RESPONSE TO COLIN JOHNSON'S ARTICLE
'CAPTURED DISCOURSE; CAPTURED LIVES'

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If we take the closing statements in Johnson's article to their logical extreme it is that only Aboriginal people should write Aboriginal life stories and that Johnson does not like a non-Aboriginal person writing an Aboriginal's story whether that be in his/her own idiom, e.g. Kriol, or a translation into colloquial English. I understand these sentiments but I cannot agree with them. If My country of the pelican dreaming, Banggaiyerri, and Countrymen had not been written the stories of the six men contained in them would never have been told. Their stories deserved to be told and for the same reasons given in Johnson's polemic: the Aborigines of the east Kimberley as in all other parts of Australia have been given a lousy deal. Their stories help to record this and in some measure seek to redress the wrongs by jogging the awareness of readers. The life stories are moreover an accurate record of Aboriginal opinion in that region in spite of what Johnson says about authenticity. They can no longer be reduplicated. There are also cases where an Aboriginal person requests a white friend to record on tape and in writing his/her story. An obvious rejoinder is, Why not get another Aboriginal researcher to do this? Bill Rosser for instance is doing it (Rosser, 1984-5). But that is not always possible. Oral history workers are few in number. Funding is not always readily available. Friendship and trust is another important ingredient which does not always conform to ethnic boundaries. In time there will be I hope more autobiographies and biographies written by Aboriginal people so that my contributions and those of a scant handful of other researchers will become increasingly unnecessary.

The review is full of sweeping judgements using emotive language. The word 'discourse', which means reasoned speech or narration, is used as a magical term along with other jargon. The reviewer indulges his antipathies towards whites, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, anthropologists and a special sub-category, American anthropologists. There is very little critical evidence. Within this welter of opinion I agree on some points and take issue with others.

Jack Sullivan did not give a 'so-called' life story. It was a life story. He thoroughly understood that. He was not tongue-tied, nor was Grant Ngabidj. After forty-six conversations with Grant and forty-two with Jack that was hardly the case. They did not water down their stories of shootings, etc. in self-censorship through fear of me. We had to communicate and we did so through English plus many indigenous words. It does not figure necessarily that Aborigines recording their recollections with a white person are wasting their creative imagination. Oral narration is an art (a lost one in most corners of modern white society). Many persons who told me their stories did so with enjoyment, zest, skill. We were friends. They taught me. All stories oral or written are manipulated. They are artefacts. They are subjective (so too are translations). That is what storytelling involves.

The narratives in their penultimate form were taken back to the field and reread aloud to the storytellers who to that extent did have control over their work. They approved of the straightforward English into which their tales were transformed. They were more interested in the subject matter, preferred the message to the medium. When oral narrative is transferred to writing it must of necessity undergo change. Even verbatim stories lose the nuances of facial expression, tone and gesture unless (as Muecke does) these are indicated in
glosses in the text - and that is a second best. This limitation is one of the reasons why video film is slowly coming into its own as another means of recording Aboriginal history.

Jack spoke more or less as in his narratives (see page 5 of Banggaiyerri ). He spoke English much like white bushmen in the region because that was the language he grew up with. In Grant's case I took far more liberties. I agree that I might have used a different approach as in Rosengarten's life of Nate Shaw for example, a long colloquial narrative. Even so considerable editing took place there. Translation does not necessarily mean complete assimilation into English. I kept in mind (a) what I thought would be acceptable to a publisher, and (b) understandable to the general reader. These were value judgements. (General reader denotes all people, not only those of European descent. For example, one or two of Grant Ngabidj's younger relatives just out of school read parts of Grant's story to his widow Daisy Djanduin some time back). It is true that a European Australian framework was superimposed on the Aboriginal narratives, the arrangements into chapters and sections for instance, as well as very close paraphrasing. I am surprised however that Johnson thinks the stories themselves are anthropological. The introductions and end notes are. Most writers have an editorial policy. What I did was to employ one of several possible ways in which life histories might be presented. In the eyes of some critical readers this comes off; in the eyes of others it doesn't.

Johnson wants the life histories to be political. Grant was interested in telling me about his experiences on the cattle stations, his brushes with the police (a political theme), conflicts between his own people (another political issue), and matters of the religious life that he felt free to tell. Jack Sullivan liked to tell of his experiences on the cattle stations too and he says just that on page 211 of Banggaiyerri. It's all in those books. The third book Countrymen to which Johnson makes passing reference is full of political questions. Bulla Billinggiin had some very pertinent things to say. Look them up in pages 93-95, 170-173, 236-239 and elsewhere in that book. I say things about colonialism and imperialism in the introductions. To imply that if Grant and Jack were able to write their stories by putting pen to paper themselves they might have become aware of their position in modern Australia is to patronise them. They were fully aware of their situation as impotent onlookers in their own land and they told me so many times. Johnson does not like Kriol; nor is he enamoured with standard English (a label I used once and since regret because 'colloquial English' is a more accurate description). I am being taken to task for writing down Kriol (as I do sometimes) and so fossilising traditional discourse, and making free colloquial English translations of Kriol (as I readily admit) and so rendering the narratives inauthentic. Johnson is having it both ways. Linguists treat Kriol as a language in its own right within a particular cultural milieu and make written descriptive studies of it in order to show that it is just as legitimately a language as any other. The discussion and study of something does not necessarily mean that it is under threat or not accepted. To merit study can be sometimes the greatest compliment of all.

It is a good critical technique sometimes to judge a book by its cover but one must be careful. The pelican for My country of the pelican dreaming was chosen after much thought and discussion with the graphics people at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies because that bird was one of Grant Ngabidj's Dreamings. The title was also Grant's. The cover for Jack Sullivan's life history was made from a photograph of Jack and his pencil sketches of one of the cattle stations on which he lived. Johnson thinks Jack does not look

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1 Rosengarten, 1974:xxiv.
2 Cf. Countrymen, :257.
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like an Aboriginal and damns the whole book on that account. Jack would be tickled to be thought of as a founding patriarch. He too suggested the title for the book.

I think that for me, Grant, Jack, Bulla and all the others the circumstances were right for the times, seventeen years ago when it all started. We are still at an early stage of this vocation. We can get inspiration from other writers (including Oscar Lewis) and should learn from their limitations and successes. Students of Aboriginal history have at their disposal a growing variety of self-told texts on Aboriginal life: autobiographies (entirely self-written), biographies (written by someone other than the person whose life is told), and life histories (written by collaboration between the person whose story is told and some other). This includes Aborigines and non-Aborigines. In every case there is some kind of editing. There is richness in this diversity. All of us, because we share a common humanity outside the blinkers of class, culture and belief, have something to offer.

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