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David Unaipon's life stories: Aboriginal writing and rhetoric

Abstract:

David Unaipon (1872-1967) has been described as a scientist, author, anthropologist, preacher, inventor and public speaker. To these descriptions can be added musician, lecturer, curator, political activist, guide, and door-to-door salesman. A master of many trades, descriptions of Unaipon have struggled to merge the various aspects of his life into a single, coherent narrative. This paper focuses on Unaipon's life stories – the stories told about him and his family and the stories he told about himself. A central argument of this paper is that, rather than describing Unaipon as a jack of all trades (or, worse, a master of none), Unaipon can accurately and productively be described as a 'rhetor,' a person using various forms of media (and various forms of life writing) to present arguments across different social, political and cultural contexts to change beliefs about Aboriginality. Further, Unaipon's rhetoric was fashioned from indigenous and western traditions. To describe Unaipon as a rhetor can re-energise the arguments he put forward during his lifetime, can reveal the consistency and relationship between arguments he made in various fields or disciplines, and, most importantly, can provoke debate and discussion about Unaipon's life and writing at a time when, despite his prominence as one face on Australia's \$50 note, as the namesake of Australia's most prestigious award for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing, and as an author anthologised in collections of Australian and Aboriginal writing, his writing is all but ignored in Australian culture and literary criticism.

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Keywords:

Aboriginal writing; Life writing; Rhetoric; Indigenous rhetoric

Introduction

An article entitled ‘Black genius,’ published in the *Maryborough Chronicle* in 1914, described David Unaipon (1872-1967) as a ‘scientist, anthropologist, inventor and public speaker ... the super aborigine’ (Unaipon 1914: 3). The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* describes Unaipon as the first Aboriginal writer to publish a sole-authored full-length manuscript as well as a ‘preacher, author and inventor’ (Jones 1990: n. pag.). To these descriptions can be added musician, lecturer, curator, political activist, guide, and door-to-door salesman; a master of many trades, descriptions of Unaipon have struggled to merge the various aspects of Unaipon’s life into a single, coherent narrative. This paper focuses on Unaipon’s life stories – the stories told about him and his family and the stories he told about himself. Rather than describing Unaipon as a jack of all trades (or, worse, a master of none), Unaipon can accurately and productively be described as a ‘rhetor,’ a person using various forms of media (and various forms of life writing) to present arguments across different social, political and cultural contexts to change beliefs about Aboriginality. Further, Unaipon’s rhetoric was fashioned from indigenous and western traditions. To describe Unaipon as a rhetor can re-energise the arguments he put forward during his lifetime, can reveal the consistency and relationship between arguments he made in various fields or disciplines, and, most importantly, can provoke debate and discussion about Unaipon’s life and writing at a time when, despite his prominence as one face on Australia’s \$50 note, as the namesake of Australia’s most prestigious award for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing, and as an author anthologised in collections of Australian and Aboriginal writing, his writing is all but ignored in Australian culture and literary criticism.

Even though Unaipon is often described as an important writer there has been little critical work that engages deeply with his writing; he is a writer with status but whose work is not read. Perhaps a reluctance to read his work as an example of rhetoric that draws on indigenous and non-indigenous traditions of argument has contributed to the critical silence around his work. Five of Unaipon’s short stories are anthologised in the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (Unaipon 2008: 19-24) and the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Unaipon 2009: 316-21), reflecting his prominence in the development of Aboriginal and Australian writing. And yet just two critics in the past decade have published articles focusing on Unaipon’s work (Gale 2005; Miller 2008). Contentious attacks questioning the merit of Aboriginal writing go some way to explaining the aversion to reading rhetoric in Aboriginal literature. In a criticism of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, Peter Craven claimed that the collection included too much Aboriginal writing without literary value: ‘every kind of doggerel and naïve bit of memoir writing besides ... much of it devoid of literary quality or even literary ambition’ (Craven 2009: 8). Such sentiments have been echoed in an Australian Curriculum Review report, which cited one of its advising specialists, Barry Spurr, who claimed the impact of Aboriginal writers on literature in Australia ‘has been minimal and is vastly outweighed by the impact of global literature ... on our literary culture’ (Dept. of Education 2014: 165). Spurr’s views informed the Report’s finding that there has been an over-emphasis on Aboriginal literature in the Australian curriculum that has supposedly led to the ‘undervaluing [of] Australian literature and the place of Western literature, particularly poetry’ in the curriculum (Dept. of Education 2014: 165). In contrast to these opinions, it can be asked whether literary ambition is distinct from political ambition or whether literary writing is separate from persuasive writing. As

will be seen, reading Unaipon's life writing through a rhetorical lens can highlight how indigenous life writing often draws on indigenous and non-indigenous traditions of storytelling and critique to develop a rich political argument.

Unaipon wrote and spoke in various genres: memoir, sermon, dreamtime legend, poetry, anthropological critique, newspaper interview, and political leaflet. The approaches to Aboriginal writing advocated by Craven and Spurr would no doubt lead to the categorisation of some of Unaipon's work as unimportant doggerel, naïve memoir, or unambitious rhetoric and see his work banished to a non-literary scrap heap. Craven's and Spurr's critiques, however, have been challenged in news outlets by critics such as Sophie Cunningham, who suggests the need for literary critics to reconsider the concept of literary quality by acknowledging the role of rhetoric and poetic in Aboriginal writing (Cunningham 2009), and writers such as Melissa Lucashenko and Tony Birch, who suggest impact extends beyond critical or social acceptance and that Aboriginal writing provides important critiques of Australian nationalism (McQuire 2009).

For Cunningham, Craven's criticism of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal literature* rests on a narrow definition of literature that displays a preference for literary aesthetics privileging white male writers. Craven, it is claimed, overlooks the literary value of 'the use of rhetoric to persuade and to move the reader' (Cunningham 2009: n.pag.). Cunningham suggests Craven separates literary (or poetic) writing from rhetorical writing, where poetic might be defined as the use of writing to express aspects of the universal human condition (code for the values of society's most privileged) and rhetoric would refer to argumentative writing designed to change an audience's opinions, beliefs, or inspire them to action. Craven is accused of harking back to distinctions originally made in Aristotle's treatises on *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, where one style of writing has value as literary while the other is dismissed as political. Over time, Cunningham's criticism suggests, such a distinction has enabled literary critics to ignore or marginalise the writing of non-white and female authors, creating a canon of white, male writers to implicitly endorse a worldview where power, importance and privilege reside with white men. Cunningham challenges Craven's dismissal of rhetorical texts, suggesting that, even though the distinction between poetic and rhetoric can be analytically useful, there are literary qualities to writing with rhetorical *and* aesthetic aspirations. Revealing the intertwined rhetorical and poetic aspects of Aboriginal writing suggests that concepts of literary quality, impact and ambition need to be refigured in order to better understand the aims and effects of Aboriginal writing.

Aboriginal novelists Lucashenko and Birch counter the views of Spurr and the Department of Education by redefining the way the impact of literature is measured. For Spurr, impact refers to the influence a work has on other writers and artists, on debates by literary critics, and the appreciation shown toward a work by award judges, critics, academics, teachers, and general readers. Such a definition, according to Lucashenko, is likely to assign literary worth to those 'books recycling the same tired, narrow tropes which informed the colonial tropes which informed the colonial project in Australia for two centuries' (McQuire 2009: n.pag.). Literary quality, that is, can be defined in ways that reify colonial attitudes. On the other hand, literary quality might be defined according to works that challenge accepted tropes and narratives, work that is likely to be less popular and less immediately influential. And yet critics and commentators rarely identify the quality of such writing, a result of what Birch calls the

‘disloyalty effect,’ where readers do not value work that presents ‘a negative critique of the national story’ (McQuire 2009: n.p.). While recent Aboriginal writing might take a more recognisably defiant stance against (neo)colonial attitudes, we will see that Unaipon, writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, experimented with a style of poetic argumentation that appeared loyal to established colonial attitudes in order to invite change. In particular, Unaipon utilised what George Lipsitz terms a ‘poetics of place’, an evocative language tied to specific location (Lipsitz 1994); further still, Unaipon’s life writing can be read as ‘custodial’, drawing on Peter Minter’s work on eco-poetics, in the sense that it protects and cares for discourse traditions practiced on Ngarrindjeri country, the particular place Unaipon and his family came from. Unaipon’s rhetoric incorporated these poetic techniques to broaden the scope of his critique and to continue indigenous poetic and rhetorical traditions while attempting to avoid perceptions of disloyalty to the institutions administering Aboriginal affairs. Developing reading strategies sensitive to the counter-narratives presented by Aboriginal writing, especially in writing as intricate as Unaipon’s, can foster critical thinking by engaging readers with contradictory versions of accepted national histories and by driving the possibility of attitudinal, social and cultural transformation. As such, the study of Aboriginal writing, despite the criticisms of Craven, Spurr and the Department of Education, is important to the national curriculum and retains the potential to significantly influence Australian society and culture.

Unaipon’s writing and arguments survive in various forms in several places. There are two accounts of his life published in an annual report of a religious association and in a pamphlet he sold door-to-door (Unaipon 1951; Unaipon 1953). There are newspaper publications of stories he wrote, interviews with him, and summaries of speeches he delivered—more and more being rediscovered as early newspapers are increasingly digitised. He also wrote a manuscript entitled ‘Legendary tales of the Australian Aborigines’, submitted to Angus and Robertson in 1924-25, which was then appropriated and published in the name of a Scottish anthropologist in 1930 (Ramsay Smith 1930), and which has recently been edited and published in Unaipon’s name and close to its original form (Unaipon 2001). A shorter collection entitled *Native Legends*, not as widely available as the recently published *Legendary Tales*, is acknowledged as the first sole-authored full-length publication by an Aboriginal writer. Several edited versions of individual stories by Unaipon were published in the assimilationist magazine *Dawn* in the 1950s and 1960s and in various anthologies between 1990 and 2008. While the locations and versions of Unaipon’s writing reveal different themes and purposes in his writing and require various reading strategies, this paper will identify a traditions of storytelling, argument and crosscultural exchange in an early crosscultural exchange between Unaipon’s father and a missionary, and how they are utilised in one of Unaipon’s auto/biographies. It will be shown that Unaipon fused the poetic and rhetorical in arguing for improved understandings of both the restrictions placed on Aboriginal people and how indigenous people have innovatively responded to settler culture.

Unaipon’s life stories

Born in 1872 at the Point McLeay Mission Station, South Australia, Unaipon was raised at a time when indigenous people were restricted in what they could say and how they could say it. The son of James and Nymbulda Unaipon/Ngunaitponi, his early years were spent

balancing lessons about Aboriginal culture from his father—a Wunyalundi man of the Potawolin language group (part of the Ngarrindjeri nation/confederation)—with the lessons on scripture and etiquette provided by the mission deacon and AFA secretary, George Taplin. Unaipon's father, himself a remarkable person who worked within the confines of a Christian and colonial regime to engage Western culture with Ngarrindjeri culture, was the first Ngarrindjeri deacon of Point McLeay church, and perhaps laid the foundation for the kind of author Unaipon would become. James helped with the transcription of Ngarrindjeri stories for Taplin's publications, but the collaboration between James and Taplin was not represented in the authorship of the titles they produced:

Over a period of six years, James explained the social structure, recounted legends, taught the language, corrected translations, and recalled the recent history of the Ngarrindjeri. [Taplin's] journals from 1873 onwards show clearly how great a part James Ngunaitponi played in recording his own rich cultural and linguistic heritage ... James Ngunaitponi was certainly the assistant author, and could possibly have claimed to be co-author of [these] important works (Jenkin 1979: 153).

Among Taplin's many publications, James' assistance is evident in *The Narrinyeri* (1874), and *Folklore, Manners, Customs and Languages of the Aborigines of Australia* (1879). James was clearly a strong figure who constantly sought new ways to ensure the survival of Ngarrindjeri culture in spite of the destructive and oppressive tendencies of the colonial regimes of the time. A newly rediscovered source also suggests that James Ngunaitponi had experience with the use of literary narrative to present arguments in European contexts (I would argue the influence was not lost upon his son).

Taplin's *Folklore* attempts to summarise the histories and traditions of Aboriginal people affected by the establishment of the city of Adelaide and surrounding locations. In a section on 'superstitions' (under headings provided by the Colonial Office to be used in structuring accounts of life in the colonies), Taplin describes an encounter with 'an old man and his son' who arrive at the mission settlement in the early 1860s. The story can be read as an instance of cross-cultural rhetorical and poetic exchange. The men in Taplin's story are named Ngunaitponi and his father Ngunaitpon-arni. Ngunaitponi—who would assume various names throughout his life (James McPherson, James Reid, James Unaipon, James Ngunaitponi)—is described by Taplin as 'a man of about forty, tall and well-proportioned. Like many natives, he had in his youth lost an eye by having a spear thrown at him in a fight' (Taplin 1879: 141). This is David Unaipon's father. Taplin's description of James Unaipon's first appearance is decidedly measured in comparison with his description of James' father (David Unaipon's grandfather), Ngunaitpon-arni, who is described twice as a 'tall, hairy, grey, venerable savage' (Taplin 1879: 141). Taplin's rhetoric here defines and positions the Unaipons into a pre-existing hierarchy of humanity. This colonial attitude, which underpinned many non-indigenous interactions with indigenous people, was the target of the Unaipon's writing and argument.

Taplin's account of his first meeting with David Unaipon's father and grandfather includes a story told to him by Ngunaitponi (James Unaipon). 'Ngunaitponi's Story' mentions various spirits that inhabit the world, including Melapi, who lies in ambush to attack men. The story tells of how Ngunaitpon-arni was once attacked by Melapi, wrestling and battling the spirit until it becomes the 'dim outline of a form like a man,' eventually retreating (*Folklore* 142).

Taplin may have unwittingly captured an early criticism of missionary activity in his transcription of Ngunaitponi's story. The story, poetically rendered as a story about spirits located in a particular place, can also be read as an example of rhetoric that resonates between pre-contact and colonial contexts: a story about an indigenous man encountering a dangerous spirit that assumes the outline of a man is here told by an indigenous man soon after his first encounter with a spiritual man (Taplin). Taplin, that is, can be read as Melapi and the story, thus, presents a glimpse into Ngunaitponi's wariness of the missionary colonist. Taplin has the final say in his version of 'Ngunaitponi's Story', concluding with a Christian redemption story:

Ngunaitpon-arni died some time afterwards. He had listened many times to the Word of God. It is a comfort to know that he died calling upon the name of the Lord. In his last illness he was heard fervently praying to the Lord Jesus to save him. Surely we may hope that he was saved (Taplin 1879: 142).

While a picture of Ngunaitponi is included in the manuscript, neither the picture nor the 'Story of Ngunaitponi' are linked by Taplin to James Unaipon. Elsewhere in *Folklore*, James Unaipon is described as a 'steady Christian adult native, who would always take the side of truth and righteousness ... a nucleus around which those who were impressed by divine truth could rally' (Taplin 1879: 101). It appears almost as if the potentially rebellious (or creatively critical) Ngunaitponi is distanced from the subservient and reliable James Unaipon by name and page number. I'm suggesting here not only that Ngunaitponi (James Unaipon), David's father, took an approach to narrative, spirituality and the Christian faith that could help him critique colonists while achieving his own ends (which may not always have been compatible with Taplin's goals), but that Taplin's narratives of his experiences with the Ngarrindjeri were fictionalised to an extent to present his own argument about both the need for missionary activity and the notion that Christianity was necessary for indigenous people to become civilised. This narrative wrestle between Ngunaitponi's story and Taplin's transcription draws on different traditions of poetic and rhetoric. David Unaipon, when he came to author his own stories, drew from these different traditions.

Late in his life David Unaipon wrote two short and intriguing autobiographies (*My Life Story* in 1951, and 'Leaves' in 1953). An analysis of *My Life Story* reveals both the restrictions on his authorial agency and also the reasons he turned to writing as a method of resistance against colonial discourses. Read aloud to the Christian organisation that would eventually publish it (the Aborigines Friends Association—AFA), and most likely edited by the AFA's president, *My Life Story* shows how various organisations and individuals monitored and influenced Unaipon's expression. But Unaipon found a way to assuage the 'disloyalty effect', to meet the expectations of his audience while asserting his own agency as an author. Unaipon fondly recalls his father's lessons:

[My father] became a good liaison officer between the white and black races ... He used to take me into the solitude of the bush, read the bible to me and pray that I might grow up to be a good man and live at peace with all men. I owe much to his example and influence (Unaipon 1951: 3-4).

To his Christian audience Unaipon's anecdote expresses the moral virtues of the Bible, prayer and missionary activity. Poetically, Unaipon's auto/biography describes his

connection to place—the story opens by describing his birthplace at Taillem Bend, life for indigenous people along the Murray, and the close connection between Aboriginal people in these areas and the land. It is a custodial form of poetic, caring for the traditions of the land and encouraging such connections (Minter 2012). It is also a ‘dangerous crossroad’ (Lipsitz 1994) in the sense that Unaipon is introducing one form of cultural locatedness and place-based living practice into the consciousness of people living according to different practices, albeit in the same location. And yet, Unaipon manages the cultural crossing, possibly adding a dangerous level of critique to his story. The setting of the anecdote is removed from the typical location of Christian activity, the place of the bible study suggesting a difference in the use and interpretation of religion by Unaipon and his father. Arguably, the setting of the anecdote—in the bush, outside the official bounds of the Church—set the scene for an understanding of Christianity within the framework of Ngarrindjeri beliefs, customs, responsibilities and agendas. Whether or not it was acknowledged at the time, in presenting this story of his early education, Unaipon inverts the power dynamics at play in the context in which the anecdote is told; instead of acquiescing to the demands and expectations of the AFA he uses a place-based poetic to make a subtle argument, gently reminding his audience that Christianity has been incorporated into a Ngarrindjeri worldview and that he has responsibilities and influences that extend beyond the AFA, church and Western education.

Following the example of his father, Unaipon was taught early in his life to employ what might be called an invitational resistance strategy. Communication scholars Foss and Griffin, in response to what they saw as a pervasive definition of rhetoric in patriarchal terms of control and influence, originally defined ‘invitational rhetoric’ as a different style of communication where rhetors aim to create mutual understanding, not for the purpose of persuasion that aims to ‘dominate another’ because their position is different to the speaker’s, but to forge ‘nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework[s]’ that create ‘appreciation, value, and a sense of equality’ between participants in a rhetorical situation (Foss and Griffin 1992: 5-6). Invitational communication strategies resist oppressive, patriarchal communication techniques that insist on the ability of a speaker to control an audience by changing the audience’s opinion to conform to the speaker’s worldview. Invitational rhetoric, on the other hand, is not oppositional or focused on control: ‘no longer about me versus you, but rather about ‘us’ searching for different ways to understand the world. This approach *offers* rather than *asserts*; it *asks* rather than *attacks*; it *invites* rather than *demand*s’ (Del Gando 2008: 87, emphasis in original). As a speaking strategy for the traditionally oppressed and marginalised, invitational rhetoric might well describe postcolonial rhetoric such as that used by the Unaipons without diminishing their novel use of literary poetics.

In his interviews, articles, stories and manuscripts, Unaipon would often display understanding of the beliefs of his audiences and encourage reflection on the assumptions informing those beliefs. In *My Life Story* Unaipon appears to endorse the missionary practice of the AFA and the influence of Christianity on the Ngarrindjeri people, but he invites the audience to consider how Western practices and belief systems are appropriated into indigenous cultural and social practices that existed prior to first contact. His rhetorical technique acknowledges his audience’s beliefs before inviting them to consider alternative ideas about Aboriginality, culture, heredity, and social organisation. And his approach worked well enough to secure a platform for his ideas at a time when Aboriginal voices were

largely ignored. However, highlighting a limitation of invitational rhetoric, such subtle narratives of resistance are often framed by colonial discourses in ways that make them appear to be acquiescent, pandering accounts confirming the superiority of colonising cultures. For Lozano-Reich and Bone, ‘Dialogue and mutual respect are excellent goals inside social movements organisations and in classrooms; they may operate at country clubs in boardrooms; but in relation to antagonisms between unequal parties, invitations can be tragically disarming’ (Lozano-Reich and Bone 2009: 223). While Unaipon’s invitational rhetoric was masterful enough to engage audiences at speaking events and on the printed page, the unequal social and material relationship between Unaipon and his contemporary audiences means that the extent to which his writing fostered mutual respect and understanding during his life is debatable. Potentially, then, the most significant outcome of Unaipon’s invitational strategy is that it enabled him to both practice indigenous poetics of place and to create records of his critiques of colonial attitudes—in interviews, publications, pamphlets—that, although they were not overly effective at the time, retain some kind of transformative potential for audiences today.

Conclusion

The symbolic prominence of Unaipon arguably simplifies his life. But his symbolic prominence also presents an opportunity to discuss the complexities of his life and writing. For example, critics must grapple with the contradictions of his life stories: Unaipon spoke of the importance of protecting Aboriginal legends but collected them and adapted them to make profit; Unaipon spoke against the objectification of Aboriginal people as a focus of study but was reportedly collaborating with various anthropologists (amateur and professional) to collect stories, artifacts, and even indigenous remains; Unaipon is often described as a devout Christian, but said toward the end of his life ‘I don’t believe in Jesus Christ ... no, Ngayaringunand is what is born in us—the great spirit. Not Jesus Christ, the son of the Virgin Mary. It’s an insult to say that ... and saved by the Holy Ghost. That’s blasphemy, is it?’ (quoted in Gale 2001: 60). Given that so many of his legendary tales focus on characters constantly in the process of becoming—from ally to enemy, to despised outcast, to respected outcast—perhaps he was all too aware that survival required contradiction, complicity, resistance and perseverance. His life stories certainly suggest as much. In searching for a complex understanding—and contradictory, multiple, and fragmentary reading—of Unaipon’s life, archival documents, manuscripts and life stories must be read as complicated imbrications of Western and indigenous poetics and rhetoric.

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