Indigenous Storytelling

It is a difficult process to publish papers from a conference and try to recapture the event, the impact, the mood, the vast exchange of knowledge and friendships that were developed and load it all into one stand-alone monograph. Some may argue for starters that the faces are missing; voices cannot be heard and thousands of words have been cruelly left out. Some may even go so far as to say that there are some things in life that can only be lived and that no amount of writing can account for experience. Some may say it, but try telling an indigenous biographer or an autobiographer and see how far you will get.

In putting this monograph together it was important for the editors to divide the monograph into sections. Section Two focuses on four of the papers presented by Indigenous biographers and autobiographers. Just as it was difficult to put the monograph together, it was just as complex trying to organise an international gathering of biographers and autobiographers who came from such a broad spectrum of academic disciplines, educational backgrounds and cultures from across the globe. One of the many concerns we had was to ensure that speakers would not be made to feel detached from the main thrust of the conference because they themselves were yet to be published authors. So as a precautionary measure, the first thing we communicated at the opening was that what we hoped would emerge from out of the conference was a sense of ‘heart’.

In the days ahead that ‘heart’ was freely delivered; particularly by those who talked about their own communities or family members and even their own life’s stories. Jenni Caruso, an Arrernte woman, presented a powerful paper about how she as an academic has to constantly juggle with a multiple identity between her ways of communicating and western academic modes of understanding. Samantha Faulkner talked about how she as a Torres Strait Islander writer, copes with writing about what she calls the ‘bumps and joys’ of her grandfather’s biography; as with Professor John Maynard who has just recently undergone the process of publishing a book about his grandfather Fred Maynard. Then there were those like Margo Neale from the National Museum of Australia who talked about why it was important to write about Aboriginal role models like Aboriginal artist Emily Kngwarreye; while Aboriginal curator Barrina South from the Australian Museum in Sydney gave a talk centred on the narratives of a number of Aboriginal women from New South Wales. In the same vein was Dale Kerwin a proud Biripi Man who talked about his
Adding to the spirit of the conference were indigenous speakers from overseas such as Taiwanese lecturer Hau-Ren Bradley Hung who talked about the value of indigenous literature and the autobiographies of Native American author Joseph Bruchac and indigenous Taiwanese autobiographer Ahronglong Sakinu. Also contributing was New Guinean writer and Senior Lecturer Sam Kiama, who discussed what had been some of the more prickly problems one deals with when recording and publishing the stories of the local people in the Morobe Province while Kuela Kiama a musician and mathematician from Botswana gave a touching presentation entitled ‘Tears for my land’. Conversely Dr George Mukuka from the University of Johannesburg offered an insight into the rich history on the early developments of the indigenous clergy of South Africa; while Mina Sakai, a leader of the ‘Ainu Rebels’ in Tokyo not only shared a heartfelt message as ‘one Ainu woman to the rest of society’ at the conference, but gave a traditional Ainu musical performance at the conference dinner.

Nevertheless, the final four papers selected for Section Two of the monograph were chosen ultimately on the basis of their diversity. The first paper in this section is written by Waka Waka/Kalkadoon elder Judith Wickes. Wickes paper is highly personal, comprehensive and emotionally charged paper based on her Honours thesis entitled “‘Never really heard of it’: a study of the impact on identity of the Queensland certificate of exemption for Aboriginal people’. The second paper is by Aroha Harris, a member of the Te Rarawa and Ngapuhi tribes of Aotearoa New Zealand who describes to us the experiences she has had to go through in writing a biography about Maori elder Joe Hawke. The third paper written by Munzhedzi James Mafela, a Professor of African Languages at the University of South Africa is not a straightforward biography about Nelson Mandela, but a commentary about the Mandela biography and how traditional kinship bloodlines play a significant role in indigenous biographical storytelling. Finally the fourth paper in this section is by PhD candidate Maria Preethi Srinivasan who discusses the work of and attempts to link two indigenous women, Dalit writer Bama and Native Canadian writer Lee Maracle.
So as you read through the next four essays we ask that you might like to consider the context in which the papers were delivered at the conference and imagine the spirit that was shared by all those who came to tell their indigenous stories.

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