut and the Larrikiya rich in cultural exchange or 'accommodation'. These narratives challenge stereotypical notions of Aborigines as the 'oppressed' and Whitefellas as the 'oppressors' and cover such areas as the Larrikiya's work ethic, spirituality, education and attitudes to land and how they relate to European concerns.

These forms of narratives present a more subtle and specific picture. They 'unsettle the past' (Hamilton in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 14) and by their very nature undermine the big picture of traditional history which relies upon dichotomies; dichotomies such as - 'invaders' versus 'resistance fighters' and 'oppressors' pitted against 'oppressed'. Oral histories break down this one dimensional, simplified perspective and
portray a more complex reality or realities. This is especially evident in the relationships between Aboriginal people and the colonisers.

Dening argues that the stance of the passive observer, the authoritative, all knowing, objective historian, loses validity when we look for the 'particular' or the 'smaller' historical picture. This perspective underlines the strength of the oral history genre. He attests:

Telescopic seeing, whether into the past or into the heavens, is likely to foster a certain delusion of apartness in the observer, a sense of separateness from nature, and in that a sense of 'objectivity'. It is microscopic seeing that destroys the notion of passive observation (Dening 1996: 220).

Throughout the course of this thesis I will continually revisit the historical development and nature of the relationship between the colonisers (Barragut) and the colonised (Larrikiya) as it applies to Darwin, Northern Territory and to my relationship with Topsy Secretary. The story of the evolution of the Barragut/Larrikiya relationship and the 'accommodation' that was effected to different degrees on both 'sides' is a constant theme in Topsy's stories.

Topsy Secretary speaks proudly of her working life and quite affectionately of her Whitefella bosses and families that she worked for. Instead of looking at the relationship between the Whitefella and the European settlers as one-dimensional, as 'the conquered and the conqueror', the concept of 'accommodation' enables us to understand the complex, subtler nature of this relationship. Attwood states:
On the Northern Territory frontier, McGrath suggests that the needs of European and Aboriginal economic systems overlapped - the cattle stations required a labour force and the nature of much of the work, casual, outdoor and nomadic, was compatible with the Aborigines' customary life. Harmonious relations were also the outcome of Aborigines seeking to incorporate the Europeans into their kin communities and the latter's acceptance of the reciprocal obligations they had thus incurred (Attwood 1990: 125).

This can still apply today, where researchers or other people go to work in Aboriginal communities. Depending on where the community is, they may find themselves incorporated into an Aboriginal family and into a totemic or skin group. This helps to facilitate their work in that the community 'know' their relationship to them and how to act, correspondingly, towards them. In my situation, working with Topsy Secretary, it wasn't as formal as this. She instructed me to call her Ngalap or 'Nanna' and there were certain obligations that were expected of me, such as provision of food, tobacco and lifts and access to social welfare services. I also had an obligation to tell the 'truth' when it was necessary, that is, present her story or facilitate the expression of her voice to Government Departments and other organisations such as the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA), Northern Land Council (NLC), Museum and Art Gallery NT (MAGNT) and the local newspaper - the Northern Territory News.

3.2 Larrikiya identity - 'they wasn't a lazy one'

Compared to mainstream history, oral histories reveal the unexpected, contradictions and inconsistencies because they acknowledge 'difference', acknowledge individual voices and uncover previously unknown information. Topsy's testimony reveals this form of knowledge.
We catch some insights into the relationship between the Larrikiya and their employers and into Larrikiya identity when Topsy Secretary talks about the history of her people working for European and Chinese bosses. Topsy stresses the fact that the old Larrikiya were hard workers, not a 'lazy one'. They adopted something of the European and Chinese work ethic. Perhaps this was because of a need to survive in an urban environment but whatever the reason it does serve to break down common stereotypes of Aboriginal people as 'lazy drunks'.

Topsy Secretary states:

They's very old, cheeky old Larrikiya people. All...too cheeky. And they used to say when other people come, you know, from long way, 'nother Larrikiya:

"Oh, we're hungry, we come for tucker".

Ah, cook meat, cook damper, give a tea and they tell 'em:

"You get a job, plenty people here, white people want people to work, you get a job, you get money, you buy tucker ".

They used to talk like that to them others. 'Nother Larrikiya tribes from bush that come. Oh, they wasn't a lazy one.

Well, they used to help some Chinese garden...to grow some vegies sometime. They used to work in the store, you know. Sometime they used to work at Smith Street, Cavenagh Street and all that. Just the broom, they sweep. Get all the rubbish, put 'em in a bag. No rubbish bin before.

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 36)
When I spoke to Ngalap about her younger days spent at the Kahlin Compound, Topsy again highlighted the independent and hard working nature of the Larrikiya.

Great, great ancestors of mine. You know, they used to tell us they work hard for getting that [tucker and clothes], instead of money (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 39).

When talking of her father Frank Secretary and his life she recounts:

My father was working Star Pictures, Union Office. He used to clean the yard, you know and stay there too. Three jobs in one day, he used to go. Sometime, when he finished that, quit job, he go to place to place, to rake yard, you know, you get paid cash (Topsy laughs). We all lived together with our father and mother. They were the school days, where we went to school. My father used to go and work in town and come back. My mother did not work. She used to stay home and clean and wash clothes. [My father] never stopped work, he never had holiday, only the weekend (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 75).

And a comment she frequently makes to me:

In my young days never lazy. I used to love work, you know, earn my own money. I’d be proud to have my own money. To shout my friends at Don Hotel (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 119).

Topsy explains that her father, in his capacity as boss of the Larrikiya, believed he could not stop the Barragut from taking over the traditional
land of the Larrikiya (Darwin or Bordaan) and, instead, thought that it was enough that he could work for his own living, in much the same way as the Whitefellas. He came to accept the concept that the ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ Larrikiya were becoming few in number and as such could not hold on to all of their country. Topsy quotes her father’s words: ‘I can’t take the whole of Darwin. If my tribe was alive then theys the ones that can say to you people, white people’ (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 87).

Throughout my seven year relationship with Topsy Secretary she has always made a special point regarding the hard working nature of herself and the ‘old’ Larrikiya. More importantly it is a significant and proud part of her own identity. The necessity of her having to work hard was a constant refrain in her life. She needed to do this to support her child due to the absence of her first man, Samuel Puruntatameri and then the death of her second ‘husband’ Norman Harris (Barral). In addition to this, those days (1940s) for her and other Larrikiya people were very hard.

Topsy’s narratives are excellent examples of what constitutes the unique characteristics of oral histories. Oral histories can reflect, sometimes very powerfully, the identity of the narrator and his/her people. Quite often Topsy will punctuate her conversations with me by saying with a heavy voice ‘Sean, all my life, I never stop working. I earn my own living’.

Topsy Secretary’s strength of character can be seen in the emphasis she places on her and her community’s truth. Sometimes she will emphatically and aggressively state to me ‘I know my histories!’ (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 72). Darian-Smith and Hamilton describe ‘this preoccupation with identity’ as a ‘preoccupation with claiming a past’ (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 2). Secretary’s memories and recounting
of them serve a very important role in presenting her image, her identity. As Vansina puts it:

Reminiscences are then not constituted by random collections of memories, but are part of an organised whole of memories that tend to project a consistent image of the narrator and, in many cases, a justification of his or her life (Vansina 1985: 8).

White suggests that identity or self definition are encapsulated within ‘histories told and remembered by those who inherit them’ (White 1991: 3). He expands on this:

Stories about the past are an important, universal vehicle for self definition. Whether we call them ‘social history’, ‘life history’ or ‘personal stories’, retrospective narratives create the present through idioms of remembrance (White 1991: 4).

3.3 Larrikiya and Barragut belief systems
Other forms of cultural exchange or ‘accommodation’ emerge in Topsy Secretary’s stories. Her recounting of Larrikiya creation stories depict a fascinating and highly sophisticated integration of both the Larrikiya traditional belief system and of the Barragut Christian framework. In contrast to Topsy’s oral accounts, Barwick (1981) and Morphy (1988) highlight the general lack of research by anthropologists and historians into Christianity and its adoption and adaptation by Aboriginal communities.

Academics are rarely scornful about indigenous...religious beliefs. These are exotic, ethnic and acceptable. Christian beliefs are not accorded equivalent
respect as cultural markers. The acceptance of Christian religion by Aboriginal communities is either ignored or lamented by anthropologists and historians. No other aspect of Aboriginal life has been so deliberately unexamined (Barwick 1981: 82).

Sometime during the dry season of 1994 I was assisting a colleague in his field work in the Victoria River Downs region. He was carrying out work for the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA, a Northern Territory Government Department). His training was in ethno botany and his work generally involved anthropological type research. On this particular day we were travelling with a very senior Ngarinyman man, Snowy Kulminya, who pointed out to us his sister's grave site at the base of a very large tree. I expressed my sorrow to this man and did my sign of the cross in the Catholic style. My colleague made disapproving comments about this and about the fact that I carried Catholic holy water in the glove box of our vehicle while travelling on Aboriginal land. This was a family tradition of mine to afford us protection in our travels in much the same way as some Christians carry St. Christopher medals. I was surprised that a man who so respected Aboriginal culture and had worked with them for well over ten years could not also respect another culture, that of Irish Catholicism. It appeared to me at the time that the Ngarinyman elder was respectful of my 'act of prayer' but that it was the researcher who was uncomfortable with it.

Topsy herself 'accommodates' aspects of western Christian belief systems that accord with her traditional beliefs. The Aboriginalisation of Christianity has rarely been examined by anthropologists and historians. I refer to some exceptions in the following pages.
It is in the oral histories' domain that we find evidence of such 'accommodation'. It is important to note that it is the Aboriginal voice that reveals this experience, especially in Topsy Secretary's case, when she talks of how Gulpba or 'God' made Larrikiya country. Topsy relates this story in a similar fashion to the Christian story of how St. Christopher carried the baby Jesus across the river to safety except she replaces Christopher with the name of Jesus's father - Joseph. I confirmed this information with her by describing in detail a St. Christopher medal. She agreed that this was the medal and story she was speaking of.

In the following account Topsy, firstly, speaks about Gulpba and tells how Gulpba or 'the Lord' made the country, leaving his 'spells' or dreamings in the country.

*Is the Christian God, like God in the Bible, is He the same as Gulpba or different?*

It is a Gulpba! Gulpba, that's a God! See, they say, Larrikiya, see they say: "God gave us this land, we stop here! We can't go another place. Cause that's not our home. Our home here."

He [God, Gulpba]walk all the way from Bagamanijing, from Larrakeyah barrack. It was Joseph carry him, you know. That was his home, Larrakeyah barrack. And he walk, you know, he put the ceremony ground everyway, this side. All along the beach way he went. Finding where he can find place for Man [sacred site]. He went through here, Shoal Bay. Like he left his spells, you know. [Gulpba], He left it for human today! When you have that certain day when the people come. The Lord himself, Gulpba, was in the shoulder when he was a little baby boy.
[Mindil], it shoulder blade. The native people called it Mindil this saltwater. Because the Lord, Joseph [St. Christopher] ... had a sandal step on the rock, you know. Everybody used to go there an' look at rock. I don't know, might be fade away now.

Why did the old Larrikiya people call Mindil beach - Mindil beach?

Because blackfella call Mindil first and white man call it Mindil beach. Yeah, that’s a blackfella name. It mean ‘shoulder’. It was Joseph that carry the Lord, baby Jesus on his shoulder. When the tide went out, he walk past. Y’see old people used to believe in God. Anything they see, that was His. That’s why they use to believe all them things and they used to tell us (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 8).

In the above account Topsy attributes the protection of land and caretaking to Gulpba, the Christian ‘God’. According to Larrikiya traditions, Gulpba and the Christian ‘God’ ‘gave us this land’ and so Topsy and the Larrikiya and Whitefellas have a duty of care for this country.

See, oh, we only a believe that anything that there, that God put it. We say: “Don’t touch that. That belong to Him, He put that there!” See! Gulpba, we call him, God! Anything we see, anything we got, they used to say, old people: “We didn’t get that! That was God put it there for us!”

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 7).

Her responsibility to care for her country, traditionally as a Larrikiya elder, is also a Christian responsibility. Gulpba in the Larrikiya language literally
means 'high' or 'above'. The Christian God obtains this name because worshippers look to the heavens or 'above' when they pray. Gulpba or 'Him' 'puts' the country there and it can't be 'touched'. 'Touched', in this instance, means 'damaged'. This is a powerful message because Gulpba came from Bagamanijing to Kulndal (Larrakeyah Army Barracks) and both these sites are involved with men's ceremony.

The notion of collaboration between subject and interviewer will be explored in chapter four. It is enough to say here that oral narratives are more likely to reveal 'difference' or a unique perspective. For example, a standard history of a particular Aboriginal community may give information about respective rates of baptism and attendance at mass of its community members but it would not capture the religious familiarity displayed in the following exchange:

*When we went to that St. Paddy's party, when you were walking out of the house you spoke to Jesus in [Larrikiya] language. Remember doing that? What'd you say to him?*

I said: "Look after us, we're going to the party" [Seán laughing].

Cause me an' him [McMahon] the cripple one [Seán & Topsy hooting with laughter].

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 172).

What is not actually captured in the above written account is the virulence or the aggressive tone with which Topsy addressed the picture of Jesus on the wall, when we were leaving her house. Her language and tone was very similar to 'growling'. 'Growling' is a sign of intimacy in Aboriginal society. You may 'growl' or 'tell off' someone if you are
familiar with them. Topsy demonstrates her intimacy with Jesus the 'Son of God', not through a pleading prayer, but in a direct, passionate instruction to Him of His duties of care to her and her loved ones.

Another example of Topsy's adaptation of the Christian religion is an account she gives of how she protects herself with the 'River of Jordan'. On occasions in the past when Topsy has felt threatened or 'annoyed by spirits' she will place cups of water around and under her bed. She calls this 'my River of Jordan'! Interestingly, water is also very important in Larrikiya funeral ceremonies for both cleansing and protection, and in female initiation ceremonies.

Barwick argues that 'accommodation', as it relates to religious practices, has not been well represented in anthropological or historical research. Morphy (1988) also argued this in his article The resurrection of the hydra: 25 years of research on Aboriginal religion. In more recent times there has been more published work to do with Aboriginal integration of Christian spirituality, most notably 'Can we be equal in your eyes?: a perspective on reconciliation from north-east Arnhem Land (1994) and 'Anthropology, self-determination and Aboriginal belief in the Christian God' by Ian McIntosh (1997); and 'Aborigines and contemporary Australian nationalism: primordiality and the cultural politics of otherness' by Andrew Lattas (1997).

McIntosh refers to the perception of the Christian God and religion as it relates to Aboriginal concepts of land and traditions on Elcho Island. This integration of Christian spirituality into their traditional frameworks bears a good deal of resemblance to Topsy's depiction of Gulpba.
The reconciliation of Christianity and 'traditional' beliefs has been achieved by Aborigines at Elcho Island in such a way that God is seen to have always been in the land, influencing Aboriginal lives and traditions (McIntosh 1997: 286).

3.4 Difference

In contrast to mainstream history, 'Aboriginal-owned' histories put before us narratives of difference. They also add to the store of regional histories and local knowledges and are capable of presenting Aboriginal peoples' own history or histories. Fielder (1990), while reviewing *Survival in our own land* by Ken Hampton and Christobel Mattingley, stresses this point:

The central difference resides in the 'our own' of the latter text: the fact that the story of the Aboriginal people's experiences in South Australia is told predominantly by Nungas themselves makes this 'historical account' so different from others. It is exposure to such discourse - exposure to what Muecke calls the political threat of the Aboriginal 'we' - that is so needed within our education system (Fielder 1990: 88).

Oral history is much more disposed to presenting the voice of the 'Aboriginal 'we' than other forms of traditionally researched and documented histories. Fielder depicts 'difference' as it occurs in Aboriginal-owned narratives.

*Survival in our own land* is one effective way of reclaiming and renewing these heritages by constructing and reconstructing Nungas' own stories. This text rewrites 'South Australian' history... from the 'Aboriginal' point of view... [It] is not a history in the conventional or chronological sense. It contains facts and it also contains feelings - facts and feelings of the past which have shaped
the present and which will inform the future. Rather than presenting a linear account of Nungas' experiences, *Survival in our own land* adopts a thematic approach, and also focuses on specific places (Fielder 1990: 88).

The above description could easily fit Topsy's narratives which reclaim and renew Larrikiya heritages. They construct and reconstruct Larrikiya's own stories and rewrite Darwin's history...from the Larrikiya point of view. Secretary's narratives are 'not a history in the conventional or chronological sense', rather they 'contain facts and feelings of the past' (Fielder 1990: 88). This is the case for most Aboriginal oral narratives.

Goodall (1987) reflects on the different content and different style of information contained in Aboriginal narratives:

> Are Aboriginal speakers ill-informed? In fact, these Aboriginal peoples' memories record a more accurate account of the *broad reality of Aboriginal experience* (my italics) than do the technicalities of the documents, but to reach that conclusion we need to think about those memories beyond their literal meaning (Goodall 1987: 17).

Aboriginal oral histories serve different purposes or intent than do the classically researched and written orthodox historian's accounts. Goodall discusses what she expected to hear when she carried out oral history interviews with Aboriginal informants and how this clashed with what was actually heard.

> My assumptions were stronger than I realised: I was expecting to hear about Aborigines as long suffering victims, rebelling where possible but mostly...
unable to alter the course of their oppression... The focus of oppression had differed from my expectations (Goodall 1987: 18).

Prior to engaging with Aboriginal speakers Goodall was tied up within a discourse that limited a broader and more accurate appreciation of Aboriginal historical experience. She perceived Aboriginal people in clearly defined terms, as victims, existing only as a reflection of mainstream Australian history, as isolated bystanders of history.

I had a similar experience in approaching the task of documenting Ngalap's stories six years ago. I, perhaps, saw myself as championing her and her community's cause, as a vehicle by which she could finally be heard by the ignorant Darwin masses. Over the past seven years I think I have learnt more about myself, my motivations and personal dilemmas and, maybe, the right questions to ask.

The oral history interview is a site of human exchange, like any other human dialogue. I have discovered that, throughout my research with Topsy Secretary, I have been in the business, to some degree, of resolving my own dilemmas. I did not become the great voice for the 'dispossessed' Larrikiya elders as I expected. In my journey I needed to surrender my central or pivotal role and, to a certain extent, this was not possible. The structure of the oral history process places most of the power in my hands. Despite failing to fulfil my original 'mission', I was able to play a role in putting together a text that portrayed 'a rich, complex history of Aboriginal experience' (Goodall 1987: 20).

Oral histories are capable of providing a forum, a place where the Aboriginal voice may move from what Mudrooroo terms 'the fringe' or
the margins and reclaim their ownership of a rightful place in the public domain. Their histories can no longer be seen as peripheral to Australian historiography. It appears from the debate surrounding Wik and the 'Stolen Generation' that John Howard and the Coalition would prefer to hear Aboriginal voices wailing from the fringe or relegated to where they came from, the 'margins'.

Aboriginal oral narratives do not simply take up their rightful place in the public historiographic domain. They transform the 'centre', the public domain. Postcolonial historiography assists the movement of Aboriginal voices from the 'margin' towards the 'centre'. Sweeney believes that 'Aboriginal writing take[s] up a position marginal to the mainstream, moving towards the centre, but constantly redefining the core by the pressure it exerts on it' (Sweeney 1986: 177).

3.4.1 Difference within difference

In the genre of Aboriginal oral histories, as in postcolonial historiography, the emphasis is on difference, difference in terms of geographical and community 'narrative constructions' and in terms of knowledges. There is a multiplicity of forms of knowledge and stories according to different localities and communities. We may say that there is 'difference within difference' or to borrow the language of the theatre - a 'play within a play'. This stands in contrast to the authoritative historical text which seeks to isolate a singular form of truth.

Heather Goodall, an oral historian herself, highlights the degree to which some Aboriginal people reconciled themselves to European oppressive structures and practices. She tends to have a critical tone when referring to this by inferring that somehow Aboriginal people she interviewed
'minimised' the truth. Perhaps, in her oral history collation, she has not come across Aboriginal peoples or communities who may have positively 'accommodated' European culture. Perhaps, it is a reflection of regional difference in as much as the New South Wales and Northern Territory experiences are very dissimilar. Where she has come across what she calls 'minimisation' in her oral history research she describes the process whereby she

became aware...that many Aboriginal people, when recalling their past, did not stress oppressive or discriminatory situations. If they described such experiences at all they were as likely to brush them aside with 'not too bad' or if asked, to deny them altogether...There were enough people who did recall such incidents in detail and with great anger to convince me that oppressive circumstances such as low wages, coercion to work, curfews and police harassment did occur and that they had been just as frustrating and wounding as I had expected (Goodall 1987: 28).

She walks on dangerous ground when attributing reasons why she believes Aboriginal people 'minimised' their adverse experiences. There is something of the oral historian as 'psychologist' or as 'psychoanalyst' in her explanation.

So people internalised the constructions of the dominant racist dogmas and convinced themselves, as a matter of survival, that there were indeed 'good Aborigines' and 'bad' ones and those who were arrested, bashed or harassed had deserved their fate by being 'cheeky'. Alternatively, their reflections on these events over time involved the need to come to terms with them, if only to restrain their anger to tolerable levels. So ways of coping developed to release one's self from the weight of the past, some by reconciliation involving
Christianity, others by more secular means such as denial or erasing from memory the events which were too hard to live with (Goodall 1987: 28-29).

My initial response to this argument is to draw into question such sweeping statements as ‘so ways of coping developed to release oneself from the weight of the past, some by reconciliation involving Christianity...’. No doubt a lot of the history she presents is true in terms of Aboriginal arrests, bashings and police harassment and so it is true for other parts of Australia including Darwin. However, generally speaking, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Christian experience is vastly different and far more complex than simply an attempt on the Aboriginals’ part to come to terms with the great trauma of the past. Instead of bringing into dispute the accuracy of Goodall’s conclusions her research demonstrates the quality of ‘difference’ that regional histories reflect. The reasons she arrives at for Aboriginal peoples’ minimisation of the past would not necessarily hold true for other regions of Australia.

Apart from the fact that the Aboriginal historical experience with Christianity is different across various regions, it is also important to note the particular mode in which the respective histories are presented by Aboriginal informants. In Topsy’s case she is more interested in emphasising the closeness between the different religions and world views of the Larrikiya and the Barragut. She is at home in both domains, the Christian world and her traditional Aboriginal world. If anything, the Christian dogma is adapted or fitted to the Larrikiya traditions. So, a particular strength of oral histories could be seen to be their capacity to convey different forms of knowledge as well as presenting narrative accounts for different purposes.
Jackie Huggins, an Aboriginal writer from Queensland, was very critical of the acclaim that was visited upon the publication of Sally Morgan's text *My Place* and condemned in extreme language its lack of 'Aboriginality'. She pointed to Bain Attwood's comments regarding the nature of Morgan's ancestors' relationship with the colonisers. Huggins quotes Attwood:

I agree with Attwood wholeheartedly when he states 'Her forebears have not been oppressed as much as most Aborigines were. By and large they have not acted as she expects or wants them to have acted: while they now resist, they previously did not or at least did not do so consistently; their relationship to the colonisers was more one of co-operation than of conflict: they exercised a degree of choice in denying their Aboriginality' (Huggins 1993: 461).

Earlier, writing in the same article, Huggins rejects outright any attempt by non-Aboriginal people to define Aboriginality when she avows:

I detest the imposition that anyone who is non-Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race. Neither do I accept any definition of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginals as it insults my intelligence, spirit and soul, and negates my heritage...There are no books written by non-Aborigines that can tell me what it is to be Black as it is a fiction and an ethnocentric presumption to do so... (Huggins 1993: 459).

This statement laced with extreme feeling denies varying definitions of Aboriginality and especially definitions put forward by non-Aboriginal people. Remember Huggins views Sally Morgan in the above light also. Ironically, she feels justified in citing Attwood (a non-Aboriginal academic) to support her version of what it means to be truly Aboriginal.
She, like Attwood, seems to refuse to permit Sally Morgan to own her own 'Aboriginal' history and identity because it does not meet her criteria of what it means to identify as an Aboriginal.

Why does Huggins make such angry statements in relation to Morgan and deny her her rediscovered Aboriginality, an Aboriginality based upon a history of co-operation and accommodation with European people. She appears to resent the praise that has been lauded upon Sally Morgan because she is not 'Aboriginal' enough and, therefore, does not deserve credit. Her extreme statements serve as indicators of strong feeling, of anger at the lack of recognition of herself, her community and her writing. In other words, her criticism of Sally Morgan says more about Jackie Huggins than it does about Sally Morgan. Huggins comments:

Like myself, many would believe that the power and control have always been in the hands of Europeans to make feeble and pathetic attempts to construct Aboriginality without our knowledge or consent... I have been used and kicked in the teeth every time I have taken on the 'Big Sister' role (Huggins 1993: 459).

Huggins' stance does not value 'accommodation' and 'co-operation' with the colonisers or the Europeans because she believes it denies 'Aboriginality'. Huggins, herself, has worked in the area of oral histories with her Aunt Rita in producing a historical account of her community. Her perspective and research reflect a 'different' attitude towards what it means to be an Aboriginal in Australian society and throughout its history.
Huggins' view stands in stark contrast to the oral histories of Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary, undoubtedly a woman of great stature and authority within her own traditional community. She values and tells stories of the historical exchange between Whitefellas and the Larrikiya and emphatically disagrees with Huggins view. Would Huggins dare to say that Topsy Secretary is not Aboriginal?

However, this is not the main point of this exploration. Arguments about definitions of Aboriginality disclose 'differences' of Aboriginal experience and contact with the settlers in different parts of Australia and reveal the legacy of varying forms of identification that they have effected. Strangely Huggins denies Morgan's 'difference' while claiming that her article 'will show up homogeneity for the myth that it is' (Huggins 1993: 463).

This is a theme that emerges in Aboriginal historiography, the revelation of 'difference', of a lack of homogeneity. Loh, in a review of an Aboriginal oral history collation by Nan Gallagher, also stresses 'difference' in oral historical writings partly through an exploration of 'accommodation':

This book should serve to weaken the belief that Aborigines are a homogeneous people... The book is mainly about individuals accommodating their past but some concerns for the future are presented (Loh 1993: 485).

So, in the Aboriginal oral historiographic domain, there is great difference and particularly so in the area of 'identification'. It is a common feature of Aboriginal identity for people not to relate or place themselves within a broad framework that displays ties to country and other Aboriginal people they do not know. McGregor provides an example of this as it relates to language choice. He comments that 'in regions such as the Kimberley and
Dampier Land, Aborigines frequently wish to express membership of smaller groups...one way they do this is by exploitation of language choice' (McGregor 1989: 48).

Throughout the whole process of working with Topsy Secretary to produce her history I would, in her presence, call the project a ‘book’ or ‘her history’ or ‘her story’. In contrast, she would call it ‘language’. This is an important pointer to how she identifies herself within a traditional Larrikiya history. At different stages in our work together she would teach me Larrikiya language and this would bring her the greatest enjoyment and I realised that the key to eliciting her history or her ‘truth’ lay in my journey to learn language, around which every aspect of Larrikiya culture revolved. Her identification is to her family group at Kalalak, to some people, who in years gone by, resided at Belyuwun and to Felix Holmes and Lena Henry. All of these people understand Larrikiya language. Felix Holmes and Lena Henry are not Larrikiya but both have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the language because they spent many years in Darwin mixing with Topsy’s family and other older Larrikiya people.

Topsy Secretary identifies herself and family within a smaller group in relation to the broader Darwin Larrikiya community. This is due to the fact that she still feels resentment towards other Darwin Larrikiya because, as mentioned earlier, in the early 1970s they wouldn’t assist her and her brother fight for title to the land at Kalalak. This struggle for Kalalak is a key defining point to her identity. She does not recognise other Larrikiya families, who at that time, did not want to identify themselves with her or as 'Aboriginal'.
There is no such thing as a single Larrikiya voice, just as there is no universal Aboriginal voice except as it pertains to the Law. Topsy's testimony above again underlines the strength of oral histories. They present a complex range of information, experiences and voices related to 'social identity, community and place' (Morris 1990: 83).

3.5 The use of metaphor and myth to represent 'truth'

Oral histories are better able to encompass reworkings of history, or what Carley (1992) calls the 'rememory' of events. They are also able to encapsulate the use of metaphors in an attempt to explain the past, especially when simplistic explanations are inadequate. Goodall quotes Murphy on this point:

Murphy argues against the simplistic view that oral history testimony is transparent, an empirical collection of direct reflections of events. He sees instead processes like the creation of metaphors which allow people to cope with, to analyse and to transform the experiences which they are remembering... considering not just initial perceptions of events but the continuing processes of reflection, the means by which people come to terms with difficult periods in their lives. These processes of reflections, as much as the initial experience, shape the way in which a memory is stated in the present (in Goodall 1987: 29).

Metaphors or myths are frequently used by Topsy Secretary when she recounts stories from her past. In conjunction with this is her vehement assertion that these metaphors are the 'truth'. This is both an appeal to an audience to take heed and a statement of authenticity of the story. One particular narrative account from Gweyelgwa ngayuboenoe, gwoyalwa nganigi 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country' stands out.
Topsy tells the story of a mermaid that used to swim around Cullen beach, an area that developers have totally altered. The word 'Cullen' comes from the Larrikiya word *Galan*. The general meaning of the word is 'fighting stick' but, more particularly, it refers to a species of bloodwood tree.

Topsy Secretary utilises the mermaid story as a metaphor 'to cope with, to analyse and to transfer the experiences' she is recounting (see above quote: Goodall 1987: 29). The experiences relate to changes to Larrikiya country, notably Cullen beach and changes in Larrikiya culture.

Today, that sand it move out now, gone away. And.. they're ruining the country. It'll never come back since the first ship came. [Mermaid] went away now. [Because the] noise, I think. You know, mermaid and fish don't like noise. You try stand in clean water, you make a noise, the fish gone! See. Well, [she is] half a fish, Seán! That's a real mermaid, got fish tail [on] it. (Topsy laughing freely) [She got a] beautiful golden hair. We seen it when we was a kid, you know. We trying to cross over, he [she] jump an' he [she] disappear! She was a teenage girl too, awh. The real mermaid I seen my own eye when I was little girl. That's the one now! She might be far away, 'nother island somewhere. She gone long time ago when I was little girl.

*Aah! A mermaid?*

Yeah. Only one. Real one! Real woman! Young woman.

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 65-66)

And speaking to Samantha Wells, from the North Australia Research Unit (ANU), in a separate interview, she recounts:
White skin like you, Samantha! Beautiful blonde hair, got shells, trinkle, trinkle in sun, fish leg on it. We used to swim, like shallow water, naked one... trying to catch her, try to look her, you know, ohh young teenage one (Topsy’s voice very soft). (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 66)

And I ask her:

*Is there any way for that mermaid to come back?*

No.

*How come?*

Cause she gone to the sea now, probably in ‘nother place. If [she] found a nice beach, might be staying there, you know. Once she wanted to come out from the sea, well, she stop there [Cullen beach]. [But not now.] I don’t think it’ll be back because the house is still going on and on and on, noise. See, those day wasn’t a noise! When the Jap bomb Darwin it was worse. It gone many years ago. The first ship came in, you know, the oil made a bit hurt. She dive somewhere. People don’t believe, they’ll find out, [something will happen]. They move the sacred site things.

*Which site was that?*

Well, the native people used to call him [her], like Larrikiya tribe, they used to call him [her] ‘Queen’, ‘Princess’, that mermaid. They used to see it! (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 66-67)
Although the story is ‘truth’, it also functions as metaphor. The mermaid is beautiful with ‘golden hair’, and ‘got shells, trinkle, trinkle on it’. She is also all knowing - ‘we seen it when we was a kid, you know. We trying to cross over, he [she] jump an’ he [she] disappear!’... ‘tried to swim across to that bank and look at her but she knew when we were there, just jump in the sea and go. When he [she] smells, oh, he [she] gone’. The mermaid is a metaphor for Larrikiya traditional culture or for a golden age when the township and seas of Darwin were unspoilt, undeveloped and it functioned as a world within which a child could play all day.

The mermaid has disappeared, disenchanted with the change in the environment due to development. ‘She might be far away, ‘nother island somewhere. She gone long time ago when I was little girl’. The mermaid left when the first ship came at the onset of European settlement. ‘It gone many years ago. The first ship came in, you know, the oil made a bit hurt. She dive somewhere’ (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 67).

Ironically, the mermaid has white skin but is driven away from her country. And yet, at the same time, she is there somewhere and maybe even playing a hand in moving sand on the beach. Similarly, the Larrikiya traditional owners and their land remain even though the community and their land have undergone great transformation; to such a scale that it is unbearable for the mermaid and almost unrecognisable to the traditional owners. ‘But she must be there! For that sand I seen it, it moved right out! Oh, somebody move the sand or.. I think he’s [she’s] moving [it her]self...’ (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 66).
While reviewing another Aboriginal oral history collection (the Bunuba language group) Houston utters some comments which seem applicable to Topsy's narrative also. He says that 'the original stories... had a deeply spiritual content, a strong element of magic that doesn't suit our ideas of historical fact (although it was a very real history... )' (Houston 1995: 8). The written version of Secretary's mermaid story does not capture the vocal tone of emotional longing and nostalgia that is expressed by Topsy Secretary when recounting this narrative. However, it is plainly evident in the oral performance.

This account ends with a warning to respect the land, not to mistreat it because to do so risks harm being visited upon the country. 'People don’t believe, they’ll find out, [something will happen]. They move the sacred site things' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 67). By implication, Topsy is also arguing for respect for this form of history.

Muecke extends the concept of 'alternate truth/s' that are communicated via Aboriginal narratives. These narratives reveal how the land was formed by spirit beings and explain the ramifications these stories have for the organisation of a community's social and ceremonial lifestyle. Non-Aboriginal people may call these stories 'myths' or 'metaphors'. For Aboriginal people they are religious convictions, eternal truths that govern every aspect of the individual's life.

Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' stories are often thought about as the creation of landscape features by mythological beings, so that the country was blank initially, to be filled by features - rocks, trees, rivers and gorges were the result of travelling ancestors, who ended up as particular features themselves... (Muecke 1992: 164).
In the same way, in the Larrikiya 'Dreamtime' the mythological being of the one-eyed trevally created the springwater at Lameroo beach. Secretary recounts this story:

Lameroo had its own water because that trevally fish jump and made a spring water. Freshwater for people to drink. That's why native people call, Larrikiya people [call Lameroo] - damoera, eye. Cause he had one eye that fish and jumped. But God put him [there], you know. He jumped and made a freshwater. [It's a] dreaming from the fish... Water still there.

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 33)

Ngalap Topsy when referring to the 'Dreamtime' states that 'God' or Gulpba put that there. In other words, Gulpba created that country and its dreaming. Of course, there are many stories of the creation of country pertaining to Larrikiya traditional lands and the involvement of mythological beings in this process.

There are numerous examples of the utilisation of 'myth' in Aboriginal narratives to convey 'truth'. The history, the myth, the metaphor of Captain Cook is a recurring theme in many Aboriginal oral traditions. He is mentioned in oral accounts in Larrikiya traditions for Darwin and shows up in different story forms across the Northern Territory, even in Victoria River Downs. Chips Mackinolty and Paddy Wainburranga amplify the role of metaphor to reveal different forms of 'truth' as it occurs in Aboriginal oral histories.

Contemporary accounts of Captain Cook among Aboriginal people bear little relationship to that which non-Aboriginal people regard as 'history'. Between
Cook discovering Australia and Aboriginal people discovering Cook, there is clearly a variety of historical truths. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, Captain Cook is of symbolic significance as much as anything else...for Aboriginal people he is the archetypal ‘first white man’ to invade Australia (in Swain & Rose 1988: 355).

Topsy Secretary talks of Captain Cook sailing to Darwin, captaining the first ship to come here and playing some part in the settlement of Darwin. She addresses Samantha Wells in a recorded interview:

See, first Captain Cook sailed and he left two convicts here and they speared them and they buried them, two of them in Fort Hill. Big hill was there, you know. They knocked it down. One was Mr Stoke Hill, one was Mr Fort Hill. Two wharf was there. Those people you saw at the museum, they was a real wild people. [They had] tribal marks (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 44).

Her recounting of this event differs in some respects from the European historical records. The value of oral traditions as opposed to the written record is humorously portrayed in a discussion between Chips Mackinolty and Paddy Wainburranga regarding Captain Cook.

Once, I explained to Wainburranga the non-Aboriginal account of Captain Cook. When Wainburranga relayed this account to people back at Beswick (Aboriginal community east of Katherine), it was greeted with some hilarity. How did white people know about Captain Cook? Only through books, of course: books are notoriously changeable (in Swain & Rose 1988: 360).

Wainburranga perceives the shortcomings of the orthodox historian’s text and debunks its power over the spoken story. If oral histories are
'unreliable', chronologically and objectively speaking, then written documents may also be 'unreliable'. After all both forms of 'text' are interpretative. Oral narratives undergo a selection and interpretive process by the subject who considers what is for public consumption. In the same way, conventional historians study records, diaries and decide what is fit for publication.

Why has a hierarchy of evidence been developed in Western historiography? In conventional history precedence has been given to Government records over oral testimony. For example, an 'objective', rigorous written account of a massacre of Aboriginal people by troops would have been accredited greater credibility than the story about the event that has been passed down by survivors. It is for this reason also that stories regarding the 'Stolen Generation' are only gaining broader acknowledgment in more recent times.

The government and colonial recording of these events did not ascribe 'truth' to Aboriginal accounts regarding these happenings. The colonial writing of these events are only one interpretation, an interpretation based upon a particular arrangement of 'facts' according to political motivation. Sager maintains that 'written records and documents from the past are fallible... they contain omissions, silences, self-serving evasions, or even outright lies' (Sager 1993: 2). And Carr states that

every journalist knows today that the most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts. It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue (Carr 1961: 11).
Aboriginal oral histories are another interpretation, another representation of 'truth'. If all history is interpretation and depends upon an author's position, background and biases then oral histories simply provide more evidence for an interpretation. Questions must be asked as to who is the author representing? Who is the subject of an oral history interview speaking for?

Sir George Clark, taking the traditional historian's position, claimed that history is a 'hard core of facts' surrounded by a 'pulp of disputable interpretation' (in Carr 1961: 9-10). Carr however argues that:

the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation. Indeed, if, standing Sir George Clark on his head, I were to call history 'a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts', my statement would, no doubt, be one-sided and misleading, but no more so, I venture to think, than the original dictum (Carr 1961: 23).

Aboriginal oral histories, by their very nature, are an excellent vehicle for 'myth', 'metaphor' and other forms of knowledge which do not easily fit the orthodox historiographic construct. Healy stresses that there are some good reasons why historians should consider such structures as Aboriginal 'myth' because they add to the diverse nature of the Australian historiographic domain and challenge its very foundations. He asserts:

Aboriginal histories of Cook are interesting because they suggest that history can be a house of diverse plurality, and such an approach ameliorates the outright dismissal which has sometimes greeted oral history and the histories of indigenous peoples... My argument is that these histories can also be read as a
challenge to some of the most basic tenets of European derived systems of history (Healy 1991: 28)

Healy also comments that these forms of history which depict the 'conquest and survival' of an indigenous race in a wholly different manner as reflecting

a whole range of alternative forms and plots which handle time/space differently, experiment with identity differently, juggle continuity and discontinuity differently and take as their structures not progress or heroism, but morality, culture, land and Law (Healy 1991: 33).

The objective, rational historian, such as Keith Windschuttle, would deny access to the value of these forms of knowledge and to the delight of the story form and 'truths' they contain. Windschuttle is very critical of the postcolonial school of historians. He maintains that the traditional tools of the historian remain the best method for the writing of history. He explains that orthodox historians use terms such as 'meanwhile' to describe events occurring at the same time and that they are capable of depicting political events which occur over varying time scales (Windschuttle 1994: 110).

Every narrative writer makes provision for events that happen not in sequence but simultaneously. Every time historians use that common term 'meanwhile' they are writing of events that have occurred at the same time as those they have just discussed, that is, events that obviously take place in a non-linear progression. Not only this, but it has always been clear to historians that some phenomena operate on quite different time scales from others. Some events, such as the fate of individuals in politics, unfold very quickly, in days or
weeks; while others, especially national issues such as economic status or military power, fluctuate in the medium term over years... (Windschuttle 1994: 110)

However, his approach fails to address the complex issue of the incorporation of an Aboriginal 'chronological' perspective into historical writings. Inadvertently, he emphasises key areas that conventional history has focussed on; that of 'politics' and 'national issues such as economic status or military power' (Windschuttle 1994: 110). He demonstrates his lack of understanding and exposure to Aboriginal notions of space and time. These Aboriginal concepts are capable of usurping chronology as an organising theme in the ordering of historical memory.

Dening describes the essential attractiveness of these narratives when he says:

That is the problem of history, of myths, of signs and symbols. They are all in time. They cannot be set in stone or gold. If one would catch them, see them culturally at work, one must catch their changing, their inventions, their attachment to a fluent present (Dening 1996: 226).

3.6 Rectifying the written record, telling the ‘truth’, reclaiming history
Paula Hamilton points to the myth of Australia possessing a relatively brief history (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994). She states:

One of the most powerful myths that dominates the Australian historical landscape is that this is a new country (Britain as the old); and that we have such a short history. Indeed, travellers to Australia from the nineteenth century
onwards would often comment that they perceived it as a place *without* history. This idea of historical *tabula rasa* is of course a settler story... (in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 10).

Throughout the telling of her stories Topsy Secretary will repeatedly declare ‘I’m telling the truth in Darwin’. A significant part of this truth includes the fact that the *Larrikiya* were here long before the *Barragut* and have a rich knowledge and historical tradition. The ‘truth’ is mentioned in her prefacing or framing of stories. They must know that I am still alive to tell the truth. That is important for me, native woman, full blood *Larrikiya* (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4).

After participating in a radio interview on the 8DDD (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) about our collaboration and prior to completing Topsy’s publication I said to her that I will need to stand up strong to tell the ‘stories’ she has entrusted to me. She agreed and empathised with me because she believed that it was very important to put the ‘truth’. When I say this to Topsy I am letting her know that I understand my obligations to her, that I understand the importance to her of her ‘truth’. The articulation of this truth is a step towards the *Larrikiya* reclaiming a central position within the ‘Australian historical landscape’.

Oral histories provide a vehicle for representations of *Larrikiya* truth. Hamilton addresses this issue when she relates an observation by Jacques Le Goff. Le Goff discusses the contest over remembrance and the value of the shift from an oral recollection to a written collective memory.

Jacques Le Goff, a French historian, says that where societies are predominantly oral, the shift to the written collective memory offers the best
chance of understanding the struggle for domination over remembrance... The importance of Le Goff's observation lies in the complex interplay between an oral and literate culture to contest the dominant historical narratives...(Hamilton in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 10).

Hamilton explains that Aboriginal memory is sustained 'through community and culture despite attempts to break it down' (Hamilton 1994: 10). The oral narratives of Topsy Secretary, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, are capable of 'successfully unsettling the past' (Hamilton 1994: 14) by positing the 'truth' as experienced and expressed by herself and her community members.

By focussing on the text of Sally Morgan's My Place, Carley puts the view that the 'non-linear' nature of oral histories 'subverts the "narrative events" approach which begins in 1788 and structures the "settlement" discourse' (Carley 1992: 43). Carter highlights 1788 as the 'greatest barrier to Australia's spatial history' (Carter 1987: 34) and as a year which is 'an impassable barrier; it swallows up what went before' (Carter 1987: 35). Aboriginal oral histories struggle against this concept. They not only question 1788 as a starting point for Australian history, they demolish it. Oral histories are part of this contest for textual representation and land ownership (Muecke 1992: 2) and are an attempt on the part of Aboriginal people to reclaim history. As Taylor argues, it is a way of 'redress[ing] social disadvantage' (Taylor 1997: 1)

Muecke outlines the unique strengths of Aboriginal stories when he comments that they should be seen
as containing truths valid for their own territory - truths that carry ancient
knowledges of survival, ecology, health and social relations. There is a whole
philosophy here which has scarcely been explored: survival is about movement
(rather than settlement); a workable economy is about equal two-way exchange
(rather than greed or accumulation); and at the heart of social relations is the
idea that a community has patterned groupings which limit individual’s
authority in relation to their country (Muecke 1992: 47).

Closely linked to the concept of ‘truth’ as an inherent facet of Aboriginal
historiography is the notion of ‘identity’. Memories provide ‘security,
authority, legitimacy’ along with ‘identity’ and it functions as such in the
present (Hamilton 1994: 15). Because there is a struggle involved with
memory, both within the domain of Larrikiya historiography and within
conventional Australian historiography, Topsy asserts ‘I’m telling the
truth in Darwin’. By declaring this she stakes out her claim to the terrain
of historical ‘representation’ (Muecke 1992: 2) just as she claims the
terrain of her traditional lands. This ‘truth’ is enmeshed in the land and
makes up who she is, her identity. She calls on the authority of her
ancestors for her authority and identity and this is, simultaneously,
closely bound up with the earth and Darwin itself.

My ancestors they was telling stories from stories from stories to us now and
from me, I’m telling stories and stories about old Darwin again! From
ancestors! They can’t change it because it too dangerous, Darwin! It too many
sacred sites (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 16).

Conclusion

Aboriginal oral histories should not be looked at primarily as a
source of information but as a cultural practice. The framework of my understanding begins not so much with the facticity of historical accounts, but rather with the way the experience of the past events, incidents and circumstances are signified culturally and socially. The representations of history provide us with a focus on what are essentially expressions of social identity, community and place (Morris 1990: 83).

In this chapter I have focussed upon the capacity of Aboriginal oral histories to portray a history 'different' from that of 'conventional' Australian historiography. By so doing, they contest the dominant paradigms and conventions of Australian history. This is their most obvious strength, that of providing a platform for Aboriginal peoples' voices to be heard at the 'centre' or in the heartland of Australian historiography. This movement from the 'margin' to the 'centre' is well expressed by Thompson. Here, Thompson speaks generally about oral history but it is equally applicable to Aboriginal oral history.

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from leaders, but from the unknown majority of people... It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old towards dignity and self confidence... Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition (in Morris 1990: 84).

And Morris quotes Murphy who proposes that

the political claims made for oral history -- or strictly speaking for the oral mode of historical memory - are familiar enough. Firstly, it is argued that oral
history provides a hearing for those previously unheard, to those not represented in written archives, such as the working class, minorities such as blacks and ethnic groups... (in Morris 1990: 83).

Murphy's argument relates very closely to what Topsy Secretary terms 'truth', a 'truth' that has been largely unrecognised over a long period of time. It is a 'truth' that does not explicitly deny or reject dominant white accounts of the past either (Neumann 1992: 290). The emergence of postcolonial voices have forced a 're-evaluation' of and movement 'beyond the established traditions of sanctioned history' (Morris 1990: 83). And this 'new truth' or 'other histories' do not just seek to impart knowledge or information, they employ metaphors to impart a moral instruction, as seen by the Mermaid story associated with Cullen beach and in the stories of Captain Cook.

Morris recounts a story of how a woman she was working with explained to him that

it was a pity her old uncle wasn't alive because he would have 'put the real story into you'... Knowledge is seen as being a part of oneself which one must divest from oneself in order to give. It appeared as if language was not simply a means of conveying information, but that both language and the knowledge it conveyed had a material substance and efficacy of its own (Morris 1990: 89).

Neumann sees the artist, or in this case Topsy Secretary, as a 'healer'. Her role in 'telling the truth' helps to heal the sickness that is at the heart of the colonial relationship. The 'truth' of oral histories are also much more likely to embody what Dening terms 'freaks and chance' of history (in Potts 1991: 17). Potts suggests that narrative is the best vehicle for
conveying this 'freakish' information (Potts 1991: 17) and describes how the history he most likes to read is very informative and open-ended.

Narrative incorporates difference and leaves the door open for other stories and knowledges. They leave question marks and not full stops. They are 'never ending stories'. To claim that there is only one form of history or that the duty of history is to find out what really truly happened can lead to an exclusion of other knowledges, experiences and world views. In discussing the role of narrative and historians Potts puts it delightfully 'we are not scientists of certainty' (Potts 1991: 19).

Lowenthal (1985) discusses the 'personal character of memories' and how this means that it is very difficult to substantiate their veracity. Instead of focussing on the 'truthfulness' or 'accuracy' of memories it has been my intention in this chapter to bring to the forefront the concept that oral histories serve different purposes than do mainstream or 'conventional' histories. And here we are left to contemplate the purposes of oral memories. Lowenthal believes that a memory that is proved empirically wrong should not be discounted.

The personal character of memories magnifies the difficulty of confirming them. No one else can wholly validate our own unique experience of the past. Memories proved wrong or inaccurate are not thereby dispelled; a false recollection can be as durable and potent as a true one, especially if it sustains a self-image (Lowenthal 1985: 200).

Oral histories are more amenable to accurately reflecting Aboriginal experience than traditional history and they present a complex range of information, experiences and voices related to 'social identity,
community and place' (Morris 1990: 83). They de-construct stereotypes and misguided myths about Aboriginal people and are capable of correcting the written record by way of revealing information that was previously unknown.

Oral accounts reflect 'difference within difference' when it comes to the domain of Aboriginal historiography; that is, differing Aboriginal views and experience within the Aboriginal historiographic domain. They present a more specific picture/pictures, both of place and of the individual. Most importantly, oral histories provide a means whereby Aboriginal communities can sustain 'community' and 'culture'. This sustenance is essential in the provision of meaning for both the individual and the community because 'when you have no memory you have no feelings. Loss of memory destroys one's personality and deprives life of meaning' (Lowenthal 1985: 197). And Muecke argues that, in the postcolonial situation, great importance lies in the 'survival of cultural traditions' rather than in a 'survival in the strictly economic and day to day sense' (Muecke 1992: 46).

Oral histories focus 'on actions and events, behaviour and relationships rather than interpretations' (Taylor 1997: 6). Because of this, Taylor in citing Attwood, advocates:

\[
\text{it is possible to gain insights into the social values and institutions that have shaped the way in which individuals try to make sense of their lives and give meaning to their experiences (in Taylor 1997: 6).}
\]

If we can state with any certainty that there is no one authoritative History of Australia that contains the one 'true God' Truth or a History
that tells all stories from all perspectives, than we can say, like Carley, that 'in the end, history is portrayed as open-ended and always only partial' (Carley 1992: 44). Australian historiography continues to be a site of contesting voices and interests. The 'marginalised' who offer alternative views and constructs of this country's history are, because of this process and challenge, transforming the centre, the 'dominant discourse' (Walton 1996: 79). Oral histories are a very powerful means by which indigenous people are able to challenge this discourse.
Chapter Four
4 Issues Related to the Creation and 'Reading' of Aboriginal oral histories

4.1 Difficulties in ‘reading’ oral histories

Because there is no specific intention to isolate the one true history, oral histories are capable of embracing broader forms of knowledge. This terrain is complex indeed, especially if we keep in mind what Attwood refers to as the ‘hermeneutics of the self’. Drawing on Portelli’s (1981) work: The Peculiarities of Oral History, Attwood comments:

Memory is subjective and interpretative. It originates in oneself, and refers to the internal worlds of cognition, perception and emotion, rather than those which are objective or external, thus offering a hermeneutics of the self. Oral sources ‘tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did’ (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 204).

4.1.1 Context is vital

Oral histories are able to deliver ‘more’ to the reader than the standard conventional history because in addition to normal historical sources (both primary and secondary) oral histories use spoken testimony. Sometimes this oral testimony may be difficult to understand. In Aboriginal oral histories some background knowledge to the Aboriginal cultural context would assist the reader. Context is vital. It is not only readers who have difficulties. The historian’s task of transposing oral evidence into text also has particular problems.

Because of the nature of Aboriginal oral historiography, Attwood concludes that there are ‘insuperable difficulties’ presented for historians
(Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 205). Generally these questions arise in Aboriginal oral histories at points where a 'white' audience may not share cultural values with the Aboriginal narrator. What is being expressed by the Aboriginal narrator is a form of the 'other' to the non-Aboriginal reader. Goodall speaks to this 'difference' when she discusses the problems associated with analysing Aboriginal knowledge.

Analysis should be often difficult and sensitive thinking required to gain an understanding of another cultural and social experience. That means asking questions of Aboriginal statements to locate the areas where we, non-Aborigines, need more information to understand what is being said. The points which do not 'make sense' to non-Aborigines or do not meet our expectations are likely to be those where we do not share information or assumptions or analytical frameworks with Aboriginal speakers. Those are the points where our understanding can expand (Goodall 1987: 19).

'An informant's historical information comes with their feelings, evaluations, explanations and ideas concerning what happened' (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 204). If 'an informant's historical information comes with their feelings, evaluations, explanations and ideas' (Popular Memory Group in Attwood 1994: 204) then it is more imperative perhaps that the reader has some context or background information regarding the narrator's past or their cultural context. A simple example of this in my work with Topsy Secretary concerns the style in which information or stories are rendered. A lot of transmission of Aboriginal knowledge depends upon the listener having a degree of background information or understanding of the story or event in question. These stories are continually retold over time to community members.
Quite often I did not fully understand what Topsy was relating to me as I hadn't had this 'lifetime' of listening to these stories or to the themes pertaining to them. When I pleaded ignorance Topsy retorted 'but I already told you!' Because of my closeness to her she assumed that it already 'made sense' to me. After all, in her mind, I must be close to her as she was telling me intimate stories from her life and from her community. She forgot that I did not have the same contextual background over time that other members of her family had. Although I only came to Darwin in the late 80s, Topsy used to say to others that I 'had grown up in Nightcliff all my life'. Nightcliff is a Darwin suburb near Kalalak. I came to think of this remark as an acknowledgment by Topsy that I had a depth of knowledge regarding the Darwin area because of my learning from her. In her eyes, to know the country and its history means having lived there a long time or 'all your life'.

Goodall argues that there is an 'attitude among non-Aborigines that analysing or asking questions of what Aboriginal people are saying is somehow anti-Aboriginal and an attack on Aboriginal credibility' (Goodall 1987: 19). This may be so, but without proper cultural contextual understanding, the interviewer or oral historian may be asking questions that will not lead to a better understanding of the information being offered by the narrator. In my relationship with Topsy Secretary it is only now, after seven years of dialogue, that I am coming closer to asking the 'right' questions and thereby gaining a more significant understanding of 'where she is coming from'. The cultural divide between us can never be totally bridged, but the more time I spend with her in 'everyday' situations the quality of our communication improves.
A couple of years ago I was present at a very important meeting between Topsy Secretary (in her capacity as a Larrikiya elder) and representatives from the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (Northern Territory Government) and the Northern Land Council. This meeting concerned a very important sacred site adjacent to Topsy’s home at Kalalak, named Jirriyigi, and the damage that had been done to it by a nearby property development. I remained silent throughout this meeting because I was merely visiting Topsy and believed I had no ‘official’ role. It was only sometime later during an argument between members of Topsy’s family (which I witnessed) that Topsy criticised me for not speaking out at this meeting. I replied that I had no idea that she actually wanted me to speak as I thought she had more authority than I in this situation. She insisted that I should know that I had to speak and was exasperated that I did not realise this.

Because she had told me the ‘truth’ regarding Larrikiya history and culture, I had responsibilities to ‘tell this truth’, particularly at important meetings. She had never instructed me to act in this capacity but, in terms of ‘Aboriginal’ expectations it was obvious to her that I had these responsibilities. I did not have the prior contextual knowledge to realise my responsibilities in the relevant situation and as a ‘politically correct’ oral historian I would not do anything without specific instructions from my informant. This would be tantamount to committing a sin against the ethics of ‘proper’ Aboriginal oral historiography. This incident was indicative of my ignorance both at the start and in the course of my collaboration with Topsy Secretary.

In an Aboriginal community domain, with the passing of stories and knowledge comes associated responsibilities as a caretaker of knowledge.
In this sense, 'custodianship' displaces 'authorship' (Muecke 1992: 121) and individual subjects are socially positioned as repeaters of traditions rather than the sources of original or creative material' (Muecke 1992: 121). An oral historian cannot obtain such knowledge over one interview or even a series of interviews. Aboriginal knowledge, in Topsy's case, is invested over time within the framework of a relationship that she and her family value and respect. In my case, it was because of a growing commitment and role, through 'relationship', to Topsy and her family that I started to receive 'knowledge'. It was a part of a broader relationship, a relationship which was predicated upon Topsy's family's acceptance of me. This acceptance and the subsequent development of our relationship was vital before the 'real story' or the 'truth' could be related to me and even then I did not understand, sometimes, the significance of the information being communicated nor the responsibilities attached to it.

4.2 The 'veracity' of Aboriginal oral histories

In chapter one I introduced Trinh Minh-Ha's view that the value of 'story' in modern times is in the ascendancy. She examines 'story' as a form of 'truth' and explains the changing nature of historiography in relation to 'story' as a source of knowledge. In the above chapter I also explained Trinh Minh-ha's argument as to why 'story' came to be perceived as an unreliable source for research. In short, Trinh Minh-ha alleges that 'fiction' or 'story' has come to mean 'lies' and that 'fact' represents 'truth' (Trinh Minh-ha in Muecke 1985: 291).

In relation to the reliability of oral narrative, Shaw writes that

most early critical discussions of life history centred upon questions of reliability of one kind or another... qualitative approaches which use, for
example, descriptive narrative were seen as being less scientifically respectable because it was subjective in nature (Shaw 1980: 227).

Goodall, when speaking to this theme, suggests that among non-Aboriginal people there is a view that Aboriginal people are simple and unsophisticated.

This view assumes that Aboriginal people always speak in literal, superficial and empirically verifiable fact. Such a view is not just romantic but patronising. It portrays Aborigines as simple or childlike and denies them recognition as adults, living complex lives in the middle of extensive social networks and political alliances. This 'Aborigines as innocents' view assumes that Aborigines have not even made decisions or choices or had any of the experiences which mould and create recollections and judgements of one's own experiences. The corollary is that the choice becomes one of accepting Aboriginal statements as literal fact or of rejecting them altogether. There is no interpretative facility allowed, so when there is a discrepancy between the literal meaning of an Aborigine's statement and some other source, for example a document, then the Aboriginal statement tends to be rejected as unreliable (Goodall 1987: 19).

As previously discussed in this thesis, the 'Aborigines as innocents' view accords with what Muecke describes as a Romantic/Racist discourse (Muecke 1992: 30). I would argue that this view hinders our 'reading' of Aboriginal texts or testimony. A standard response by some non-Aboriginal people to the recounting of an Aboriginal story might be one of disbelief - 'it can't be true because it can't be proved'. There is a failure to come to terms with this form of knowledge. Often the premise or purpose behind the narration is not understood. For example, the reason Topsy
gives for the coming of Cyclone Tracy might be to make a statement of identity or of strong feeling.

In chapter one I outlined the various stories Topsy Secretary told concerning Cyclone Tracy. I explained that, according to Topsy, each story is true and is presented at different times according to the audience and the purpose behind the telling of the story. Each account of the coming of Cyclone Tracy shares the important theme of respect for country and for traditional owners but varies in its detail. An objective academic viewing of these varying accounts might conclude that they are unreliable and perhaps ‘childlike’ in terms of intellectual rigour and that, therefore, they are not true. However, this superficial perspective fails to see the reasons behind the stories and to understand the organising principle of ‘place’. It may miss very important information such as what is occurring to country at that particular time. A narrative referring to the past may tell the reader much more about the present. This point is also made by Attwood and discussed in chapter two (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 203).

Lowenthal, in his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, discusses reasons behind discrepancies in oral testimonies. He refers to Buckhout when he posits:

> Indeed, the gross inaccuracies emphasise the point: people are so eager to be part of ‘history’ that they falsely ‘remember’ their responses to, or even having been present at, some momentous event (Lowenthal 1985: 197).

This is quite a superficial reading of why discrepancies arise in oral narratives. This ‘inaccuracy’ or discrepancy may be unimportant in terms
of what the overall message, theme or purpose is. In the recounting of the Citizen Rights march in the 1950s in Darwin, Topsy Secretary is confused as to which march she attended. However, this detail is unimportant because the strategy of the narrative is to emphasise her long standing involvement and commitment to the struggle for Larrikiya rights, not to verify the actual time and date of an action. The 'conventional' historian might deplore a lack of meticulousness in detail but if we subscribe to the theory that oral history is more inclined to reveal 'tropes' rather than minutiae then we accept that the context of the delivery of the information is more important. The broad picture is revealed in an effective manner through oral historiography as depicted by Murphy and previously mentioned in chapter two (in Morris 1990: 89).

4.2.2 What is 'forgotten' or 'omitted' in oral narratives

Oral histories are notable, not only for what the narrator remembers, but for what he forgets or omits. Some critics point to this as a weakness and others simply state that this is 'unavoidable'. Lowenthal believes 'memories must continually be discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order...Much forgetting is not just desirable; it is unavoidable' and 'to think is to forget a difference, to generalise, to abstract' (Lowenthal 1985: 205).

Further on Lowenthal remarks that 'these losses [forgetting] leave the remembered past as 'islands in a confused and layered landscape, like the random protusions after a heavy snowfall' (Lowenthal 1985: 206). In the case of Topsy's narratives I have found the contrary to be the case. Instead of her 'remembered past' articulated as 'islands in a confused and layered landscape' I found a text of inner consistency. Over seven years of exchange I found her many stories and accounts of the past, people and
events, conforming to the way she sees and describes the world and her place as an important Larrikiya elder within it. Instead of being left with the remnants of a confused landscape, what can be seen through the eyes of Topsy Secretary’s collected narratives, is a clear articulation of her ‘self’ and her place within the traditional Aboriginal world and within the European ‘construct of the township and community/ies of Darwin’. I would argue that, at the very least, oral narratives reflect the personal needs and concerns of the subject and his or her self image and that, as Lowenthal puts it, ‘no one can wholly validate our own experience of the past’ (Lowenthal 1985: 200). Topsy’s stories certainly reflect this.

Other critics discuss what is lost in the recording of oral histories. Attwood (1994) discusses the notion of ‘textual authenticity’ and puts the view that ‘important visual and aural elements of oral testimony are necessarily lost in transcription - accent, inflection, pauses, facial expressions and other bodily movements’ (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 196). Hamilton argues that it is the historian’s role to fill in the missing gaps left by an oral history and it is the narrator’s role to recall what the historian ‘forgets’.

Memory is gradually lost and here the historian steps in to tell the stories that people forget - the ‘gaps’ in the collective remembering... Just as the people do remember what the historians forget (in Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 10).

Again, a weakness in this utilisation of oral histories is that it fails to value the narratives for their independent strengths and meanings. There can be a tendency to use the ‘data’ contained within the form solely as a back up for other sources.
As mentioned in chapter one, people are continually involved in the act of interpreting events from their everyday life. I have already referred to Morris' point that 'the production of historical memory is simultaneously an act of forgetting' (Morris 1990: 83). The narrator, in similar style to the academic historian, is involved in the active task of observing, selecting and omitting various events and information as part of the process of 'making history'. The difference that lies between the oral narrator and the academic historian might be the parameters within which they make these active choices. We must remember that the orthodox academic historian is also in the business of omitting and forgetting Aboriginal concepts of place and time. The charge of limitations of authenticity can be equally levelled at this form of historiography.

While working with Aboriginal informants Morris observed that oral testimony was premised upon personal experience. He comments:

Such events and experience were classified in terms of, 'I saw that' or 'I heard about that' or 'so and so was there'... In effect, the oral histories had an internal referent, drawn from active participation in a lived experience or an understanding based upon a shared experience (Morris 1990: 92).

Critics who highlight the 'unreliability' of oral testimony do so because individual feelings, attitudes and evaluations are involved in the act of interpretation. They would argue that this detracts from the objectivity of the accounts. In all forms of historiography selection, omission and interpretation of information are involved. Oral testimony offers a unique personal insight and is, therefore, a valuable historical resource. Aboriginal oral histories not only offer unique personal perspectives, they provide testimony from a different cultural perspective.
4.2.3 Language and 'reading' Aboriginal oral histories

To these immense cross cultural difficulties in reading Aboriginal oral histories we made add the inherent complexity of language itself.

Language is not a transparent medium through which the world may be experienced or expressed. Neither speech nor writing can furnish a privileged, neutral mechanism of representation. Rather, language is always 'incomplete'. It does not give us an exhaustive description of the physical and social world. However 'factual' or 'realistic' a text appears to be, it is inescapably dependent on the conventions of reading and writing that its producer and consumers bring to bear (Atkinson 1992: 37-38).

A number of problems related to language must be considered when reading an 'Aboriginal oral narrative'. Firstly, because of language differences, the non-Aboriginal reader of an Aboriginal oral history would encounter problems understanding the language used and in deciphering meaning. Secondly, the Western literary conventions that determine the style and format of a published text often mean major changes to an original Aboriginal text. This may render the final product without its original flavour. Thirdly, it is impossible to notate in a literary form a spoken performance. Similarly, there are great difficulties related to recapturing faithfully the mood, sound, tone and overall context of the original interview.

In addition to these problems, language is incomplete and unable to proffer a comprehensive, total view of the world and the events within it. Oral histories which derive much of their content from spoken language and present their findings in written language are *ipso facto* incomplete, a fragment or snapshot of what has happened.
Fragmentedness is a defining feature of postcolonial historiography. It resists the singular definitive text. Each postcolonial text adds to the overall historical picture or jigsaw. In the process of reading postcolonial histories it is necessary to be aware of the limitations pertaining to each text. Atkinson asserts:

the fragmented text avoids those representational devices whereby 'the culture' is captured and contained within a single narrative that is reconstructed by one single voice, from a single point of view (Atkinson 1992: 410).


The ethnographer can no longer subordinate all of his or her 'data' to unifying themes and models. The work of the text is more overtly recognised as an act of *bricolage*: the fragments of 'data' (which are themselves crafted rather than found) are thus juxtaposed. The textual arrangement therefore becomes a kind of 'collage' or, as Dorst (1989) calls his work, an 'assemblage' (Atkinson 1992: 41).

Atkinson attests that this form of text reflects the effects of 'contrasts and juxtapositions' which differentiates it from conventional texts. Conventional texts tend towards the use of 'cumulative evidence, unfolding narrative' and 'logical progression' (Atkinson 1992: 42). Even this thesis demonstrates the conventions of orthodox history by incorporating parallel research and literary techniques.
Regarding language and Aboriginal histories, Muecke explains that 'individuals are born into language and have had no immediate say in its formation; they are formed by language, and in particular by its discourses' (Muecke 1992: 22). Non-Aboriginal people are also born into a particular discourse surrounding Aboriginal history. They are informed by that even though the information is largely gathered together and analysed by non-Aboriginal people. Poststructuralist and postcolonial historiographies which incorporate Aboriginal voices provide a means to expand or break away from this discourse and begin to inform us of the Aboriginal experience. This is not to say that there have not been sympathetic and empathic white contact histories. In reading Aboriginal histories written or recounted by Aboriginal people themselves however, white people are limited by the discourse they have been exposed to all their lives, whether at school or through the media.

4.2.3 ‘History is dead! Long live histories!’

Postcolonial literary critics and historians may laud this latter day approach to the construction of historical texts but other writers, such as Keith Windschuttle, are damning in their criticism of the inadequacy of the form. Windschuttle finds it very hard to come to terms with the fragmentary, pluralist, multidisciplinarian character of the postcolonial world of text construction; a world of writers who admit the limitations of an historiography to isolate a unified singular truth. He lauds the traditional historian’s method of patient and meticulous data collection, leading to a text that tells history as it happened. In doing so, he neglects to reflect upon his own contextual standpoint from which he begins to write this ‘accurate’ history and, so, prefers to remain uninformed of the shortcomings of his created texts. On the subject of the rise of postcolonial historical writings Windschuttle has this to say:
In the 1990s, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us. The central point upon which history was founded no longer holds: there is no fundamental distinction any more between history and myth (Windschuttle 1994: 2).

Throughout the course of this thesis I constantly refer to Topsy Secretary’s statement 'I'm telling the truth in Darwin'. Without looking into the context of this statement and the reason for which she uses this terminology, we might be tempted to say, in ignorance, that she believes Aboriginal history, as she tells it, to be the truth in contrast with the standard European versions of the settlement of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Where does that leave us in relation to Windschuttle’s inference that history should be about ‘tell[ing] the truth about the past’. If we accept his approach to the writing of history we have at least two true histories of Darwin, an Aboriginal one and an European version. Is one version of history wrong and the other right? Any criteria used to judge right and wrong are firmly rooted in the language and culture of the competing parties.

Windschuttle has great difficulties in finding any merit in postcolonial historical writings. This has nothing to do with the shortcomings of this domain but more to do with Windschuttle’s inability to come to terms with the shortcomings of 'his domain'. Inevitably, he maintains the supremacy of the 'grand narrative'. He fails to take into account the
limitations and biases of the author based upon their own cultural frameworks. Windschuttle is unable to accept the loss of the privileged role of the historian, the role of an all-seeing, all-knowing, unbiased God-like figure. His lack of acceptance of the need for historians to reflect more critically upon their own writings is hinted at when he states that 'the traditional practice of history is now suffering a potentially mortal attack from the rise to academic prominence of a relatively new array of literary and social theories' (Windschuttle 1994: 2). Windschuttle would deny recognition being given to a whole plethora of historical writings, Aboriginal histories included. This denial reflects more about the inadequacies of the conventional, objectivist historian's craft than it does about the value of postcolonial historiography.

Windschuttle sees conventional history as the ideal approach, but it is only ideal and pristine because of what it omits. It omits many voices, reduces them to one. It omits difference: differences in regions and communities. It seeks to tell one story when to tell one story means the non-telling of others. With an exploration of 'difference', with the provision of a platform for voices from the margins the postcolonial historian is tempted to proclaim 'History is dead! Long live histories!'

There are difficulties in reading the 'new histories', particularly if you were reared in an education system that taught history from a coloniser's point of view. We are tempted to treat Topsy's narratives in the same way we were taught to treat historical texts at school. That is, as if it they contain the only truth. We may fail to reflect upon 'fragmentedness' and cultural and regional difference and so find it difficult to accept the veracity of these versions. We may fail to understand that Topsy uses the term 'the truth' as a motif of strong feeling because she believes Larrikiya
history and culture is not respected. One can be a God-like historian or reader if one chooses to ignore a range of voices and, instead, opt for the singular, superior authorial role. Atkinson articulates the advantages of a postcolonial approach to the oral history interview in this way:

Rather than the single 'voice' or point of view of a single authorial stance, the textual formats allow for a range of different perspectives or positions to be 'voiced' in the one text (Atkinson 1992: 45).

4.3 History and myth

4.3.1 'Myth' as 'truth'

Ellerman also uses the term 'truth' when discussing the role of oral histories and the information they contain. According to her, traditional historians are wary of oral texts because they don't meet the standards of intellectual rigour of their discipline. She states:

Suspicion as to the 'truth' contained within life histories is heightened because they rely on oral sources. Indeed, a similar debate within the discipline of history surrounds the use of oral sources...trenchant criticism has been voiced by professional historians, who argue that oral history is not 'real history' (see Douglas & Spearritt 1982). For example, O'Farrell (1982/3: 8) claims that to rely on oral accounts is to 'retreat from analysis, discipline, depth and precision - perhaps history of the heart not the head' (Ellerman 1995: 20).

To tell the truth or to write a 'correct' history in the manner of Douglas, Spearritt, O'Farrell and Windschuttle, would mean a non-recognition of Topsy Secretary and the Larrikiya's voice. If we consider that Aboriginal-owned histories primarily deal with relationship to land and that the traditional 'objective' historian deals with happenings in isolation to
'place', the question is raised: Who has the real history? Historians who omit, to some degree, Aboriginalised concepts of place are missing or omitting an important component of history. Is their history real?

Orthodox historians have many problems with the integration of metaphorical forms of knowledge and myth into historical texts. Windschuttle's statement that 'there is no fundamental distinction any more between history and myth' (Windschuttle 1994: 2), opens up another can of worms. Windschuttle disapproves of the use of myth in historiography. He alludes to this point by discussing a time when 'the humanities and social sciences had some claim to being intellectually respectable' (Windschuttle 1994: 2).

Lowenthal discusses the role of myth in certain Indian histories.

In perceptions of India's past, there are no 'criteria for differentiating between myth and history... What the Westerner considers as history in the West, he would regard as myth in India;... what he calls history in his own world is experienced by Indians as myth' (Pannikar)... Advocating a 'metaphorical' history, Nietzsche disparaged 'factual' explanation in favour of mythic insight from drama and fable. And written history may acquire the poetic, universalising character of myth as time outdates its specific factual content; we no longer read Gibbon as Roman history but as an eloquent meditation on human decline and fall, exemplified by Caesar's Rome (Lowenthal 1985: 211).

Lowenthal refers to Becker when speaking of the value myth once held in the past. Its subsequent loss of value may have occurred as a result of the rise of scientific rationalist thought throughout western history. Walter Benjamin believed that 'modernity destroyed the art of storytelling in
western culture and that the ... rapidity and scale of social and
technological change' played a major role in devaluing 'direct experience'
in Darian-Smith 1994: 3-4). Interestingly, Lowenthal provides us with an
insight into how the conventional, rationalist form of history is, perhaps,
coming to the point of being 'discarded'.

Perspectives on historical understanding are as diverse as its components. They
include what is sometimes derogated as mythological. 'In the history of history
a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story', notes
Becker, 'as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the
category of discarded myths (Lowenthal 1985: 211).

Houston also considers 'myth' or as he calls it 'magic' in his review of an
Aboriginal oral history compiled by Pedersen. Houston comments:

But there are difficulties. When Pedersen was told the original stories they had
a deeply spiritual content, a strong element of magic that doesn't suit our ideas of
historical fact (although it was a very real history to the Bunuba people and
barely 100 years old)... (Houston 1995: 8).

In chapter two I discussed the role of metaphor in oral histories in the
use of knowledge in different forms and for different purposes by the
narrator. In 'reading' Aboriginal oral stories, the audience needs to be
aware of the function of metaphor and to the purposes behind its
utilisation. In addition, Aboriginal people may see this form of
knowledge as 'truth' or as a 'true story'. This does not fit the definition of
Western 'truth' and so the Western reader coming to an Aboriginal text
may need to be acquainted with these forms of expression. The readers
may have to suspend their own cultural perspective and some critics suggest that this is impossible.

Muecke addresses himself to this subject when he discusses the category of 'fiction' as it applies to Aboriginal knowledge.

Aboriginal societies, for instance, do not recognise a category 'fiction'. There are stories and talk among the spoken genres. Stories can be true or 'of the Dreaming'. Stories which are not true are 'liar', but often do not take narrative form. It would seem, then, that all Aboriginal oral narrative is 'true' in their sense of the word if it does not fall into the 'Dreaming' category. Such stories also inevitably contain dialogue ('talk'). European Australians listening to such stories find difficulty in interpreting them. Their training does not tell them whether to interpret them as history, 'just talk' or fiction. How then can the Aboriginal narrator insist that the story is true? (Muecke 1992: 65-66).

In a similar way, an European Australian audience when presented with the story of the mermaid told by Topsy Secretary (see chapter one) would have difficulty in categorising what form of knowledge it is. To Topsy herself, the story is a form of 'truth' but what precisely this form is, is difficult for us non-Aboriginal people to fathom. As discussed in chapter one perhaps the story serves as a metaphor for the continued existence of Larrikiya culture. But to even say that is an act of interpretation. When Topsy Secretary states unequivocally that it is the 'truth'; we cannot experience the same feeling for this value. It is a form of knowledge that is 'other' to us, as non-Aborigines.

If we consider the strengths of oral histories (see chapter three), we can see how 'difference' may occur within various frameworks of historical
knowledge. Chips Mackinolty and Paddy Wainburrranga speak about the different versions of history relating to Captain Cook as it applies in the Aboriginal domain which stands in contrast to the conventional colonial account.

Contemporary accounts of Captain Cook among Aboriginal people bear little relationship to that which non-Aboriginal people regard as 'history'. Between Cook discovering Australia and Aboriginal people discovering Cook, there is clearly - a variety of historical truths. (Mackinolty & Wainburrranga in Swain & Rose 1988: 355).

4.3.2 'Strangeness, 'difference' of Aboriginal histories

If we get nothing else out of an Aboriginal text than an understanding that the Aboriginal experience lies outside our realm of experience, then the text has had some positive impact upon us. I think I am reflecting some of Muecke’s arguments when I assert this.

... but these two versions of the one event illustrate a rule for the writing/telling of history in cross-culture encounters. This rule would be something like: select details which are outside of, or extend, the general knowledge of your projected reader or listener. This rule thus plays along, maybe extends, a line of cultural difference (Muecke 1992: 69).

Healy also argues that Captain Cook provides Aboriginal people ‘with a means of elaborating both the long-term relations of force, and constituting this historical process as "problem"' (Healy 1991: 31). In other words, Aboriginal narratives regarding Cook elucidate ongoing problems in the historical relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. Windschuttle et al would seek to downplay the value of this form of
history and, in so doing, perpetuate a colonial power relationship which favours the non-indigenous voice in the writing of Australian historiography.

Windschuttle, in the *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Ruined by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, demonstrates an uncomfortableness with challenges to the traditional role of the 'objective' historian. For example, he deplores the utilisation of oral histories/myth in historiography, and believes that 'the adoption of any of these theories into the trade of mainstream history would change the discipline in ways that would render it unrecognisable' (Windschuttle 1994: 20). Here we find what lies at the heart of Windschuttle's fear, that of becoming redundant, 'unrecognisable'. What are Windschuttle, Douglas and O'Farrell really afraid of? The loss of their authority? Historical writings which are based on different premises to their writings challenge their authority. They are compelled to either validate the new directions in historiography since the late 1960s or stoically fortify their bunker and cling to the objectivist traditional school of historical thought.

Since the white invasion of 1788 there has been a very gradual erosion of the coloniser's monopoly on history making. Today many competing groups - women, Aborigines, workers - are intent on rewriting their place in such histories. Dening raises this idea when he comments:

> In times of conflict or social ambiguity, we make a ritual of interpretation. We carve out a social space, make boundaries around it with language and protocol, the better to convey the simplicities of our interpretations. I think these teasing moments are made for histories... In the strangeness or novelty of
the circumstances, we are teased to understand, to rationalise, by looking back.

We present ourselves by making histories (Dening 1996: 44).

Aboriginal oral histories 'tease' the non-Aboriginal reader through 'different' structure and 'different' forms of knowledge and information and they 'extend the general knowledge of ... [the] projected reader or listener' (Muecke 1992: 69).

4.4 Literary and geographical sites of struggle
Topsy Secretary narrates the history and culture of her people, the Larrikiya, but, in so doing, contends with a 'discourse' that has previously ignored Aboriginal voices and, instead, presented the European version of history. This discourse, through its omission of Larrikiya voices, disregards forms of history which lie outside its historiographic boundaries. To better understand the purpose of Topsy Secretary's history the audience must also understand the discourse she is contending with.

In the introduction to this thesis I argued that there has been a struggle for land and for literary representation between the colonisers and the colonised. Topsy Secretary exemplifies this. Her stories contrast with the dominant European version of the history of Darwin even though Topsy does not specifically address the coloniser's version. They provide a Larrikiya perspective on land in Darwin versus the Barragut perspective. I find myself returning to Muecke's statement:

In terms of cultural politics, the struggle for space is crucial, both in terms of real space (for instance land rights) and the more metaphorical space of representation (whose 'image' will count ?) (Muecke 1992:2).
Topsy Secretary describes Larrikiya history as the 'true story'. Although she is secure within her own traditional structures of knowledge, history and land ownership, she enters the historiographic and literary 'bullpit' to put the Larrikiya case, both for the ownership of land and the ownership of literary and historical representation. From this it may be deduced that Topsy Secretary believes that the Larrikiya case has not been in the 'contest', that it is now time for her to put the 'true story' in order to debunk the historical colonial legacy. The dominant image that counts (Muecke 1992: 2) is that of the European colonisers. The history of Darwin is notable for its lack of Larrikiya voices in this historical and literary domain.

Following on from this, Secretary argues for the respect of Larrikiya history even though it may not closely resemble the style of conventional rationalist history. Unknowingly she aligns herself with Lowenthal (1985) who also argues for a need to acknowledge different forms and styles of history. Secretary advocates this when talking about the story for an important sacred site in Darwin - Old Man Rock or Derriba Nungalinya. She states: 'It's not a superstitious (sic) story. It's a real story! Its [he's] a human himself' (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 19). Why does she feel compelled to say 'Its a real story!'? Critics such as Windschuttle deny Secretary her 'truth'. They, therefore, deny a recognition of her identity.

In the text Gweyeigwa ngayuboene, gwoyalwa nganigi: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country', Topsy Secretary refers to various sites of struggle that relate to Darwin, the traditional land of the Larrikiya. These struggles generally relate to differing perspectives of land by the Larrikiya and the Barragut. In the domain of historical representation, it can be said that it is the non-Aboriginal or European settlers' view that
has predominated. This is reinforced by the ownership and control of land belonging to the non-Aboriginal populace. Some of the sites within the township of Darwin which could be more obviously regarded as 'sites of struggle' include:

- Sunset Cove development in Nightcliff,
- Derriba Nungalinya (Old Man Rock), Casuarina Beach,
- Cullen Bay development, Cullen Beach,
- the Mindil beach Larrikiya and Tiwi burial grounds,
- Lee Point,
- One Mile Dam and
- all town camps.

4.4.1 Mindil beach burial grounds, Darwin
Perhaps, the most significant and constant site of dispute concerns the Mindil beach burial grounds. The Mindil Beach burial ground is located in close proximity to the centre of the town of Darwin itself. It lies underneath the Mindil Beach or Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Casino and under the very successful and popular Mindil Beach Markets. On a couple of occasions over the past ten years the bones lying in these grounds have been excavated by Northern Territory Government and Darwin City Council workers without prior consultation of Larrikiya traditional owners. Topsy and other Larrikiya were grossly offended by this lack of negotiation with themselves.

When referring to one of these incidents Topsy states:
That's where they dug all the people who were buried there. They dig her [my sister Anna] out too. That’s why I growl and I made them to put it back the bones.

"We are not animal! They’re having peaceful rest."

My family buried at Mindil beach. I went mad, Mindil beach, I said:

"If my father was alive [he] wouldn’t lift your grave. Now having a good rest. Why you come and dig my grave? We not animal. We are human like you."

(Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 60)

It is a matter of tragic irony that two symbols of Whitefella success in Darwin, the Casino and the Mindil beach markets, are built upon the bones, the graves of the traditional owners, the Larrikiya. In terms of 'whose image will count?' - the most potent Whitefella images of business and monetary gain are triumphant and are placed 'over' and 'above' Larrikiya interests and concerns. The Larrikiya 'interests and concerns' reflect their past, their heritage, their relationship to land and their history. To learn to 'read' Larrikiya oral histories means to learn to 'read' Larrikiya country.

4.5 Time

A major difficulty that a non-Aboriginal audience may have with Aboriginal oral histories is their different structures of time. In many instances of this form of history linear notions of time are subordinated to concepts of place. Muecke refers to this preoccupation with time by non-Aboriginal historians.

One feature on which white history depends is the regular indication of chronological spacing by dates, as if Time’s arrow, thus conceived, will
always dominate with its ruthless arithmetic the essential discontinuity of events and in this way set up arbitrary unities (such as Australia celebrating 200 years of history; about a half of one per cent of the duration of human occupation of the continent) (Muecke 1992: 91).

And Crawford describes the emphasis on chronological ordering in historical writings and on the date 1788 as a starting point for Australian history as an eraser of discomforting memories in Australia's past. She remarks:

As the Commonwealth Government has decided to celebrate the Bicentenary of European colonisation, some of the disturbing themes in our past are swept away by this choice of chronological perspective. The date of 1788 and the consequent idea of 'two hundred years of history' puts many stories outside consideration... just as Aboriginal people have been marginalised by white society, so their history is made peripheral (Crawford in Crawford & Gare 1987: 81).

Barwick quotes the Working Party of Aboriginal Historians who argue that 'because Aboriginal chronology is imprecise, it is dismissed, and this is just another way of denying us a say about our past' (Working Party of Aboriginal Historians in Barwick 1981: 76).

4.5.1 Importance of 'place' and its relationship to time
Aboriginal narratives attempt to reclaim their history and through this process redefine how history is constructed. European readers of Aboriginal histories may consider that a lack of chronological order within this genre indicates a lack of reliability with the knowledge contained therein. They may fail to see that Aboriginal people do not
share this obsession with time order because they consider 'place' as a more important organising construct. Time may still be an organising principle throughout Aboriginal stories but it is not necessarily the most important.

Where there is a contest for land and a contest for metaphorical representation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, there is also a contest over differing notions of 'time' as an organising principle in the writing of history. Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994) discuss the way mythic narratives transcend this problem by skipping 'through historical time'.

Instead of offering a totalising, integrated history, myths progress through historical time in leaps and bounds as a series of anecdotes, and their meanings are articulated by certain images and symbolic moments of revelation and action (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 2).

Aboriginal oral histories transcend the confines of chronological order. In my work with Topsy Secretary I found time was skipped over, visited, revisited in a circular, sometimes spiral fashion. The thread that ran through the middle of these continuing 'circles of stories' was 'place'. Hence, a reader will recall her stories within such titles as: 'old people at Lameroo beach', 'clearing/making a home at Bagot beach', 'Japaneese (sic) bombing of Darwin', 'fighting for Kalalak' and so on. The place, whether it be Bagot beach, Cullen beach, Lameroo beach or Kalalak and the context, may also indicate a period of time. In relation to this phenomena, Muecke states that 'statements are bounded by space and time. Their co-ordinates are the institutional organisations of power and knowledge as they appear in particular societies at particular times' (Muecke 1992: 97).
The principle co-ordinate that organises knowledge or history within Aboriginal society is attachment to land. Hence, a history regarding an Aboriginal community, in a sense, could be considered 'other' to a neighbouring Aboriginal community.

Darian-Smith and Hamilton discuss the ways in which colonial historiography ordered history into time zones such as 'postwar, prewar, inter war' and focus on the re-evaluation of place as an ordering construct within historiography. They postulate that 'historians have recently begun to explore relationships between place and the past, no longer assuming that geography is simply the ground on which events took place' (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 5).

The Aboriginal oral accounts pertaining to the role of Captain Cook in Australian history highlight 'place' as an organising principle in the construction of their narratives. Healy remarks:

Like most Aboriginal histories of Cook, this history is linked to place rather than time. Whereas Europeans are in the habit of ordering events to conform to chronological time, Aboriginal history is equally precise in ordering names to places (Healy 1991: 29).

Carter portrays this preoccupation with linearity as it applies to non-Aboriginal historians as limited and short-sighted. He comments:

We have, in fact, to make cloudy again the line between language and space, to turn a barrier into a road, to recover the sense in which language did not simply delimit, but made a difference. We have to disperse the myth of spontaneous,
theatrical settlement and linear progress, and to demonstrate the dialectical nature of foundation, a product of language and the intentional gaze, not of the detached, dictionary-clasping spectator (Carter 1987: 36).

Carter describes the settlement of Australia which is recounted in a linear fashion in the following manner:

Such history is a fabric woven of self-reinforcing illusions. But, above all, one illusion sustains it. This is the illusion of the theatre and, more exactly, the unquestioned convention of the all-seeing spectator (Carter 1987: xv).

In place of 'the all-seeing spectator' read 'the orthodox conventional historian'.

Because of the ways in which Australian colonial history has been conventionally written a 'barrier' has been created: a 'barrier' to discovering 'truths' regarding Aboriginal historical experience as seen by Aboriginal people themselves. This barrier has been cemented firmly in place because this form of history was written by non-Aboriginal writers for non-Aboriginal audiences. The content and structure of such histories reflected the colonialists' concerns. If this form of history is a 'barrier' for the postcolonial reader, than we can also say that individual Aboriginal oral histories represent 'roads' towards 'enlightenment' and a redefining of the 'line between language and space' (Carter 1987: 36).

Obviously, Aboriginal societies do not conceptualise time in the same way as white Australians. Muecke again explains:
Aboriginal cultures traditionally did not add up the years and did not necessarily see time as progressing in a straight line. Their discourses on the past, therefore, might not be constructed according to the same rules as white history (Muecke 1992: 91).

The Working Party of Aboriginal Historians (comprising Marcia Langton, Wayne Atkinson, Michael Williams and Doreen Wanganeen) assert that:

Aboriginal chronology takes many forms, but particularly a cyclical or spiralling one. It is not a consecutively numerical form. When old people talk to young people, they refer to a point on a cycle as a referent... (Working Party of Aboriginal Historians 1988: 57).

Topsy Secretary, in relating a story to a particular site on Larrikiya land, may go back to the past in recounting another event connected to this site, come a little closer to the present to relate another tale, revisit the present to tell another story and so on and so on. The site or 'place' she uses as the narrative’s thematic underpinning may be important because it is a sacred site, has a relevant 'dreaming', has historical significance to the Larrikiya or, just simply because Topsy may have lived there at some time in her life. Healy emphasises 'space' as an organising principle in 'Aboriginal historical consciousness' and contrasts this with a non-Aboriginal perspective (Healy 1991: 29).

In terms of a non-Aboriginal sense of history it is not really clear whether the 'historic' event was observed from 'the point' or whether the history is told from there. For Aboriginal historical consciousness this is a distinction of artifice. The time of the 'event' returns with the time of the telling because the
place is always there. These are histories without a linear notion of time in
which space is deeply historical. (Healy 1991: 29).

And Healy adds that 'these histories refuse to make categorical
distinctions between the past and the present' (Healy 1991: 31).

If we are talking about difficulties of ‘reading’ or understanding
Aboriginal oral narratives and if we consider that, to a large extent, their
content is organised around concepts of ‘place’ then it would seem to
make sense that it would help the reader to have some background
knowledge of the location, the area of land the subject is referring to in his
or her account. To fully appreciate an Aboriginal oral history that is
centred in a remote desert area of central Australia could be very difficult
for a city dweller who has never met an Aboriginal person in his/her life
and has no concept of their lifestyle or values. As mentioned earlier in
this chapter, what they may pick up from the text is Aboriginal knowledge
as an experience of the ‘other’.

Muecke states that if the reader is ‘familiar with the landforms, as well as
the local flora and fauna’ these forms of Aboriginal texts would be much
more accessible. Correspondingly, Carter posits that ‘place itself
disappears’ in a history that is structured primarily on chronological
order. 'Place' disappears' when a 'narrative of events takes over'
(Crawford in Crawford & Gare 1987: 82). If the reader is not familiar with
the 'place' being written of then the text, the narrative will most
definitely convey ‘difference’ to him/her. Dening argues for the retention
of 'strangeness' in historical texts and that it is very important not to
falsely make these texts accessible to everyone (Dening 1996: 77).
Working with Topsy Secretary was an educational process for me, regarding Larrikiya land, sea, culture and language. The work we did together has some significance even if I may not have understood a lot of her testimony. Part of that significance is the fact that I helped build a bridge across a cultural and historical chasm. My questions, framed in western terms, assisted western readers to at least access Topsy's view of her 'country' and the 'truth' she insisted on telling about it. The bridge we constructed together is not flawless and the reader needs to be aware of its limitations.

4.6 History - a site of 'multiple constraints'

Oral histories are one form Aboriginal people are able to utilise in the struggle for their history to be heard and for their 'image' to 'count' (Muecke 1992: 2). Just as the land is a 'site of struggle' between Aboriginal and European Australian aspirations, so is the domain of historiography a 'site of struggle' between Aboriginal and white Australian forms of historical representation (Muecke 1992: 2). But in the process of converting Aboriginal narrative accounts to a text that can be consumed by a western audience they have had to undergo adaptation to western historical and literary conventions. Muecke cautions against the perception of Aboriginal histories or literature as a simple conduit towards the liberation of the Aboriginal voice because of the 'constraints' imposed by the need to adapt to a Western form. However, while recognising this pressure it does not necessarily mean that the new 'text' becomes devoid of impact or authenticity.

Rather than seeing the text as a place where the desire to speak is liberated, it could be seen as a site of multiple constraints pertaining both to form and contextual relations. These constraints are not negative; they tend to make sure
that a text will have a specific application in renegotiating meanings (Muecke 1992: 138).

This issue will be examined in more detail in chapter five, especially as it relates to the collaborative nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors working together to produce a historical text, a text that, to some degree, must undergo an adaptive process in order to communicate to a non-Aboriginal audience. According to Muecke, 'appropriate forms of inscription or notation of verbal performances' have not yet been found (Muecke 1992: 40). Perhaps there are none. Because of this, the written form of language 'notation' cannot assume ascendancy over spoken 'notation' (Norris in Muecke 1992: 40).

This chapter has attempted to address some of the contingencies and complexities, not immediately noticeable, involved in the reading of Aboriginal oral histories. The major problem here is the basic difference in structure between the Aboriginal owned histories and Western forms of historiography. Healy implies that these two forms can never completely meet nor dialogue with one another by remarking 'that there might be basic and primary distinctions between an Aboriginal historical sensibility and a non-Aboriginal historical sensibility; a primary fissure in the collective memory of "Australia"' (Healy 1991: 28). Attwood also stresses the primary differences between these competing forms of historical expression. However, he inadvertently discredits oral testimony and by inference Aboriginal narratives when he argues that "myth" and "history" are two different strategies for constituting "reality", and he aligns oral testimony with "myth" (in Rowse 1993: 467).
By saying this, Attwood fails to recognise the 'primary fissure' (Healy 1991: 28) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historiographic forms. He shows his bias towards the conventional objectivist school of historiography. This is endorsed by his preference for the use of Aboriginal oral testimony as a 'secondary' source in the writing of history. He demonstrates this when he says that oral history can be a useful addition to and 'corrective of the written record' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 195) and can 'offer new insights, thus providing the historian either with a truer account of the past or another perspective' (Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 195). Perhaps, he too believes oral histories are 'not real history' (Douglas & Spearritt 1982).

This view is not a new one but a continuation of a colonialist, superior discourse surrounding Aboriginal voices in the domain of Australian historiography. Sweeney points to the limitations of this view by citing Judith Wright:

Judith Wright warned in 1974 against applying Western critical judgement to Aboriginal literature, in whatever language it is written. She pointed out the rather 'disquieting resemblance' between Western criticism of Aboriginal lifestyle and Aboriginal literature and the likely errors of both imposed judgements (Sweeney 1986: 8).

Dale describes the contest between the two knowledge forms in this way:

An important part of placing traditional concepts of history under stress lies in the conflict between indigenous and western attitudes to temporal order and value. The western view of time as a linear progression (the continual upward movement of man) posits a causal - and implicitly uni-directional - rather than a
contextual relationship between particles of time and space. Yet for many indigenous peoples linearity was and is in itself intrinsically chaotic, disrupting the continuity of the physical/social environment which tells the individual who she is by locating her in a continuum that is social, spatial and temporal (Dale 1987: 28).

Even while taking into account the complex problems inherent in reading and creating oral histories, it may be argued that the whole historical process of 'knowing history', if such a thing is possible, is an enigma or a mystery anyway. Lowenthal quotes Kubler's view on this question when he remarks that "knowing the past", as Kubler says, "is as astonishing a performance as knowing the stars" and it remains no less elusive for being well documented' (Lowenthal 1985: 191). Similarly, a non-Aboriginal reader of Aboriginal oral histories grapples with not only the difficulties of transposing the vocal form to the written but also with cultural knowledge and information that are different to her own.
Chapter Five
5 Collaborative Historiography

5.1 'Aboriginal people as captives of discourse'

The conventional historian tends to value the collection of empirical data over oral narratives in order to ascertain 'what really happened?' He prefers to take an objectivist stance and set himself apart from the subject he is discussing. 'The oral historian', however, 'is usually part of the sources he or she seeks to interpret, unlike the orthodox historian who stands apart from his or her sources' (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 198).

Tony Birch addresses the issue of non-Aboriginal academics involved in the writing of Aboriginal history in a poem entitled Half Caste. He wrote this poem in response to Bain Attwood's argument that Sally Morgan's ancestors 'exercised a degree of choice in denying their Aboriginality' (Attwood in Huggins 1993: 459). Apparently they did this because, according to Attwood, they had 'not been as oppressed as most Aborigines were' (Attwood in Huggins 1993: 459).

The poem reflects, from an Aboriginal perspective, the dangers of writing Aboriginal history that is not controlled or owned by Aboriginal people themselves.

'Half Caste'
You see me
half black
half white
but never whole
a corpse
torn apart
to toy with
my body -
an 'intellectual's'
commodity

you 'make' me
arranging
re-arranging
my history
and identity

I turn to see
I am decapitated
limbless
my body -
re-assembled
in gubbah discourse
(Birch 1993: 458)

Aboriginal historiography has been dominated by non-Aboriginal historians. This has provided real problems where representation and misappropriation of Aboriginal voices is concerned. Barwick cites the Working Party of Aboriginal Historians who are critical of non-Aboriginal historians and editors who distort Aboriginal style and structure in their writing of history.

Overzealous white historians and editors have altered the structure and form of Aboriginal stories, myths and oral records to make them more
comprehensible to a white audience, but have thereby made them incomprehensible to Aboriginal audiences...Only we can recognise the Aboriginality of a piece of work...When the cues, the repetitions, the language, the distinctively Aboriginal evocations of our experience are removed from the recitals of our people, the truth is lost for us...Because Aboriginal chronology is imprecise, it is dismissed, and this is just another way of denying us a say about our past (Working Party of Aboriginal Historians in Barwick 1981: 75-76).

The rise in the number of Aboriginal oral histories and, even, in the number of collaborative works between Aboriginal subjects and non-Aboriginal historians since the 1970s is evidence of a progression towards an Aboriginal owned discourse. Fielder, while reviewing a collation of South Australian oral histories, attests that there is a need for an Aboriginal owned discourse in the area of history. This set of oral histories, Survival in Our Own Land: Aboriginal Experiences in South Australia since 1836

complies with what Narogin calls 'writing from the fringe'. There is no preface of authentication or approval by a white person, and there is no apology or justification for the non-standard English. After so much has been 'blacked off' and 'thrashed out' of Aboriginal culture, the retention and celebration of a style or discourse that can be described as 'Aboriginal' is of great importance (Fielder 1990: 89).

Fourmile emphasises that Aboriginal people are also 'captives of the archives' when she quotes Hagan's referral to the native Americans' corresponding situation.

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To be an Indian is having non-Indians control the documents from which other non-Indians write their version of your history...the historical Indian may be the captive of the archives, but the key to those archives is in the hands of non-Indian historians (in Fourmile 1989: 1).

Fourmile cites McBryde who says that 'the past is the possession of those in power; the past belongs to the victor' (in Fourmile 1989: 1). In the same way colonial Australian historiography has been written with the victor's pen.

Fourmile also maintains that in Australia 'ownership and control of historical resources are denied to [Aboriginal people]' through 'the distribution of Aboriginal historical resources, problems of access and issues of legal ownership' (Fourmile 1989: 2). This contributes to the non-Aboriginal control of the discourse surrounding Aboriginal historiography.

Muecke believes that discourse is controlled in different ways in different societies. He argues:

Different structures in the different societies determine the hierarchies of discourse: Aboriginal discourses lack precisely the authority to be heard in the white institutional context. They cannot be accepted without being processed - summarised, edited, gathered up into an acceptable discursive order, one that speaks from a position of power (Muecke 1992: 144)

This is so because such discourses do not share colonial historiography's preoccupation with 'order' and 'rationality'. Aboriginal voices were repackaged by non-Aboriginal historians so they could be 'read' by a non-
Aboriginal audience. Aboriginal voices or oral histories were not considered 'textable' for a white audience. Dening reflects ironically on the non-Aboriginal preoccupation with 'text' when he comments:

Mozart writes a sonata on a cold day in a spiteful mood; Pomare, high chief of Tahiti, at the same moment distractedly 'eats' the eye of a human sacrifice. Yet we have a common-sense confidence that the 'real' past, like the 'real' present, is much more connected and ordered. We have a confidence that the past is ordered in itself in such a way that we can make a narrative of it. It is textable...This mythic confidence in a text-able past is the ambience in which histories are made (Dening 1996: 41-42).

I have already discussed the fact that Western structures of time, place and identity do not fit Aboriginal equivalent constructs. For example, if we took a conventional map of Australia and overlaid a map organised according to differing Aboriginal language groups (eg Horton 1994) we would see no similarity in definition of boundaries nor in the names of respective 'regions'. In much the same way, I would argue that Aboriginal oral histories and traditions do not fit the Western historical construct. However, academic histories may be effective in communicating Aboriginal voices with some integrity where Aboriginal people themselves have some degree of ownership and input into the historiographic process.

Since the 1970s Aboriginal voices have become more prevalent in the historiographic domain. Muecke, Rumsey and Wirrunmarra address this point:
Until recently, Aboriginal people have generally not been represented as speaking subjects in the literature of Aboriginal history, anthropology, or even biography. This situation has changed considerably during the last decade. 'Oral history' has now become respectable among the world community of academic historians (Muecke, Rumsey & Wirrunmarra 1985: 83).

5.2 Collaboration

Initially, Aboriginal oral histories reflected heavy non-Aboriginal involvement in the form of direction, editing and target audience. The oral historian, in many cases, has been a non-Aboriginal who works alongside Aboriginal informants. Goodall maintains that the production of an oral history is based upon an unequal relationship and that because of this there is a potential for 'exploitation, manipulation and distortion' (Goodall 1987: 29). And Atkinson asserts that even if the transcribed interviews are detailed it does not necessarily mean that there is an 'equivalence of voices' (Atkinson 1992: 45). He remarks that

the question-and-answer sequences, when translated to other contexts such as the doctor's surgery or the school classroom, would normally be found to be enactments of domination and control (Atkinson 1992: 45).

McGregor (1989) points out that in the field of Aboriginal oral literature there has been a broad scope of material which

varies enormously in quality and the degree to which it faithfully represents the source literature. Even within the print medium, Aboriginal oral literature has been presented in a variety of ways, and has been used in quite distinct ways within mainstream white culture (McGregor 1989: 47).
Many forms of published Aboriginal literature incorporate the use of oral testimony as told to a non-Aboriginal interviewer, for example, Bruce Shaw's work with Aboriginal informants, Bain Attwood's research with the Burrages and Stokie; and Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville's *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*. In many instances the non-Aboriginal oral historian plays a major role in shaping the text, both in initiating questions through the interviews and in the final editing of the document. The most important feature we need to note from all these texts is that they are all presented and utilised 'within mainstream white culture' (McGregor 1989: 47).

Attwood is critical of oral historians generally who do not reflect upon their role in 'authoring' the text. He states:

> Most oral historians, though, wedded to the traditional goal of their discipline, are loath to accept that they are co-authors of their sources since this draws into question the status of their texts. For these historians...the synthetic nature of oral sources is deeply troubling (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 198).

Oral historians who are 'wedded to the traditional goal of their discipline' and who do not acknowledge their 'co-authorship' role are not, generally speaking, interested in capturing the unique characteristics of Aboriginal voices. If they are so attached to the 'conventional' mode of historiography then we may assume they tend towards the empirical aspirations of historical research or what Windschuttle calls 'the traditional practice of history' (Windschuttle 1994: 2).

On this point Barwick maintains:
But most volumes of reminiscence based on taped-recorded accounts which have been prompted and later edited by alien interviewers are less concerned with the flavour of Aboriginal narrative than with the facts or views so garnered (Barwick 1981: 74-75).

Perhaps this is a slightly dated view with more and more Aboriginal publications coming out since 1981. Such modern day oral historians as Heather Goodall attempt to include Aboriginal participants in the process of recording oral histories. Goodall discusses such a trend in oral historiography:

This returns us to considering the practice of oral history, the role of the historian and of analysis, and the role of non-Aborigines in Aboriginal history... The History Workshop Journal debates suggest an alternative direction which recognises the difficulties in oral history but which proposes an advance rather than a retreat. The suggestion is that analysis should involve the people whose memories form the core of the history of the project.

(Goodall 1987: 30)

Goodall takes for granted the existence of non-Aboriginal historians in the arena of Aboriginal historiography and advocates the need to include Aboriginal people at all stages of the process of oral historical documentation. However, she highlights the position of the non-Aboriginal historian by constantly analysing the whole domain from the historian's perspective. By doing this Goodall relegates the Aboriginal voice to second place, behind that of the more important historian. When she discusses Aboriginal inclusion in the processes of oral historiography
her preoccupation seems to be with improving the non-Aboriginal historian's craft. Goodall reflects this train of thinking when she states:

"Exposing our own analytical processes to the Aboriginal people involved in the interviewing appears to be an important way in which historians can test, review and expand their own understanding, locating points of difference with Aboriginal people not only in our information but in our interpretations" (Goodall 1987: 31).

Goodall, in her analysis, is referring to stories told by Aboriginal people to white professional historians and produced in a written form familiar to white academic historical 'norms'. The conventional, academic, historical form is not highly effective in communicating the Aboriginal voice because of the inherent difficulty of translating them into a written text. Non-Aboriginal historians continue to struggle with this very issue.

Goodall refers to non-Aboriginal ownership of collaborative histories when she discusses 'the politics of information control' (Goodall 1987: 31). She does admit that the politics surrounding this discourse are controlled by non-Aborigines but in stressing the need to recognise 'Aboriginal analyses' and to expand 'access to western tools of critical analysis' for Aboriginal people, she maintains the status of the 'eminent historian' at the centre of the debate. This disempowers Aboriginal voices.

Goodall also states:

"The politics of information control in this discipline has left most power in the hands of non-Aborigines. Change involves more than the recording of Aboriginal voices. It requires recognising Aboriginal analyses and expanding"
access to western tools of critical analysis. Listening to Aboriginal voices
requires dialogue with Aborigines at an analytical level as well as an empirical
level (Goodall 1987: 31).

It is the non-Aboriginal historian who records the Aboriginal voice. It is
the non-Aboriginal historian who recognises Aboriginal analyses. It is the
non-Aboriginal historian who expands access to western tools of critical
analysis. Goodall concludes with the argument that there needs to be
more dialogue with Aborigines at an analytical and an empirical level.
The worthy aspect of this argument is the need to de-mystify the oral
historiographical process to Aboriginal subjects. Should the whole process
be taken over by Aboriginal people themselves so that the discourse itself
will then more accurately reflect Aboriginal voices? Although I believe
this is the course that needs to be followed, there is a shortage of
Aboriginal academic historians. Logistically speaking, this prevents them
from taking over the Aboriginal historiographic domain. The
preoccupation with academic historiographic skills may not be a defining
characteristic of the historian post 2000. If we accept that all history is a
form of interpreting the past, then oral histories stand alongside academic
histories as a valuable record of the past. The authoritative, grand
historical narrative ceases to hold pride of place.

The Working Party of Aboriginal Historians is concerned about non­
Aboriginal control of their histories. Barwick quotes the Working Party
on this point.

The Working Party have complained about editorial intervention which made
their oral records more comprehensible to a white audience but 'thereby made
them incomprehensible to Aboriginal audiences'. If they cannot find some
mode of interpretation or explanation which will make their set of truths
comprehensible, other Australians will go on misrepresenting Aborigines, by
asking questions they do not answer and ignoring what it is they say (in
Barwick 1981: 84).

5.2.1 'Collaborative autobiography'

Bruce Shaw uses the term 'collaborative autobiography' to describe the
style of writing he has been involved in with such texts as *Countrymen:
The Life Histories of Four Aboriginal Men as told to Bruce Shaw* (1986),
*Banggaiyerri, the Story of Jack Sullivan* (1979) and *My Country of the
Pelican Dreaming Ngabidj, a Gadjerong Man* (1975). Attwood points out
that Shaw adopts this phrase because it incorporates a 'finished work'
which 'contains something of all those party to it' (in Attwood, Burrage,
Burrage and Stokie 1994: 208). In this sense, the work I have carried out
with Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary may be called 'collaborative
autobiography' but to name it as such may imply that it is a definitive
work when it is only one rendering or retelling of her life stories. The
term 'autobiography' itself represents a particular genre related to
European literature. Some historical and literary works by Aboriginal
authors may fall under this category, for example - Sally Morgan's *My
Place*.

According to the Macquarie Dictionary (1991) the word 'autobiography'
means 'an account of a person's life written by himself' (Macquarie
burnt my feet for this country, this is my country', stories from the life of
Topsy Secretary (Juwaning) as told to Seán Heffernan* is not 'written' by
the subject, Topsy Secretary. It is an account that is narrated by Secretary to
myself, the interviewer, through a process of question and answer and

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general conversation. Attwood argues that it is quite common to regard autobiography as a 'creative act by which the narrator constructs the life as s/he tells it' (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 208). However, in the case of a 'collaborative biography', the interviewer plays a major role in directing the course of the testimony by selecting the questions to be asked based upon judgements she has made about the relevant importance of various events in the subject's life. Not only does the interviewer lead the questioning process she may also be responsible for the final editing and organisation of material into the final publication. This narrative is a representation of the life of the subject. There could be many representations of the life of a subject depending upon who is carrying out the interviews, the particular time and circumstances of the interviews and the quality of the relationship between interviewer and subject. As Attwood points out:

one does not live one's life story, and the life story is not the real life, but a representation of it...Consequently, many literary critics and other scholars have been led to describe autobiography as fictive (literally, something created or made) (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 209).

5.2.2 Gweyelgwa ngayuboeno, gwoyalwa nganigi: 'I burnt my feet for this country, this is my country', stories from the life of Topsy Secretary (Juwaning) as told to Seán Heffernan

The text that Topsy Secretary and I developed was 'something created or made'. It was fashioned from, firstly, our relationship; secondly, our interviews directed by myself; thirdly, from my transcription of the interview tapes; fourthly, by my selection of the content that would remain in the text or omitted; and, finally, by my arrangement and organisation of testimony into relevant headings and sections. To this
point, Topsy Secretary would not have it any other way. She wanted her voice represented in the Whitefella historiographic domain but saw it as my role to facilitate that. Even though I played a major role in the construction of Topsy Secretary's narratives, I would argue that they are a valuable historical resource for the non-Larrikiya and Larrikiya reader. They reflect, to a some degree, Topsy's identity and her historical perspective.

There is still a lot of power in my hands in terms of 'representing' Topsy's voice in print but there are checks and balances. Firstly, most of her family have read the text we 'co-authored' and have given feedback both to her and myself. In any event, Topsy would not tolerate any alterations from other family members anyway. Secondly, my brief from Topsy is to tell the 'truth' to Darwin and occasionally that means delivering lectures, seminars to University and other audiences and giving interviews to newspapers and radio on Larrikiya history. I am working in the public domain and, given the small nature of Darwin community, am accountable. The stories or information I disseminate on Topsy's behalf find their way back to the local Larrikiya population. I also check all information with Topsy before I present it in the public domain unless it is part of the original publication we have already completed together. Topsy Secretary doesn't insist on this. I do. It must be noted that I have worked with her for seven years and that the license she gives me to present her 'voice' is grounded in the trust developed in the relationship over this time. This is one model I would propose for an oral history text which is based upon the relationship between an Aboriginal informant and a non-Aboriginal historian. There is no single definitive model for this working relationship. There are as many models as there are relationships but the most important issue here is that the historian
needs to be, in some way, accountable to the subject and to the subject's community.

Attwood stresses the overriding role of the oral historian in the text production process and refers to Lummis (1987) and Grele (1985) when he states:

The historian's questions can sometimes stimulate recall and so elicit a memory which might not otherwise have surfaced. The recollections, then, are less self-selected or self-directed than in autobiography. The historians can also shape the content of the source since their concerns and interests tend to become those of the informant (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 198).

Initially, in my enthusiasm to represent what I thought Topsy's concerns were, I dominated the interview process with questions largely related to my concerns of capturing Topsy's traditional knowledge on tape and on paper for future Larrikiya generations and, in order to provide a political voice for the Larrikiya in the public domain. It is debatable as to how much the text developed over the course of our interviews reflects Topsy's concerns. It is difficult to get away from the fact that I, as the interviewer and historian, controlled the construction of the text. The oral historian shapes the final product through his 'control' of the process. I see our completed text as representing, perhaps, more my concerns with what an audience might want to hear or, at least, attempts on my part to capture a genuine reflection of Topsy's identity. The emphasis here is on 'attempts'! It remains a text that represents my perceptions of what are the most important events and key organising themes in Ngalap's life.
Attwood is generally critical of oral historians who do not admit the powerful role they play in shaping their text during this process of collaboration. He observes that:

A minority of oral historians who adopt a more self-conscious and reflective approach to their practice not only concede that they play a vital role in articulating their informants' memories but also emphasise that 'oral sources are always the result of a relationship, a common project...oral testimony is usually part of the sources he or she seeks to interpret, unlike the orthodox historian who stands apart from his or her sources (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 198).

Attwood reflects upon the motivations behind his involvement in the oral history project with Stokie and the Burrages. He felt that he had a 'moral obligation' to the Burrages to write the history with them.

I had an obligation to the readers of the book; I had responsibilities to the discipline and profession of history; and I had a commitment to producing a book which provided me with intellectual satisfaction and preserved my personal and professional integrity. Consequently I came to conceive my role to be that of author/historian rather than that somewhat more humble position of recorder/editor in which I had hitherto framed this project (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: 201).

Attwood also reflects upon issues of conflict which arose between the Burrages, Stokie and himself throughout the text construction process. Some of these conflicts centred around concerns with content and chronological organisation and were resolved through compromise
because of their mutual dependence upon one another in order to get the book written. Initially, Attwood believed that his role was to record the testimony, to present their story but as the project unfolded he came to realise he had much to contribute and that he would be remiss if he failed to do so. His input was filtered through the informants' critical eye.

In my work with Topsy Secretary I too believed I had a moral obligation to record her narratives. It had less to do with my role as a professional historian and more to do with issues of maintenance of memory and culture. As previously discussed I wished to play a part in facilitating a site of political empowerment for my subject. These were my concerns and the concern of a large number of other Darwin Larrikiya people but they were not necessarily a major preoccupation with Topsy Secretary. In developing this oral history project I discovered that the Larrikiya were not a single, unified group. There was a great deal of community division and various political family alliances among the Larrikiya which did not accord with my naive view of them.

In a paper entitled: 'You got a put true story': reflections upon land, identity and upon the relationship between the Larrikiya and Barragut as seen through the life story of Larrikiya elder Topsy Secretary, I reflect upon my motivation in working with Topsy Secretary to produce her life history text:

... if non-Aboriginal people wish to identify with 'place', with the country of Darwin then it would be fundamentally important to learn something about the traditional owners and about the significance of certain sites to the Larrikiya. I would even go so far as to suggest there is a moral imperative to do so given the extent of change or damage the European culture brought to their country
and because of the continued lack of recognition of Larrikiya culture and of their unique relationship to the land. This shift in recognition of Larrikiya culture is vitally important in improving relationship between the Larrikiya and the Barragut and absolutely essential before any discussion of 'shared identity' can be entertained (Heffernan forthcoming publication).

Reimann cites Berndt (1973) when referring to the 'moral' function of oral traditions. She asserts that 'oral tradition, then, has various functions: practical, social, moral/legal, and political' (Reimann 1990: 3). The moral function which is embedded within the structure of oral narratives can be extended to the narrator and the oral historian. If the narrator has a moral duty then the oral historian or interviewer does also. If not then the historian is pursuing a different task to that of the informant; perhaps a role that is more akin to a journalist. Atkinson (1992: 38) intimates that this sense of morality is shared between subject and historian.

In the final paragraph of the preface to A Life Together, a Life Apart: a History of Relations Between Europeans and Aborigines, Attwood stresses that the text he, Stokie and the Burrages co-authored is not intended to be a 'master narrative' (in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: xiv). He posits:

Yet while the Burrages' history questions other historical texts, it is not presented here as a 'master narrative' which shows how things really happened in the past, and thus seeks to displace Others' stories. As I discuss in my reflective essay, which constitutes the third part of this book, all stories told about the past are interpretative, and, therefore, necessarily partial and limited. The Burrages' account and my essays are offered in this spirit (Attwood in Attwood, Burrage, Burrage & Stokie 1994: xiv).
In the final essay to the text Attwood details the processes he undertook in researching and recording this historical work. It shows a thorough grasp of the latest arguments related to oral historiography and postcolonial historiography generally. The preface unmistakably reflects his heavy hand and one is left wondering: do the Burrages regard their text in the same way as Attwood? That is, NOT as a master narrative. Do the Burrages offer their account in the same spirit as Attwood, that is, as 'interpretative, necessarily partial and limited'. It seems a little strange that Attwood who says he is sensitive about not speaking for his subject, does so in this way. His words are those of an academic historian. Attwood reflects upon his involvement in text production but he deals purely with 'process'. He neglects to discuss personal issues that arose for him. We are still left knowing very little about Attwood the person but a lot about Attwood the meticulous professional and politically correct historian.

In oral historical work photographs can be very powerful and revealing. In *A Life Together, A Life Apart: a History of Relations Between Europeans and Aborigines*, there is a photo of Bain Attwood *standing* holding a microphone in front of his subjects faces (p 191). They are *sitting*. He looks very much *apart* from his subjects. It is an odd image and appears to be a curious arrangement for an oral history interview. It reflects the uncomfortableness and apartness of the interviewer. This apartness is not investigated by Attwood in the text. Even though Attwood reflects upon his interactions with his subjects to some degree at the end of the book, one is left wondering as to the state of his real relationship to them. I am not arguing that 'togetherness' is a necessary ingredient of the relationship between a subject and an historian but that
this relationship needs to be made transparent to some degree so that the reader can ascertain the quality of the information presented in the text.

5.2.3 Problems related to 'collaboration'

Goodall addresses herself to the role of the oral historian in the overall process of the gathering of oral testimony. In Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control she states that her intention was to focus on:

some political processes involved in Aboriginal experiences, in the memory of them and in the recording of those memories as oral history. This raises broader questions about the role of historians and of analysis in oral history and about the role of non-Aboriginal analysis in the writing and interpretation of Aboriginal history (Goodall 1987: 17).

How much is the final text a product of the collaborating historian? If the oral historian plays a role in constructing a text with an Aboriginal consultant then it is vital that she clarifies the cultural context that she is coming from and the processes she uses in developing the text. In this way, at least inherent biases may be made apparent to the reader. Because of postcolonial challenges to previously held notions of an objective historical text authors have come under pressure to state their bias and to justify the validity of their work. Muecke asserts:

Quite a few (white) people who have been involved with research on or with Aboriginal peoples find themselves compromised. They are less willing to take up the speaking position of objectivity implied by the realist ethnographic text. Rather they feel that it is more honest to tell the story of their involvement. This involves a subjective rather than an objective view, a response to being
hurt by rejection when ‘they were only trying to help’, a re-examination of motives about who is going to gain from the research and how Aboriginal people are going to Aboriginalise their institutions (Muecke 1992: 54).

5.3 'Ethnography on my mind'

Dening argues that, as historians, 'we need to perform in our texts' (Dening 1996: 116) and, more than this, 'we history-makers must know ourselves. We must have an ethnographic sense of our cultural persons' (Dening 1996: 30). I strongly agree with Dening. It wasn't until I was able to reflect upon my own ethnography and personal history that I was able to evaluate the limitations in my approach to documenting Ngalap Topsy's narratives.

Throughout my eight year experience working with Topsy Secretary I have been constantly forced to reflect upon my motivations and personal historical experience in order to explain to myself 'why am I so intimately involved with such a person?'. It has only been in the past couple of years that this reflection and some answers to it have become clear. Working closely with Topsy Secretary has assisted me towards what Dening calls 'deep-rooted understandings of my experience' (Dening 1996: 11).

In setting out to write history Dening maintains that:

Everyone who would represent the past must 'go native' in some way or be condemned always only to represent the present. Even the 'native' must 'go native' in finding a past (Dening 1996: 124).

'Going native' for me entailed a confrontation with stories and relationships to country which were contrary to my own experience and
to the ways I viewed the world. Sometimes the journey was fascinating and absorbing and, at other times, an uncomfortable confrontation which left me confused and unclear in situations where I did not know how to act. For example, Topsy has always emphasised to me that people should not talk about cyclones or about Cyclone Tracy during wet season time because this will call back the Gurrulwa or the 'big wind'. Earlier in 1997, during the wet season, the Australian Broadcasting Commission staged a show at the Darwin Entertainment Centre to celebrate their involvement of many years in the Territory. Part of this show was a comprehensive coverage of the damage brought to Darwin by Cyclone Tracy. I attended this show with friends. Topsy was not present. I found myself perplexed and confused because many times previously when I was sitting with Ngalap and her family watching television they would turn it off if advertisements for the NT Museum's Cyclone Tracy Commemoration were aired. Ngalap had advised me on a previous occasions that I should 'go to the toilet' in situations like these to avoid hearing about and talking about the Cyclone; 'its dangerous!'

Attwood and Goodall reflect upon the process of carrying out an Aboriginal oral history enterprise but do not deliberate in any great detail about the impact of their personal histories and cultural biases upon their work. In contrast, I feel impelled to reflect on my personal history, values and dilemmas because of this experience of encountering the 'other'. This is documented here in this thesis but not in the oral history text. This is because, as Topsy instructed, the narratives remain a family historical resource.

Initially I saw myself as championing the cause of the 'poor dispossessed Larrikiya' when I started to write THE Life Story Of Topsy Secretary. I told
myself I would be the vehicle through which she could finally be heard by the Whitefella population of Darwin. Even though I clothed my ambitions with the right terminology I can see in hindsight that I was also seeking some kind of fame for carrying out this mission.

Through the 'hard knocks' of seven years of engagement with Topsy’s family I have come to accept that our jointly authored text will not be widely published. However, the project has provided a substantial and valuable basis for this Masters thesis and that in itself is a great gift; a gift that carries with it responsibilities to her and her family. It has also provided Topsy and her family with a valuable literary and historical resource for generations to come. Added to this, I see my reflections upon the place of Aboriginal oral histories’ in the overall Australian historiographic domain as being of some value. For example, European constructs of place, communities, identities and time are challenged by Topsy’s stories.

The historical marginalisation of the Irish through British colonisation and the experience of Irish convicts and immigrants in Australia (including my own family history) is another factor in my collaboration with Ngalap Topsy. It gave me satisfaction to engage with Topsy’s family and through the task of gathering ‘information’ and writing a ‘history’ gave them a 'voice'. The projection of my self as historian has thus enabled me to reflect upon my own family’s history seen through the prism of Larrikiya stories. I think it is important to note however that my role as an historian does not precede my relationship or friendship to Topsy and the wider Secretary family.
I have already discussed in this thesis the importance of place, familial relationships and history to Aboriginal people and, of course, to Topsy herself. Throughout the course of my relationship with Ngalap Topsy I have been forced to explore more deeply my own family's history of origin which, in turn, led me to reflect critically upon the oral historiographic process.

In May 1996 I was leaving Darwin to go to Ireland to visit my family. At the time I was thinking of staying over there and working, perhaps by teaching Traveller children (a group previously called tinkers). I recorded a message from Topsy to my family in Ireland before leaving. While speaking Topsy became very emotional and, in her enthusiasm, it became very hard to comprehend sometimes what she was saying. I didn’t realise until some time later that she was convinced my life was in danger in Ireland because at that time there were a small number of bombings carried out by the Irish Republican Army in England, notably Manchester.

Ngalap Topsy thought I was trying to make her feel better about my departure by explaining to her that there was no danger of bombings in the Republic of Ireland because all the ‘troubles’ were in Northern Ireland. As I walked away from her to get in my car she started to wail, crying out loudly and lamenting for some time that she might not ever see me again and that I was the only Barragut belyia (‘young white man’) that she truly loved. She also said that I was the only Barragut that truly loved herself and her family. This moved me very deeply almost transfixeding me to the spot and making me want to return to her side to reassure her. I didn’t fully realise that the strength of our relationship was perceived on her side as intensely as it was.
Sadly, in April of 1997 my brother Anthony took his own life. I travelled to Brisbane to participate in the 'family business' related to his death; the viewing of the body, the eulogy, putting him in the ground and the waking, the celebration of his life. It was somewhat similar in style to my Uncle Bill's funeral and waking carried out in Kilkenny, Ireland (1996) except that my Uncle Bill's body was kept at home in the lounge room on full display for people of the local community to pay their respects. I returned to Darwin and shared these experiences with Topsy's mob.

Since 1990 I have participated in several funerals which involve Topsy's family and Kalalak. Some of these funerals have ended in the body being interred at the Kalalak burial ground nearby. Topsy's nephew, brother and other close relatives are buried here. I have also attended funerals over on the Cox Peninsula at the Aboriginal community of Belyuwun. This community is also situated on Larrikiya land and carries the traditional name of Topsy's father, Frank Secretary, that of Belyuwun. I have taken Topsy Secretary and another senior traditional owner Prince Mitbul over to Belyuwun on several occasions for funerals, social visits and the opening of an old people's nursing home. I was also included in family discussions along with Anna Secretary, Helen Secretary, Lynette Shields and Jacqueline Treeves regarding the need for a major operation to be performed on Ngalap at the Royal Darwin Hospital mid-1997 when she was very ill. I recount these stories here to help the reader ascertain something of the quality of my relationship with Topsy Secretary.

My engagement with Topsy's family and with the 'making of histories' has changed focus. I lecture at the Northern Territory University on my work with the Larrikiya. I assist in gaining access to forums of political power for the Secretary family. I negotiate with Northern Territory
Government Departments (mainly the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority - AAPA and the NT Museum) and the Northern Land Council (NLC) - especially over the Kenbi Land Claim and misrepresentation to these bodies by other inappropriate Larrikiya people (as Topsy sees it). I facilitate information exchange between Ngapap Topsy and her lawyer and anthropologist regarding the land claim. 'The responsibility of the researcher to the interviewee is always present' (Darian-Smith & Hamilton 1994: 3) and, in my case with Topsy, has expanded and extended beyond the life of the oral history project.

5.4 'Brokerage' and political empowerment

Fourmile discusses the reliance of Aboriginal people and communities on non-Aboriginal people to broker their negotiations with various institutions. In my experience with Topsy's family I have found that there is a dire need for such brokerage because of their lack of power and knowledge of such bureaucratic systems. I would argue that with this brokerage Aboriginal people also need practical education in order to successfully negotiate Whitefella bureaucratic processes and political networks. Fourmile explains that:

The net effect of the lack of our own cultural and historical resources and the difficulties of access to those that exist elsewhere is to foster our dependence on non-Aboriginal specialists in law, history, anthropology, education and in Aboriginal affairs generally. They effectively become our brokers in transactions between Aboriginal communities and the various institutions and the public at large which have an interest in our affairs, and thereby usurp our role as history-tellers (Fourmile 1989: 4).
Zoe Ellerman carried out an oral history project with an Aboriginal subject named Elizabeth Wason in North Queensland. She describes her relationship with Elizabeth Wason as a 'formal/informal relationship' which involved 'reciprocity' (Ellerman 1995: 34). Ellerman details this relationship in the following way:

This formal/informal relationship also involved me in a relationship of reciprocity; the obligations and commitments I acquired ranged from commitments to attend parties, meet particular people, to giving out lifts and helping out where I could in the community office and teaching as part of a training program for teenagers in a cultural heritage program (Ellerman 1995: 34).

Reciprocity is a constant feature in my relationship with Ngalap Topsy. From time to time I provide tobacco, lifts, food and money to Topsy Secretary, her husband Johnny McMahon and her brother Prince Mitbul in exchange for the 'stories' given to me. The valuable testimony I gathered with Ngalap is only one of the positive outcomes of the development of our relationship. My role to Topsy and her family is a more expansive and closer one than that of Ellerman to her informant. This may be because of the fact that I live much closer to Topsy's community Kalalak than Ellerman does to Wason's community at Yarrabah, Queensland. As the relationship between myself and Ngalap Topsy deepened I came to play a trusted intermediary role for her in her dealings with Aboriginal organisations and Government departments.

In the past Topsy and her family have been misrepresented by non-Aboriginal and Larrikiya people alike in her dealings with Government institutions. This is because there is competition among Larrikiya families
for power and position in relation to the Kenbi Land Claim. Some families desire to be close to Topsy Secretary and to claim kinship in order to gain Larrikiya credibility and to gain access to traditional knowledge that will assist them in verifying their claims of traditional ownership as described in the Land Rights Act.

One controversial figure misrepresented Ngalap for many years, claiming to liaise for her with such Government Departments as the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA). He continued to represent Topsy to this Department long after he had fallen out of favour with her. She disowned him because he had given testimony at a sitting of the Kenbi Land Claim that met with her strong disapproval. She despaired at his actions and I put forward the idea that she could write a letter instructing AAPA not to give this person access to records at the Authority which include information given by Topsy herself and to stop him from misrepresenting her for his own political purposes. Topsy and her grand daughter Helen strongly agreed with this procedure and so it was carried out (See Appendix 2 - Letters Dated 30/6/97, 4/7/97, 7/7/97). It is Topsy's perception that some members of the Darwin Larrikiya community are trying to obtain power for themselves at the expense of her and her ancestors. It is my perception that when Ngalap passes away there will be a huge void in terms of leadership for this community and that various Larrikiya individuals are positioning themselves to better contest this void.

I attempt to inform Topsy, and her 'number one' grand daughter Helen, of the complex politics involved in Whitefella society. If I'm negotiating with the NT Museum I put all of Topsy's communication in writing to them. Before sending the correspondence I show it to Helen Secretary and
to Topsy Secretary. I usually instigate the discussion of various political and social ramifications of the actions they may be taking. In short, I play an educative and empowering role for Topsy's family. Because of this I have considerable power in Larrikiya affairs. While they depend on me to facilitate action, I constantly keep them informed of the political processes involved in the various negotiations. I believe that this will assist them or other members of their family to handle these matters for themselves sometime in the future. Regardless of the matter being handled by the non-Aboriginal broker, the issue of accountability still applies.

Goodall also comments upon the issue of information control. She maintains that there is more to oral history than the simple recording of interviews. She observes that:

The politics of information control in this discipline has left most power in the hands of non-Aborigines. Change involves more than the recording of Aboriginal voices. It requires recognising Aboriginal analyses and expanding access to western tools of critical analysis. Listening to Aboriginal voices requires dialogue with Aborigines at an analytical as well as an empirical level (Goodall 1987: 31).

By informing Topsy and her family of the social and political context and of the effects of actions I take on their behalf and of the arguments surrounding oral historiography they become more powerful in the Western political and academic domain. This is not an overt feature of the collaborative relationship but greater political empowerment is one of the flow-on effects of the rise in prominence of Aboriginal owned histories. If I was not doing this as part of the process much of the power would remain in my hands. My working relationship is based upon the
trust that has developed between us but also on the value of 'inside
knowledge' I am able to reveal to her and her family.

5.5 Shared Authority
I would argue that my work with Topsy Secretary is a valuable historical
resource, mainly for her family. It is also a powerful voice for the
Larrikiya in the Australian historiographic domain. This is the result of a
successful collaborative project. Walton (1996) asserts that collaboration
between indigenous and non-indigenous people can be beneficial. She
outlines this argument in the context of women's and, more particularly,
indigenous women's issues.

I am wary of the proposition that non-indigenous women should henceforth
remain silent on indigenous issues. This proposition can become counter-
productive. Other options for non-indigenous women might include continuing
to listen to indigenous voices, developing some shared projects which require
collaboration, continuing to make spaces for indigenous women to speak and
sometimes speaking about indigenous women's issues in which they are
implicated (Walton 1996: 75-76).

Walton considers the issue of authority to speak for others. She argues
that it is sometimes beneficial for men to 'speak to' women's issues or for
non-prisoners to provide a voice for prisoners.

Foucault set an example, in his work with French prisoners, which many
others have followed. He saw himself as needing to create the possibility to let
the prisoners speak for themselves. This was part of his overall approach to
social and political action...Many feminists share with Foucault this position
which precludes the possibility of speaking for others, while it creates space for speaking by and with others (Walton 1996: 75).

I do not see myself as speaking for Topsy Secretary but I do see myself as a means by which she can have her voice heard more effectively in the 'centre' or in the non-Aboriginal controlled historiographic domain. However, it is never quite that simple. I have already explained in the previous chapter that with the passing of stories and knowledge comes associated responsibilities as a caretaker of knowledge. Defining the line between providing a space for Topsy and arguing for Topsy in the Whitefella bureaucratic domain or even in disputes between Ngalap and other Larrikiya over land (Kenbi Land Claim) is more complex. For example, I have been advised by a Northern Land Council lawyer that I will be called as a witness in the Kenbi Land Claim sometime in 1998. I will be giving evidence as an historian and as someone who has a close personal relationship to Ngalap and is, therefore, able to verify attitudes and opinions held by Topsy over many years.

When I am called upon by Topsy to speak on her behalf or when I understand that I am expected to represent her interests I do so. If I am not certain of the way in which she wishes me to act or represent her then I consult her and usually inform Helen, her grand daughter, of my intentions.

The story of the development of my relationships with Topsy Secretary, her family and the broader Kalalak community is worthy of a book of its own. Perhaps it will be written one day. It may well be a literary rather than an historical work. This form of text would raise different questions. An autobiography of my own that revealed my connection to Topsy and
the Larrikiya situation would probably not draw as much critical attention. Once a text is labelled 'history' the conventional non-Aboriginal historian's major preoccupation is applied to it; that is: 'did it really happen?' or 'is it a true story?' (Trinh Minh-ha in Muecke 1985: 291). A fictional work based on our relationship would escape this form of criticism. What is it then about an historical work, even an oral history of an Aboriginal subject written by a non-Aboriginal person that invites such intense discussion and criticism. The issue here concerns the ongoing 'struggle for metaphorical representation' (Muecke 1992: 2) combined with an obsession with definitions of race which precludes a non-Aboriginal person from being able to be involved in the construction of an 'Aboriginal' text.

From Topsy's standpoint, it is essential that her knowledge and history are documented. She is also very clear about the reasons for this. She perceives the need for an historical and literary record because of the power of the written word in the modern Western world. She wants her political voice to be included in this struggle for 'history'. In chapter one I quoted Topsy referring to the value of her oral history text:

But the book like that you put 'im in the library, you know, it, you got a put true story. Larrikiya tribe born in Darwin and nothing written down... no story written down because no one used to ask them questions, never bothered to ask them question, all sorts of stories (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4).

Topsy is very aware of the power of the written word and the way in which ownership of her history text represents the power she holds as a traditional owner. When she was in the Intensive Care Unit of the Royal Darwin Hospital in May of 1997 she was very agitated about her text
falling into the wrong hands. She kept demanding reassurance from me that I wouldn't give it to any other Darwin Larrikiya who she regards as enemies in the Kenbi Land Claim.

I raised the issue with Ngalap regarding my role in assisting her to put her story down. I explained the criticisms that generally get levelled at non-Aboriginal people like me working in this area. In the following exchange between us Topsy demonstrates her trust in me as a scribe and reflects upon the importance of having her story recorded.

_There are some people at universities, academics who may criticise me for doing this work with you. They might say that if I never came and did this work you would not have written it and that I should leave you alone. I just wonder what you think about that?_

Well, need someone to listen, put it down. Somebody should. Then it is alright. It's an important thing alright this story.

_What would you tell them if they were here?_

I'd say: "Listen. I want to put it down. I can't put it down because I'm talking", they not talking. You want a story about me. It IS important. _Larrikiya and Barragut_ to know what history about.

_Which history?_

Darwin or _Larrikiyas_.

_Why do Barragut need to know Larrikiya history about Darwin?_
They must know that I am still alive to tell the truth. That is important for me, native woman, full blood Larrikiya. It is alright for you to ask me questions. (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 4-5).

Topsy defends our aim of putting her story into the written form and stresses that this story serves an important educative function. She also demonstrates her understanding of the collaborative nature of the project.

Another criticism people might have of me is that they reckon it's not meant to be written down, that your history should stay the way it is. No. Already I explained them and they know and they will think about it when certain years come.

What I mean is that some people reckon I shouldn't put your words into a book. Why?

They reckon you should be just left by me to just talking to your family and other people. They say I'm interfering, that I'm changing...

Why? Lady or man come try ask [me] about Cyclone Tracy show [Cyclone Tracy Commemoration, NT Museum 1994], I'm telling you. You put it there [writing pad]. Don't talk about it [Cyclone or it might come].

They reckon I should not put your story into a book because I'll be changing the way you speak, because you don't write it down yourself.

I'm right to talk about my country and myself and my family. You only just came to Darwin. We right to learn [teach] what I'm saying.

What if they reckon I shouldn't make a book out of it?
Of course you can make a book out of it!

_When I finish your book some people may criticise me. I have to stand up and speak strong to tell them._

Yes, you will have to because we are telling the truth in Darwin. Where you was [was you] in my ancestor [day]? People was here. You wasn't. You don't know nothing about the native way. You the only one that come here ask the question and I tell you the truth (Secretary & Heffernan 1997: 5-6).

Topsy herself is involved in a power struggle for acknowledgment of the ownership of knowledge and power in the _Larrikiya_ community. She positions herself as the holder of the true _Larrikiya_ historical traditions and knowledge. Her voice is political, designed to contest ownership of land, traditional status and history.

It has never been stated as such to me but I believe she finds it easier to confide in someone like me who has not been previously affiliated to any other _Larrikiya_ family. I am an outsider and can be informed and guided in my duties as her confidential historian and integrated into her family structure. Perhaps this is why it suits her to have me work with her. I am a professional researcher. I am of value to her not only because I enhance her power but also because I provide material resources. Topsy ended a collaborative relationship with another oral historian in November 1997 because she was seen associating and assisting a rival family group in public at a Kenbi Land Claim hearing earlier that year. Topsy ended this relationship by informing the historian that she would be 'always sick' whenever this historian wished to interview her in the future. Topsy, Helen Secretary and myself discussed this matter which culminated in _Ngalap's_ decision to end that particular collaboration.
Conclusion

Shaw believes that in the future there will be a greater awareness and use of oral sources by scholars and a continued writing of memoirs from persons in Aboriginal communities, often with assistance from white fieldworkers in spite of what the detractors of this approach might say (Shaw 1980: 95).

Shaw wrote these comments in 1980 and he has been proven correct. Collaborative oral histories between white historians and Aboriginal subjects are part of the journey towards an Aboriginal owned historiography that takes its rightful place in the centre of historical discourse in this country. This 'part of the journey' goes hand-in-hand with the continuing struggle by Aboriginal people for land (Land Rights Act and Native Title) and for recognition of past injustices experienced at the hands of a colonial assimilationist government. The Aboriginal struggle for ownership of their own histories and land is also a struggle for control over their own lives and futures.

There have always been Aboriginal histories. They did not just emerge with the onset of European colonisation of this continent. However, they were based, largely, on an oral culture, transmitted through clan structures and ritualised in ceremonies and in the naming and reading of the country. The Aboriginal oral histories we are exposed to, in more modern times, form a strand of 'new histories' which communicate voices previously excluded from colonial historiography. These emerging Aboriginal oral histories do not merely make up a subset of academic histories. By their very nature, style and content they form a category of
their own and, in so doing, highlight the limitations of the traditional academic history text. With their growing predominance they are effecting a challenge to the structures of conventional historiography.

I do not advocate the creation of a separate black historiographical discipline but I do see the need for the definition of history to be broadened. There will always be an Aboriginal oral culture that will elude, to some degree, the western preoccupation of capturing it in some literary and historiographic form. And so it should be. But for those who wish to hear of historical experiences other than those encapsulated in white academic histories, then Aboriginal oral histories are important.

Because academic history relies upon the written word, it can never wholly act as a vehicle for the communication of Aboriginal oral histories. Perhaps this will occur as a result of the rapid development of the computer age with CD-Rom, the internet and video technology. As these forms of communication become more accessible and academically credible, so the Aboriginal voice may be better communicated. However, the status accorded to the academic written word will not be easily shaken. It is a keystone upon which modern western society is constructed.

Historians such as Windschuttle believe that history is being killed by the postmodernists, but they fail to recognise the fundamental weakness of 'mainstream' history; an history that presumes to be an objective, definitive record of the past. The strength of this form of history lay in the restricted, protected environment in which it predominated. It was able to thrive while minority histories were excluded from the historiographic domain. The entry of women's, labour and ethnic histories onto the playing field has challenged and, to some extent, subverted the
dominance of objectivist, historical narratives. Oral histories are helping
to redefine the nature of history.

The text which I collaborated with Topsy Secretary, Gweyelgwa
ngayuboenoe gwoyalwa nganigi, on finds its home among the 'new
histories'. These new histories are playing a major role in redefining and
rejuvenating academic historiography rather than destroying it as
Windschuttle would have us believe. There is still a long journey ahead
of us if we accept the definition the Encyclopaedia Britannica provides for
'historiography'. It states:

The writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical
examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic
materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those particulars into a
narrative (my underlining) that will stand the test of critical methods

There once was a golden age for the traditional academic historians when
they and they alone 'selected' information, decided what was 'authentic'
and then created the grand narrative. Now, in the age of television and
consumerism, where we shop around and choose the products we wish to
buy, it appears that we are exposed to more products of 'truth', more
brands of history. Postmodern day consumers read a variety of texts in
literature, on television or the internet and 'select' the information and
decide what is 'authentic' and meaningful to them. We are all in the
process of creating narratives and less willing to leave it to the
professional historians to do it for us.
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