

Alice Nannup's 'Homes': Cultural Identification and Land in *When the Pelican Laughed*

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I see Kangan as my home because that's the main station where I grew up on. Mother would work for other station workers, but we always came back to Kangan. (Nannup 21)

The ambiguity of the English word 'home' can no longer go unremarked: does the usage indicate an environment encountered, relationships enacted, an ideal envisaged, or an articulation of all three? (Putnam 155)

This conference is concerned with how land informs identity. In my research about Aboriginal women's autobiographical writing, the nexus between place, identity and resistance is central. Much of Aboriginal experience relates to and is shaped by the pattern of association between people and their land. Land or country, in Aboriginal contexts, shapes identity through the Dreaming which is not just a process of land formation, but also gives specific cultural practices or Law to Aboriginal people. These operate across the spatial and the temporal. This association, particularly in the case of Alice Nannup, is not easily displaced and, indeed, she records an ongoing link with her land, her home, in her autobiography, *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992).

Alice Bassett Nannup was born at Abydos Station in the Pilbara area of Western Australia in 1911, the daughter of a Yindibarndi woman, Ngulyi and an Englishman, Tom Bassett. She grew up on her father's station, Kangan, until she was taken away to be 'educated' at the age of twelve. After two years as an unpaid servant, she was sent to Moore River Native Settlement, where she stayed from August 1925 until the end of 1927. Then at the age of sixteen, she was sent out to work as a domestic servant and one of her employers was A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia. In 1932, she married Will Nannup and spent the next thirty-three years raising ten children and working in the Geraldton area of Western Australia. In 1965, forty-two years after being removed, Alice returned to the Pilbara to rediscover her surviving Aboriginal family. Sixty-four years after she was removed, Alice returned again to 'make peace with her country' (224).

This paper concentrates on Alice's experiences of 'home'; her childhood at Kangan Station, her resistance to assimilation at Moore River Native Settlement and her two emotional returns to her country in 1965 and 1987.

The protectionist policies of the 1920s operated under the assumption that removing children from their family and lands would achieve cultural displacement, an unproblematic adoption by stolen children of non-Aboriginal working class values and their employment as either domestics or as labourers. A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, was beginning to formulate his assimilation policies expressed in his book *Australia's Coloured Minority* (1947) at this time. This means that Alice was at Moore River at a period before assimilation was formally adopted as policy.

The 1905 Aborigines Act, to which Alice was subject, operated under the erroneous and patronising view that children of part descent were in a state of cultural confusion, excluded from Aboriginal groups because of their pale skin, but at the same time trapped by Laws which were socially unacceptable to non-Aboriginal institutions, for example, the marriage of teenage girls to senior, elderly men, as well as to the children themselves. Yet protectionist and, later, assimilationist policies actually created intense cultural confusion, similar to that from which they aspired to rescue Aboriginal children. Without the support of their families, without access to lands, language and Law, with relentless racism, and intense and unrelenting surveillance, it is little wonder that many of the stolen generations tell of the loss of their sense of identity, their feelings of worthlessness, fear and anger.

Alice Nannup's experiences however, are a lesson in the failure of policies of displacement, but it is important to state that Alice was exceptional; government departments at their most intrusive were/are highly successful in destroying Aboriginal people's links with their families, lands and cultures.

Alice was lucky. Her survival as a Yindibarndi woman depended on five criteria: her status as a Yindibarndi child before she was removed; her age at removal; her strong personality; the fact that she was able to return to her family and country, and the fact that her second return clearly outlines a continuing spiritual relationship with her country.

Alice's immediate family included her father, Tom Bassett, mother, Ngulyi and half sister, Ella. Alice's 'many grandmothers in the Mulba way' (Nannup 20) indicates her position in the Yindibarndi extended family which she inherited through her mother. Her childhood prior to her removal from her parents was happy, safe and loving, with accounts of her participation in the 'kid's dances' (27) gathering bush food with Ngulyi, working with her father on Kangan, travelling with him and her mother from station to station.

Alice's account of her childhood has similarities with that of Daisy Corunna's (who is Alice's Aunt (Nannup 123)), who also 'plays corroboree' (Morgan 327), collects bush food and works around Corunna Station (Morgan 329-30).

Two of the conditions of the 1905 Aborigines Act were restrictions on cohabitation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and on travel. Alice's parents were able to circumvent both of these because of their relative geographical isolation. However, it was impossible to circumvent Yindibarndi Law which was strictly enforced by the Elders (Nannup 21, 25). Alice's betrothal to an Aboriginal man fifty years her senior, was opposed by Ngulyi (36), but the only way that Ngulyi could extricate Alice from this unwanted marriage was to send her from Yindibarndi land, 'south to school' (39).

Alice was twelve before she was removed from her family and fourteen before she was taken to Moore River. She already knew a great deal of Yindibarndi Law, bushcraft and language, as well as how to cook, clean and serve before she arrived. Attempts to change her name from Bassett to Cassit were easily resisted; she simply corrected those who misnamed her (62). Alice was too old to be easily displaced.

Moore River, far from making her a compliant servant, taught her how to physically fight, bribe, 'crack dumb', curry favour and sharpened her already independent and forthright nature. In all of Alice's accounts of the brawls in Moore River, for example, Alice gives as good as she gets, noting that 'you just had to stick up for yourself' (73). Alice's privileged position and cooking knowledge (to which she never admitted) allowed her to bribe her way out of trouble by offering an additional ration of meat

and bread to the hungry trackers (82). Likewise, Alice was able to provide more rations to the dormitory mistress who helped the girls to hunt for bush food. Alice states 'When I got in favour with her I used to live like a queen' (65).

The resistance skills which Alice learned at Moore River assisted her when she went out to work as a domestic and later when she married and had children. While a domestic, she felt herself to be a worker, rather than a servant, and, within the limited options open to her, she zealously protected this ideal (104). She asserted herself physically and verbally, on one memorable occasion telling off the audience of the Radio Theatre in Geraldton in 1950 for their lack of respect and racism (14-16).

Alice finally returned to her Aboriginal family in 1965. This was a very difficult time for her. She felt very cheated that she 'missed out on her family', but the reunion with the relatives she has left is etched with relief, elation and remembering; it was 'a crying session, and a long talking session, and a crying session, and a memory session' (209).

It is important to remember that the land had changed in Alice's absence, and that her relatives had endured incredible hardships themselves. When Alice returned, her memories become a sustaining force not just for herself, but for the relatives with whom she reunites.

In a sense, when Alice returned, the people become her home, perhaps because they were the remaining link between the geographical place and the family that gave it its significance. All of the recollections of her trip to Port Hedland have friends' and relatives' names and the word 'home' dotted throughout them. For example

... then my two uncles, Uncle Sam and Uncle Ernie Mitchell, turned up. We all had a good old talk, and a few tears, and I was starting to feel a bit more like I'd come home (208).

I walked up to the door with my heart in my mouth, and I could see Uncle Bill. I couldn't see Auntie Minnie ... I was thinking to myself, well Wari, this is it, this is finally coming home (208).

As Putnam suggests above, home is at the same time an environment encountered, a place where relationships are enacted and an ideal to be realised (155) despite the forty year gap in Alice's physical association with her family, and the vast changes that had occurred in her absence. This healing in continued in Alice's final return to her country in 1987 (Nannup 221) where she ritualises her belonging to the land. She states

I put the water in my mouth and I blew hard towards the sun. As I blew this big rainbow came, and I said 'Yinda Ngurra—I belong' ... I felt good then, I felt I was back.

... They saw him, they saw the snake. He was stretched out on top of the water and they just couldn't believe it ... [Later] two old tribal men came to see me. They were really happy to think that I did the right thing...

I felt really good about going back, because although they tricked me when they took me away, in my lifetime I was able to get back some of what they took from me. You see, forty-two years later I got back to my family, and sixty-four years from when I left Port Samson, I got back to make my peace with my country. (223-4)

While assimilation policy and Yindibarndi Law removed Alice physically from her country and home, they failed to break the spiritual link between them: she always knew where her country was, even if it was impossible for her to go there. Alice

reestablished her relationships with both her land and family which, for her, constituted an emotional and spiritual healing. This healing is vital: because the Dreaming, the land and the people are all connected, identity and health are only ensured when the linkages between all three are maintained. Alice affirms her identity as a Yindibarndi woman; despite her bitterness and anger at her removal, the ceremony of the water, the rainbow and the appearance of the maned serpent, affirm her link with the Dreaming, one which has never been lost.

Aboriginal literatures can be read as popular literatures, ethnographies, socio-political histories, as autobiographies, or as sort of teaching guide about Aboriginal resistance strategies. In the current political climate, they could be read as the first testimonies of the Stolen Generation, documenting Aboriginal identity in the face of ongoing policies of displacement and assimilation.

Works cited

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