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Writing to perform the region: Making 'somewhereness' visible in post-colonisation Australia

Abstract:

The regions that colonisers know are not generally those of most importance to First Nations people, although the territorial divisions of government administration have had a huge impact on First Nations people in terms of the kinds of policies directed at them and the implementation of those policies. In this paper, I look first at the ways in which Aboriginal experience in Australia has been written out of the landscape, then at some non-territorial ways of looking at such landscapes. I then discuss how a non-Indigenous writer, in working with First Nations people, might help to make visible a different kind of 'region'.

Biographical note:

Jane Palmer is a non-Indigenous Australian writer whose research interests include the use of ethnographic storytelling methods in post-conflict or marginalised communities, to explore the processes of trauma, grief, resilience and adaptation. She has undertaken ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia and in regional Australia, and has published in the areas of ethics, fieldwork methodologies, memory studies and futures studies.

Key words:

truth-telling – Aboriginal history – regionalism – Aboriginal invisibility – reconciliation

[A] 'region' has long been defined to mean a geographic area that is 'sufficiently unified to have a consciousness of its customs and ideals' and a distinct 'sense of identity'. (Brown and Deem 2016: 1156; citing Vance 1968)

Introduction

The reflections in this paper on what it means to be a regional writer – a writer of the regions – are based on my experience listening to life stories of Aboriginal people in South West Queensland. As a non-Indigenous researcher, I have re-told, or re-presented, these stories in various forms of writing, and what has become clear is that this is not 'regional' writing in the sense of writing about my own territorially defined 'region,' nor are the narratives I present 'Aboriginal stories'. This paper explores what value the voice of a non-Indigenous writer might add to the extensive work of Aboriginal writers and researchers in overcoming the invisibility in mainstream discourse of Aboriginal people and their connection to 'regions'.

Regions and regionality

Regionalism – an approach to governance based on administrative subdivisions and borders and ambits of power – played, and continues to play a large part in Aboriginal post-contact experience; not only have policies over the last two centuries differed from colony to colony, State to State, but territorial regions were delineated and regulated by a diverse range of 'Protectors' and other authorities whose humanity or otherwise has had a huge impact on the lives of those Aboriginal people they 'governed' (see for example Kidd 1997: 68-69; Goodall 1996), and their descendants. As a non-Aboriginal writer, I too see myself as residing in a region, indeed a nested set of regions, with borders determined by government.

The idea of 'region' continues to evolve. Debate has emerged over the past two decades about whether regions are constructed through institutionally determined boundaries such as those described above – 'territorially embedded' – or through 'social practice and discourse' where boundaries are fluid and continually contestable (Varró and Legendijk 2013: 21, 24). Varró and Legendijk point to the early work of Allen et al (1998), which rethought the region 'as existing in mutually constitutive interrelations with other regions' (Varró and Legendijk 2013: 20). For Anssi Paasi (2010), regions are always in a state of relational 'becoming' in social practice and discourse:

Regions and their contested meanings are constructed across scales in a spatial division of labour by people representing social classes, all ages, all states of health, gender, and a diversity of ethnic, national, and regional backgrounds. They produce and reproduce regions in their homes and households, factories and offices, building sites, streets and shops, and in their leisure-time activities in 'nature', in pubs, or at sport events, theatres, carnivals, etc, where intentional and nonintentional actions, emotions, and passions come together.

Ash Amin (2004; and citing Massey 2004) on the other hand looks at regions as relational in terms of their political positioning: as nodes of connectivity within 'relational networks' that stretch far beyond designated territorial boundaries. Each node or region is demographically

and culturally diverse at the local level (Amin 2004: 43), but is also connected to global networks over time and across space, including 'diaspora communities, corporate networks, consumption patterns, travel networks, microworlds of communication and the many public spheres that stretch across space' (Amin 2004: 39).

Paasi's and Amin's 'relationality' of regions is a concept to which I will return later in this paper in discussing the role of the writer in 'performing' a region.

The distinction between territorial and discursively or relationally constructed 'region' is reflected in Jones and Woods' (2013) idea of material versus imagined coherence; they apply this distinction to the smaller geographical unit of 'locality' but suggest it can also be applied to regions (36). Material coherence is that provided by the 'territorial remit' of, for example, a local government authority, or a school catchment, or the reach of a shopping centre, or a combination of several such factors. The authors see these structuring factors as providing 'vehicles for collective action' (36). 'Imagined coherence' on the other hand is a sense of identity as a community, with 'shared patterns of behaviour and shared geographical reference points' (36); imagined coherence makes a locality '*meaningful* as a space for collective action' (36), although they suggest that both forms of coherence are more diffuse or fragmented in regions than in localities.

One example of the collision between definitions of 'region' is offered in Thomas et al's (2013) paper on 'crafting the region'. In the United Kingdom, artists and craftspeople over time have produced 'regions of practice'; these regions however have a complex and sometimes difficult relationship with new regional subdivisions ordained by the UK government for the delivery of arts support services, regions that reflect a government's 'compulsion to territory' (Thomas, Harvey, and Hawkins 2013: 77).

A rich description of 'imagined coherence' can be seen in Eric Storm's (2012) writing on early nineteenth-century European regionalism. This 'new regionalism' was intended to promote attachment to the land and, it was hoped by extension, national patriotism. Art and architecture became part of the return to the land, architects extolling rustic and organic forms, and artists attempting to discern the 'soul' or 'essence' of a region (Storm 2012: 45, 46). This regionalism emphasised connection to ancestors, so that 'region' and 'nation' became 'the soil and the ancestors, it is the land of our dead' (44, citing Maurice Barrès). In this early idea of regionalism, we can see a precursor of the concept of *terroir* in modern Europe and elsewhere. For food producers today, '*terroir* is understood as the holistic combination of soil, climate, topography, and the "soul" of the cultivator' (Trubek, Guy, and Bowen 2010: 139, citing James E. Wilson). This link between soil and soul, between land and identity, suggests that material and imagined coherence, territory and practice, are inextricably entwined; 'region' becomes a *terroir attache* (Randall and Guiffrida 2006: 436) that is imagined in practices of work (cultivation) and the discourse of family (ancestors), and constructed materially, not through institutional boundaries or business catchments, but on the ground – interacting with the soil, topography and rainfall, cultivating crops and caring for burial sites.

In working with Aboriginal people, one learns something – as much as people are able or willing to share – about spiritual, cultural and material connections with 'country',¹ for which Aboriginal people exercise custodianship. These connections have been disrupted by governments, settlers and institutions, through massacres, forced removals and incarceration,

slavery and discrimination that have played out, and continue to play out, in the lives of Aboriginal people. Connection to country however remains strong, and it would seem especially so in 'the regions'. Practices such as those associated with birth, death, traditional foods and medicine, and caring for country including sites of cultural and historical significance, are some of the ways that Aboriginal people constitute and take responsibility for country. It should be noted that even where people are a long way from the country of their ancestors, responsibilities for country can continue to be practiced, either by visits to homelands or by taking on responsibilities for country in one's new home (Goodall 1996: 294, 296):

Moving away has neither severed their sense of relating to their home country, nor has it removed the *idea* that a custodial relationship to land is an important part of an adult's social role.

While the introduction of the Australian *Native Title Act 1993*², and its distinctly 'territorial remit' (Jones and Woods 2013: 36) has turned country, like 'region,' into 'a field of agonistic engagement' (Amin 2004: 39), Aboriginal people's *terroir attache* extends across and beyond state and regional borders. A synonym for *terroir* is 'somewhereness'³. The stories that I and my fellow researchers gather and re-tell have this kind of somewhereness, something that locates country without recourse to the boundaries designated by governments, courts or institutional administrations.

Nevertheless, at national, regional and community level, mainstream historical and political discourse continues to render Aboriginal people largely invisible. Below is a brief overview of the rise of this invisibility and the work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and commentators who have challenged it.

Invisibility in the regions

As the killing times came to an end in each of the Australian colonies and became the subject of remembering and forgetting, the work of historical denial began. (Attwood 2001: 39)

W E H Stanner's (1969) 'great Australian silence' surrounding Aboriginal post-colonisation history has been intermittent. Historians in the late 19th and early 20th century, with some exceptions, turned away from stories of localised atrocities to narratives of pioneer and empire (Clark 2018), with euphemism substituted for fact, 'murdered' replaced by 'civilised,' 'pacified,' 'chastisement' and 'dispersal' (Attwood 2017: 27). Historical erasure accorded with the idea that Aboriginal people were 'primitive' and hence doomed in a Darwinian evolution of civilisation: 'Aboriginal people were out of time and done for' (Attwood 2017: 35-36). Nevertheless, Indigenous Australians have fought continuously to have their stories heard (Curthoys 2008: 245); in South-West Queensland alone, Hazel McKellar (1984), Mary Mitchell (2016), Keelen Mailman (2014) and Herb Wharton (1999, 2003) have written their own stories in their own words. In addition, works by Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians, anthropologists and novelists have continued to draw attention to the devastating impacts of white settlement on Aboriginal people (Attwood 2017; Curthoys 2008; Auty and Russell 2016; Boucher and Russell 2015; Maynard 2017; Maynard 2016; Scott 2012; Wright

2006; Rose 1991; Roe 1993; Byrne 2003; Griffiths 1996; Harrison 2004; Reynolds 2013; Ryan 2012).

However the public and populist political discourse of 'moving on' (Augoustinos, Hastie, and Callaghan 2018) avoids the work of remembering and mourning that has yet to be done (Attwood 2001: 40). As Curthoys (2008: 247) notes, 'moving on' has 'become a new way of advocating a return to the great Australian silence'. Amid the continued social and economic disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, continued discrimination and racism (Higgins and Conifer 2018; Markham and Biddle 2018), and the failure of government to respond adequately to the landmark Uluru Statement from the Heart⁴ (Hobbs 2017; Kelly 2017; Macdonald 2017; McKay 2017), the calls for truth-telling continue. Aboriginal human rights lawyer Hannah McGlade argues that to fix the failures of policies and programs such as 'Closing the Gap' in health, education and employment, 'we have to go back to the drawing board ... We're still dealing with the impacts and after-effects of [dispossession] today' (ABC 2018). The Australian Prime Minister's Adviser on Indigenous Affairs, Chris Sarra, has stated that there remains a need 'to pursue a sense of voice, truth telling and agreement making' (interview with Karvelas 2018). Without truth-telling, it could be argued that the business of reconciliation is unfinished (Pearson 2017; Pitty 2006: 61-62); indeed the business of colonisation is not yet finished (Byrne 2002: 137; de Costa 2006: 26).

Attwood (2001: 36-37) describes a broad change in the approach taken by historians in recent decades as they began to 'embrace memory,' as stories of experience became authoritative sources, and historians were brought 'into closer proximity with the past'. The stories I and my colleagues have heard during our visits to Aboriginal communities in regional and remote South West Queensland over the past two years are powerful evidence of a desire for both truth-telling and peace-making. But for the Aboriginal people we speak with, it must be the 'true history' emerging in the stories of those who lived it. One reason then for a non-Indigenous research to be 'writing the region' is to support the call for truth-telling and true history, and to make more visible that which has been forgotten or silenced.

I argue below that in becoming part of the process of truth-telling from the regions, the non-Indigenous writer must think beyond 'region' and 'regionality' as they are commonly defined, and must also clearly locate her writing in relationship with the works of Indigenous scholars who write from experience of both invisibility and resistance.

Where is the regional writer?

The deeply imagined, materially embedded, but contestable 'regions' that constitute Aboriginal country are not regions that I, as a non-Indigenous person, inhabit. 'My' region lies across the country of several Aboriginal nations, most closely those of the Giabal, Jarowair and Jagera peoples in a Local Government Area defined under Queensland State legislation (RDA nd). For some government purposes, this region is part of a much bigger 'region' of some 400,000 square kilometres, the Darling Downs South West (State Development Queensland 2018; Education Queensland 2018) which stretches west to the Queensland/South Australia border, and crosses over many Aboriginal nations. I identify myself as inhabiting the Local Government Area that provides me with most of the social and work-related networks and services I need to live and do my research. Even more strongly, I see my *locality* as the University campus, where those who occupy its physical infrastructure,

including me, 'have a sense of identity with the place and with each other, such that they constitute a perceived community' (Jones and Woods 2013: 36). The affordances of both my region and locality which I value of course depend on their connection to complex networks that extend far beyond 'territory' (Amin 2004: 39).

I suggest however that being a regional writer is not a matter of which region I inhabit or which other regions it overlaps, but rather which region I help to 'perform' through the practice of writing. I cannot 'perform' Aboriginal lands in the way that Aboriginal people call up country through their own cultural practices (Muecke 2008; Carter 1996); I can however, in Paasi's sense, limn, in certain ways, these places and the people who live in them, and thereby make them affectively, historically and politically more visible to others. I can do this because of the 'partial vistas' (Malkki 1995: 51) onto history and culture that are offered to me during my visits to Aboriginal communities, and a form of writing that frames and presents these stories in academic and grey literature to international, national and regional audiences.

Spivak (1988: 277) asks us to be clear about the distinction between 'representing' as *speaking for* the other, and 're-presenting' as *describing* the other. If non-Indigenous researchers wish to 're-present' the cultural 'other' they need to learn first to clearly *represent* themselves, so that the cultural and ideological framing of *re-presentation* is not hidden (Spivak 1988: 274-275). The *re-presentation* of Aboriginal people's stories, which some of my own work entails, will always be in very different 'voice' from that of Aboriginal writers. Not because of style or content, but because it does not – and cannot – represent Aboriginal experience and is not told through the interpretive frameworks of Aboriginal people. As Aboriginal scholars Karen Martin and Booran Mirraboopa state: 'To represent our worlds is ultimately something we can only do for ourselves' (2003: 211). Similarly, John Maynard argues: 'Only an Aboriginal historian can bring to bear an Aboriginal understanding of the voices of the past' (2017: 238). This is reflected, for example, in the view that the purpose of research for Aboriginal people is to maintain relations between human, plants, animals and all elements of the cosmos (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003: 208, 213). Non-Indigenous scholars can write *about* Aboriginal people, Jeanine Leane argues, only after immersion in Aboriginal stories and histories (Leane 2016: 43-45). Moreover the process of research, even that conducted by and with Indigenous people, must be designed to avoid perpetuating power imbalances between 'research expert and Aboriginal research subject' (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003: 213); and importantly, all research must acknowledge who is in control of story sharing (Leane 2016: 43).

Bearing in mind the distinction between 're-presenting' and 'representing,' the potential value of non-Indigenous researchers engaging with Aboriginal stories might be to challenge the national historical discourse that has served to 'cast minorities as negative participants in historic developments ... or has banished them from the national history altogether' (Judd 2008: 139; and cited in Maynard 2017: 238). Maria Srinivasan discusses the work of Aboriginal scholar Jackie Huggins and Indian Dalit writers Kumud Pawde and Bama to argue that their writing is an intervention in dominant discourses:

They present a consciousness and a life world that is different. This encounter with 'difference' places in check tendencies [by white scholars and readers] to homogenize. (Srinivasan 2010: 102)

Non-Indigenous scholars can learn from this argument: deep listening to the life stories and experience of Aboriginal people can prevent what Anna Szörényi (2009: 178) has described, in the context of refugee narratives, as a generalising of experience that dehistoricises events and oversimplifies the impacts of regimes of oppression. Bain Attwood has similarly noted the homogenisation of stories concerning the Aboriginal stolen generation, which obliterates important distinctions in the treatment of individuals and the attitudes of the various parties involved (Attwood 2001: 189). Bronwyn Batten (2009: 94-95) points out, with regard to the Myall Creek massacre memorial, that it is the detail of events, the particular place, the names of people killed, that 'gives the site its emotional power and enabled it to act as site of reconciliation more broadly;' the site 'must retain its individual story'.

The experiences of Aboriginal people, dispossessed from traditional lands with which they have a custodial and spiritual relationship, is also specific to place and time: they have endured abuse within institutions at the hands of particular individuals and discrimination and segregation in particular ways at particular places (for example, at the local school, on a sporting field, in a cinema or a hotel, or at a hospital). This specificity is of course connected to institutionalised racism and government-sanctioned violence, but illuminating these systemic issues can often be done effectively through stories that are specific to each community, time and place. The history of births, deaths, marriages, work, sport and recreation at each place, the determination of a particular group of Aboriginal people to return their ancestors' remains from museums to their rightful resting place on country, to commemorate the former fringe camps as sites of joy and resilience as well as fear and privation, to pass on the knowledge of Elders across generations, to gain opportunities to once again care for country, and to restore Aboriginal languages, constitute a *somewhereness* that can never be fully 'disappeared', one that a non-Indigenous writer can help to illuminate for mainstream Australia.

Should the non-Indigenous writer in such cases be seen as a 'borderlander', working to create a bridge between the 'regional' and the 'global' (the international readership of academic journals and books), between the stories owned by Aboriginal communities and the widely accepted discourses of historians and anthropologists? Extending Cooper and Rumford's (2013: 113) argument, the border and thus the borderlander can represent not an 'intermediate' position but *both* the regional *and* the global. Certainly, the re-presenting of Aboriginal stories by a non-Indigenous writer could be seen as performing the kind of 'border-work' described by Horlick-Jones et al (2004: 445): forging connections 'between scholarly inquiry and the sphere of tacit and experiential knowledges' or with 'nonprofessional voices and perspectives' (Kirmayer 2013: 367-368), exemplifying what Ananta Giri (2011: 102) has called 'a new art of sharing and border-crossing'.

Then again, perhaps, as a regional and non-Indigenous writer, I act as a 'membrane', a filter between the regions and the wider world (Hedetoft 2003: 152, and cited in Cooper and Rumford 2013) as I collect stories from the region then pass them on in curated form to a globally dispersed audience. Or rather than focusing on the writer, the writing itself could be seen as the 'interface' between the regions and the people I write about and the rest of world: the kind of 'envelope of action within which people from different "sides" act in relation to one another'(Cooper and Rumford 2013: 112); the writing makes possible, or creates, a new site of interaction between communities and other parts of the world.

The question of locating the non-Indigenous writer and her writing can best be answered by returning to the ideas of Anssi Paasi (2010: 2299):

As for wider networks of things and actions, regions are performed by politicians and journalists, newspapers, and other media ...; they come into being in stories, novels, songs, poems, films, and other artefacts that give rise to social classifications, stereotyping, and distinctions ... Regions are produced and reproduced by patients, social workers, nurses, and doctors in regional medical centres, by teachers in kindergartens, schools, and universities, by actors and sites of local, regional, and state governance ... Regions also gain their shapes in networks of communication, computers, the Internet, and mobile phones.

Looked at in this way, regions are constructed by diverse actors, in diverse places, performed in ways that extend beyond the politically charged technological and human networks described by Amin, to multiple sites of imagination and discourse. The research writer and research writing are one part of a multitude of voices and media through which regions are performed and called into being. The researcher who works with Aboriginal communities can contribute through her writing to producing the 'region' – making it visible in particular ways – in the eyes of her readers. Rather than acting as a bridge/borderlander/interface between two 'jostling territorial configurations' (Amin 2004: 36) – one regional and one global, one Aboriginal and one multinational – the non-Indigenous writer and her writing, along with research participants and their stories, are part of a myriad of things that perform and produce the region and its place in the world; both region and world are only producible in relation to the other. Rather than acting as a bridge between regional and global, it could be said that the writing serves as a bridge between Aboriginal stories and mainstream historical and political discourse.

Performing somewhereness

'A good story' can always be used to avoid discussion of broader structural issues such as the impacts of imperialism and global economics; as Maria Tumarkin (2014: 181) argues, a story 'is still no substitute for a genuine public debate with its bumping of heads, its pushes and pulls, its peculiar and all-important labours'. Given the history of Aboriginal invisibility in the regions, the writer who works with Aboriginal people's stories can respond to this critique by helping to position these stories politically and ethically within national and international debates about truth-telling and atonement. Non-Indigenous researchers working with Aboriginal people need also to be cognisant of Martin and Mirraboopa's (2003: 208, 213) directive to Indigenous researchers: that research should help to maintain Aboriginal people's relationships with the entities of their world, and disseminated in such a way as to maintain the relatedness of the research participants to the research.

However important this political and ethical positioning is for the writing, equally important is that it in some way convey the specific *somewhereness* of each story: that the stories themselves remain local or regional, rather than being subsumed into a homogenised 'Aboriginal experience' that serves merely as an illustration of a broader historical or social narrative. Szörényi (2009: 175) points out that 'testimonial texts' can produce unpredictable meanings, and have the power to disrupt discourse. Hence, it is the stories themselves that must drive the non-Indigenous writer's narrative, alongside acknowledgement, as Leane

(2016: 43) notes, of who owns and controls the stories. Kristi Amatucci ascribes agency to 'data' such as these stories:

Am I a researcher now? Collecting my data? Answering my questions? I ask: How dare I assume control of this process? *It is the data that collects me. Possesses me. Inscribes onto me the stories that it wishes me to tell.* (Amatucci 2013: 344, emphasis added)

The writer who is thus 'possessed' can cast light on each story as complex, multi-threaded and transformative. Tom Griffiths (2007) argues that a story as a 'carrier of truth' can 'change the way people act, the way they use available knowledge' (Griffiths 2007). Writing that is driven by stories of experience from Aboriginal people in Australia can *re-present* such stories to act as alerts or warnings to catalyse re-thinking in the present.

When research writing frames stories as, for example, a warning about historical erasure or 'forgetting', it becomes part of processes that concern the whole of the (territorial) nation, as well as other nations. Through the re-presentation of Aboriginal stories, the non-Indigenous researcher can help to produce the 'region' as a specific *somewhereness* that challenges historical and political discourse, a *somewhereness* that is both spectral – a 'dark stain on the edge of our subconscious collective past' (Bullen 2017: 32) – and alive, telling *now* the truths necessary for peace and reparation.

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Notes

1. Hereafter in this paper 'country' is used, without quotation marks, to indicate this Aboriginal meaning of country.

2. Excerpts from National Native Title Tribunal Fact Sheet (2010):

Native title is the recognition in Australian law that some Indigenous people continue to hold rights to their land and waters, which come from their traditional laws and customs.

The following conditions must be met:

- the rights and interests are possessed under the traditional laws currently acknowledged and the traditional customs currently observed by the relevant Indigenous people
- those Indigenous people have a 'connection' with the area in question by those traditional laws and customs
- the rights and interests are recognised by the common law of Australia

Native title:

- can be extinguished (refused recognition) because of things the government has done, or allowed others to do, over a particular area that are inconsistent with native title

- is not granted by governments—it is usually recognised through a determination made by the Federal Court under the Native Title Act
- exists alongside and subject to the rights of other people in the same area
- can only be claimed on certain areas of land or water, for example on vacant or unallocated Crown land but not on residential freehold land or public works like roads, schools or hospitals.

3. <https://www.synonyms.com/synonym/terroir>

4. The 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' arose from a meeting of Aboriginal representatives from across Australia, convened as part of the Referendum Council's response to its brief from the Federal Government 'to advise the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on options for constitutional reform' <<https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/#main-content>>. The Uluru Statement called for a 'First Nations Voice' in the Australian Constitution and a 'Makarrata Commission' to supervise a process of 'agreement-making' and 'truth-telling' between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (McKay 2017; Referendum Council 2017).

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