7 Memory and Dreaming

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Having looked in some detail at autobiographical memory in Opal’s stories and Alpurrurulam more broadly I will now look at how this analysis fits in with other memory frameworks. This is both an important and problematic question. In looking at memory in this context we find that it presents at least two main challenges to standard descriptions in the memory studies literature. Firstly we find that while Opal’s pronoun use and other evidence suggest an allocentric form of self-construal, a self-construal oriented in a way which is inclusive of others as well as context, this does not arise from nor is it produced by the kinds of interdependent cultural models described in the literature. The larger challenge posed to typical understandings of memory arises from the lack of both temporality, with regard to duration, and chronological ordering in narrative and remembering. This presents a major challenge in relation to descriptions of memory as ‘mental time travel’. An emphasis on spatial over temporal ordering brings up important challenges in relation to what precisely ‘counts’ as memory. While there is a paucity of literature on memory in Aboriginal Australian cultures there is a huge literature on people’s relationships to the more distant past. This literature can help to shed some light on the temporal aspects of remembering in this context and in looking at both of these challenges together in an interdisciplinary analysis we can see more clearly some of the unique ways of remembering and how they fit with current concepts of memory.
Dreaming, time and memory

In anthropology, and beyond, there are long-standing and continuing debates about definitions of myth, history, memory, oral history, narrative histories and various other terms connected with conceptualizations of storytelling across cultures. Although on-going, this debate has presented interesting insights and challenges when Alan Rumsey, Diane Austin-Broos and Jeremy Beckett, among others, brought these issues to the forefront in the Australian context. In this debate a number of anthropologists have contributed to a large body of work that has illuminated differences between the ways Aboriginal peoples represent the colonial past and the ways in which that past is represented by dominant cultures.¹ This work also serves to problematize the manner in which those differences have been represented and understood historically. Further, they have allowed for an awareness that different peoples represent and remember the processes, interactions and negotiations of colonial power in different ways. For many Aboriginal Australians these issues are vital in native title and land rights contexts.

Beyond anthropology historians have also explored the history-making process in Australia. For example Bain Attwood in his paper ‘Unsettling Pasts’ gives an account of the history of colonization in Australia and the many problems engendered within that process. The question he poses is not whether colonization was morally right or wrong, but rather how right and wrong were constructed within the history-making process of colonization. He claims that nation-states like Australia are ‘forged largely though historical narratives, which provide nations with a sense of being a moral community’.² In recent decades, challenges from Indigenous people and academics have contested the modernist history-making process in more than one way. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 4, modernist history in Australia has been contested on the level of content, inasmuch as Indigenous people have been both variously underrepresented and negatively represented, whereas many of the settlers’ less than praiseworthy actions have been glossed over, to say the least. However, beyond the level of content, modernist history making as a process is also being critiqued. Attwood points out that

histories are not so much collections of facts that naturally belong together as they are processes in which interpretive narratives are formulated and mobilised, and so they are always contingent on the teller, their purpose, the context and the audience to whom they speak.³