

Narrative and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands

Edited by Farzana Gounder



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University of Waikato

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Table of contents

Editor's note	VII
Glossing abbreviations	IX
About the authors	XI
Introduction	1
Part I. Inside the storyworld	
CHAPTER 1	
Moving through space and (not?) time: North Australian Dreamtime narratives	15
<i>Dorothea Hoffmann</i>	
CHAPTER 2	
We've never seen a cyclone like this: Exploring self-concept and narrator characterisation in Aulua	37
<i>Martin Paviour-Smith</i>	
Part II. Telling narratives, constructing identities	
CHAPTER 3	
Local ecological knowledge in Mortlockese narrative: Stance, identity, and knowing	61
<i>Emerson Lopez Odango</i>	
CHAPTER 4	
Small stories and associated identity in Neverver	81
<i>Julie Barbour</i>	
CHAPTER 5	
"Sometime is lies": Narrative and identity in two mixed-origin island languages	101
<i>Rachel Hendery, Peter Mühlhäusler, and Joshua Nash</i>	

Part III. Narrative memories, cultures and identities

CHAPTER 6

- Constructing Kanaka Maoli identity through narrative: A glimpse
into native Hawaiian narratives 119

C. M. Kaliko Baker

CHAPTER 7

- 'Stories of long ago' and the forces of modernity in South Pentecost 135

Murray Garde

CHAPTER 8

- Australian South Sea Islanders' narratives of belonging 155

Clive Moore

CHAPTER 9

- Avatars of Fiji's Girit narrative 177

Brij V. Lal

CHAPTER 10

- Samoan narratives: Sociocultural perspectives 193

Emma Kruse Va'ai

CHAPTER 11

- "[P]ulling tomorrow's sky from [the] kete": Culture-specific
narrative representations of re/membering in contemporary
Māori and First Australian novels 209

Hanne Birk

CHAPTER 12

- Beyond exile: The Ramayana as a living narrative among
Indo-Fijians in Fiji and New Zealand 225

Kevin Miller

CHAPTER 13

- Embodied silent narratives of masculinities: Some perspectives
from Guam Chamorros 243

David Atienza de Frutos and Alexandre Coello de la Rosa

- Index 259

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Introduction

Comprising of more than twenty five percent of the world's known languages, the Pacific is considered to be the most linguistically diverse region in the world (Tryon, 2009). This book is not an exhaustive representation of the Pacific and her languages; instead, the volume seeks to highlight aspects of narrative and identity construction that are central to the Pacific region. From our perspective, what unifies the region is the culture of storytelling, which provides a fundamental means for perpetuating cultural knowledge across generations.

This volume sees narrative construction as a culturally specific and contextualized mode of interaction, in which, narrative, through its construction, has the function of creating realities and negotiating the identities of all involved in the interaction. The purpose of this volume is to bring a concerted inter-disciplinary focus on how questions of narrative identity are played out in the Pacific region at the individual and wider societal levels.

Part I approaches narrative and identity construction through a focus on the storyworld. Part II moves from a heavy focus on storyworld elements to discussions of the situated interactional and contextual elements of narrating. Finally, Part III provides discussions on the macro-level interactions of narrative, cultural ideologies and memories at the societal and institutional levels.

Part I draws upon the storyworld elements as outlined in Labov and Waletzky's (1967) seminal work on narrative structure as well as Labov's later works on narrators' reconstructions of character roles and narrative events (1972, 1997, 2003, 2011, 2013). Labov makes the important distinction between the structural sequence of what happened and the performance of how it is told. The delineation of the storyworld is through the structural elements of orientation, complicating action, resolution and coda. The orientation provides information on the characters, and where the action takes place, both temporally and spatially. The complicating action, or the main action of the narrative, may be followed by the optional elements of resolution, which contains the narrative's dénouement, and the coda, which provides the cultural moral of the narrative. The narrative also contains evaluative elements, which encode the discursive performance of the narration.

Labov's definition of a narrative has dominated the field of narrative inquiry. Labov's definition places emphasis on temporal ordering, and more specifically, linear temporal ordering. Narrative, for Labov, is one way of recounting past events in which the order of narrative clauses matches the order in which events occurred (2011). Many narrative analysts have similarly regarded temporality as a crucial defining element of narrative (see for instance, Linde, 1993; Ochs & Capps, 2009). This emphasis on temporality has, however, been challenged (Adams, 1996; Baynham, 2003, 2009; Brockmeier, 2000; De Fina, 2003; Herman, 2004; Mishler, 2006). Analyses of narratives from non-European languages (Basso, 1984; Becker, 1995, p. 41), including those from Aboriginal languages (Haviland, 1993), have demonstrated that it is spatial ordering that is a crucial element in these languages' narrative organization.

In Australian Aboriginal cultures, narratives in the form of songs, are passed from one generation to the next. Such *songlines* (Chatwin, 1987) are a vital conduit for transmitting knowledge in these oral cultures: "songlines are epic creation songs passed to present generations by a line of singers continuous since the dreamtime. These songs, or song-cycles, have various names according to which language group they belong to, and tell the story of the creation of the land, provide maps for the country, and hand down law as decreed by the creation heroes of the dreamtime" (Wositsky & Harney, 1999, p. 301).

An integral aspect of Australian Aboriginal songlines is the emphasis on spatiality. Many Aboriginal cultures have a highly developed usage of cardinal systems (Hamacher et al., 2013). For instance, a language group of Central Australia, Warlpiri, has a culture that is based on the cardinal directions, as is reflected in their language: "north corresponds to "law", south to "ceremony", west to "language", and east to "skin". "Country" lies at the intersection of these directions, at the centre of the compass – i.e. "here"" (Norris & Harney, forthcoming).

Moreover, as Haviland (1993) demonstrates, not all cultures perceive spatial orientation from the relative perspective of the narrator. Guugu Yimidhirr narrators deictically orient storyworld events in the cardinal directions of the characters' experience of events and not from the current spatial position of the narrator. This orientation perspective is maintained over time, throughout retellings and regardless of the direction in which the narrator is facing.

Further evidence of spatiality as an essential structuring element is provided through Desert Aboriginal songlines. Desert Aborigines have highly advanced mental maps of topographical features and, in their songlines, place a greater emphasis on identity construction through place rather than characters. The songlines, which are continually updated, serve as an essential channel for passing the information of important landmarks and ancestral sites intergenerationally so that the narratives form a continuous connection to the land (Bavin, 2004).

In this volume, Dorothea Hoffmann provides further evidence of the importance of spatial ordering in narrative. Through an analysis of narrative structure in the endangered non-Pama-Nyungan language *Jaminjung* and Australian *Kriol*, Hoffmann extends observations of *place* in plot and content (Bavin, 2004; Klapproth, 2004; McGregor, 2005) to include expressions of *motion* as a major structuring device in Australian Aboriginal narratives. As Hoffmann demonstrates, the temporal ordering of events may be overridden by spatial ordering, thus placing emphasis on a change of location rather than logical time sequence of events. Various story-telling versions of the same narratives reveal that temporal ordering of events is flexible and that the structure may be mapped onto space in a meaningful fashion.

There are a number of similarities and differences observed for the two languages under consideration revealing a type of areal pattern in northern Australia irrespective of typological language kind. *Jaminjung* dreamtime narratives often focus on the narrative significance of place, re-telling the land rather than the story alone. For *Jaminjung* stories, *motion* is seen as a structuring device leading into the story-world and linking different episodes to each other in space. Similarly, in *Kriol* narratives, *motion* and the journey within the story itself is used as a structuring device along which the narrative flow depends and restriction in movement ultimately leads to stagnation within the plot. Therefore, repetitive travel descriptions are a common feature emphasising the significance of the 'journey' to any kind of narrative irrespective of the journey's 'narrative value' to the main storyline.

Hoffmann argues that spatial narrative structuring is deeply rooted in cultural and environmental features, creating a connection of unique identity for every 'owner' and audience of a story. In general, the established significance of 'place' is directly linked to the owner's identity. This relationship may be found in narratives of both languages, thus indicating a continuing cultural trait irrespective of language shift.

As we see throughout this volume, narrative construction is always tied to identity construction. In the Pacific, the question of 'Who am I?' (Bamberg, 2011) has revolved around the debates on individual and dividual, particularly in the context of Melanesian identity perceptions. The proposal that there is an individual: dividual divide between western conceptions of self and Melanesian understandings of self has been hotly argued in the anthropological literature since Marilyn Strathern's (1988) various assertions of such a difference. The proposal is that Western understandings of self are such that each feels oneself to be agentive, asserting choice and creating action. Such identities are said to produce their individuality. By contrast individuals are identities embedded within social formations and selves are perceived as being at the juncture of these roles and relations

to others. Critiqued in various ways since then, arguments have suggested that the view is faulty with various counterproposals including the idea that everyone is both an individual and a dividual. Importantly, however, the notion has not been empirically tested on a set of related narrations of the same event.

Martin Paviour-Smith enters this ongoing debate on personhood in Melanesia through an analysis of storyworld organization of character relationships and events in the Aulua language of Malakula, Vanuatu. If a community has dividual orientations to the notion of self, then we should expect narrations and narrators to signal roles and relations in their descriptions and self-positioning and furthermore, use these roles as the primary signifiers of their relation to the events that unfold in the narratives. Put more crudely, should in fact the narrators have an individual self in mind the narrations should background social relations and agency and reduce interpretations of collectivity of action, foregrounding agency in their place.

To focus on the debate outlined above, Paviour-Smith implements a Labovian approach to examine the construction of each narrator's theory of causality and the assignment of praise and blame (Labov, 1997, 2003, 2013), to show patterns of agency, or lack of them, emerging. Paviour-Smith argues that should narrators be dividualistic, agency should be collectively distributed amongst characters and, likewise, praise and blame should be apportioned to those that sit at the junctures of particular social formations, rather than bestowed upon specific characters because of individualistic identity features. Should narrators be taking up both individualist and dividualist understanding of identities, there should be shifts between individuating of heroes, victims and the like and the social relation interpretation of actions in the narrative.

Paviour-Smith's discussion adds to the understanding of Melanesians' conceptions of self and the structure of narratives in Melanesian Oceanic languages and Vanuatu cultures. The shared theme of the narrative, the devastating events of Cyclone Ivy, also provides a unique opportunity to witness a community narrate itself in one of its most difficult periods in recent times.

As seen in Part II, when the analysis moves from the narrative to the narrated event, the focus is on the social fabric of the situated cultural interactions in which the narrative is constructed (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Bucholtz, 2011; De Fina, 2011): why the story is told, how the story is shaped by its contextual elements as well as what impact the story has through its telling on the audience (Quasthoff, 2005). A change in any of the interactional elements results in a potential retelling, altered sufficiently to the new interactive environment (Norrick, 1997, 2005). In Part II, the following 'local' elements are considered, as discussed below: The cultural protocols of communicating; who is considered 'insider' and

'outsider'; the degree to which information can be shared with insiders and outsiders; and how and where information is shared.

Emerson Lopez Odango analyses the discursive performance that accompanies a narrative in which a community's traditional knowledge is being shared with an outsider. Members of speech communities in Oceania maintain close connections to their natural environment. Narratives serve as a predominant means to co-construct and transmit *local ecological knowledge* (LEK), "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and their environment" (Berkes, 1999, p. 8). Odango discusses how identities of being a "possessor" and "transmitter" of LEK emerge through narrative in Mortlockese. Using the tool of epistemic stancetaking (Englebretson, 2007; Mushin, 2001), Odango presents the discursive strategies associated with the sharing of LEK with an outsider. He analyses moment-by-moment identity work at a local discursive level of someone being a possessor of certain kinds of LEK, which then serves as a foundation for the construction of macro-level cultural roles of being an expert in a certain set of knowledge and being a narrator/storyteller, both of which often overlap.

Another aspect on stance taking is seen in Julie Barbour's analysis of the strategies narrators implement to narrate individuals in a name taboo culture. In such cultures, there are social protocols around who can and cannot be named, depending on social relationships, which includes kinship (Garde, 2013). In a name taboo culture, speakers are routinely required to employ linguistic strategies to enable them to address and refer to others. Their linguistic strategies must display respect as appropriate for the context and avoid causing offence. As Barbour demonstrates, for the Neverver-speaking people of Malekula Island in Vanuatu, name avoidance is a central part of everyday life. Name avoidance permeates all types of discourse, including *nimitl* (traditional legends) and *nos-sorian lele* (small stories). Focussing on women telling *nossorian lele* about other family members, Barbour offers an account of linguistic mechanisms of name avoidance. Coding options to identify individuals include strategies such as the use of personal names, the use of avoidance nicknames like *nivin yovyov* (the pale daughter), and the use of relationship terms like *nida tokhtokh* (paternal aunt) or *nida titi L.* (*mother of L.*). As narratives extend, speakers widen their coding options, identifying characters through pronominal forms, agreement morphology on verbs, and a category of gendered pronominal that fall somewhere in between nouns and pronouns. Barbour's findings demonstrate the complex relationships being negotiated, both within the storyworld and between the narrator and the audience.

In their chapter, Rachel Hendery, Peter Mühlhäusler and Joshua Nash focus on insider and outsider identity distinctions, as conveyed through two genres of Pitkern-Norf'k and Palmerston English narratives, the historical narrative and the tall tale. In small closed societies such as Palmerston or Pitcairn Island, everyone knows everyone, and so a particularly 'high context' communication style (Hall, 1976) can flourish. A story told for the benefit of outsiders such as the visiting anthropologist, linguist, or tourist must provide much more contextual information. The use of pronouns, deictics, proper names, and the ways in which stories begin and end are all factors that vary along this dimension. The narrative genre of 'tall tale' is often told to outsiders with a straight face, as a sort of gullibility test. The true entertainment provided by the story is then at the expense of the outsider and serves a purpose of community bonding. Historical narratives that the islanders tell about themselves illustrate the islanders' conceptions of their identity. However, pertinent questions of historicity arise when multiple conflicting accounts of an event exist, or when the islanders' own oral histories differ from the information in the European colonial record. In small communities differences in tellings of historical events can loom large, causing rifts between families who believe each other to be lying or misrepresenting events. Certain formulaic conventions are used on Palmerston, Pitcairn and Norfolk for distancing oneself from a story, or asserting or not asserting its truth, but choice of tense and aspect can also serve these purposes. Similarly, a speaker can linguistically ally him/herself with protagonists by choice of pronouns. Consider, when telling a story about colonial European visitors and Polynesians, what an important difference the use of *we* or *they* can make when used for either referent.

The final section of the volume (Part III) addresses the macro-level interconnections between narrative construction, cultural ideologies and collective memory at the institutional and cultural levels. In Part III, the emphasis is on the selection process, that is, which narratives are emphasized at the macro-level; the forms in which these narratives are presented (oral, codification); the reproductions, and alterations the narratives undergo over time; the question of authorship and ownership over the narratives; and the cultural identities the narratives embody and exemplify through their reconstruction of collective memory

The two contributing historians, Clive Moore and Brij Lal, address the relationship between narrative and the construction of collective memory. *Collective memory*, also referred to as *social memory*, is a collective group of people's recollection of past events (Olick, 2013; Schwartz, 1982). The narrative of recollection, however, often sees a reconfiguration of these events in terms of what took place, the temporal and spatial setting, the characters involved, as well as the explanations and evaluations of events. Various factors influence what and how events are recollected, including the passage of time, group rituals such as commemorations

(Zerubavel, 1995), group affiliations and politics (Hamilton & Darian-Smith, 1994) and media's reconstruction of events (Edy, 1999; Gounder, 2014; Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014).

Moore examines how Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) narrative identities have developed. In his classic study *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs distinguishes between 'history' and 'collective memory', the latter being the active past which through our narratives form our identities (Halbwachs, 1992). According to Moore, ASSI narratives have these 'collective memory' qualities. Moore examines the development of ASSI master narratives and the juxtaposition of the identities constructed within these master narratives. ASSI by-and-large interpret their history through a narrative of kidnapping and slavery which is at odds with Pacific historians, who for the last fifty years have stressed Islander agency and voluntary participation in labour migration, albeit with an early phase of illegal and often violent recruitment. Moore examines Islander origins, the difference of opinion with academic historians, differences in the choice of words and identity positions for Australian and Pacific peoples, and contemporary political agendas. In a similar vein, historian Brij Lal addresses the ways in which indenture is remembered and reproduced in Fiji and in the Indo-Fijian diaspora. An experience once shunned by scholars and the public alike, is now being embraced as a foundational part of Indo-Fijian history and seen as the triumph of the human spirit over the most difficult conditions of adversity.

In addition to the contestations between macro-cultural narratives, we also have personal narratives positioned alongside the 'grand' cultural narratives. In studies which analyse the juxtaposition of these narratives, the focus is on the acts of narrative dominance and resistance, as demonstrated in Murray Garde's study on *dun* narratives in the Sa language of southern Pentecost Island in Vanuatu. *Dun* narratives consist of a series of distinct episodes in ordinary speech, which are typically spaced by an associated song in a mix of ordinary and archaic song language. These songs are usually (but not always) repeated throughout the performance of the narrative, appearing at the end of each episode and are sung jointly by both the *dun* narrator and their audience. Garde addresses various forms of contestation concerning knowledge of *dun*. One source of contestation involves changes to the place of narrative in Sa society effected by notions of individualistic modes of agency. Notions of authenticity in the telling of *dun* engender debates about the status of competing versions and the links between *dun* and place. Whilst certain regional variation in the telling of *dun* is considered normal, there has been over the past decade a developing perception articulated by various 'big men' of the South Pentecost region that *dun* are important evidence in disputes over land and the commoditization of certain cultural practices. Using a current example, Garde examines the annual *gol* land diving ritual. Although considered the intellectual

property of all Sa speaking communities in South Pentecost, the land diving ritual and its associated *dun* narrative is also considered a national icon associated with Vanuatu and a significant economic commodity that attracts film crews and tourists who pay significant sums of money to witness and record the spectacle of young men jumping off 20–30 metre towers with vines tied around their ankles to arrest their fall. As a result disputes have developed over who is entitled to benefit from the commoditization of clan diving. *Dun* narratives in such contexts are increasingly being appealed to as sources of authority, capable of indexing what is considered 'authentic' knowledge about history, place and cultural practice and reflecting their significance as foundations for identity.

Kevin Miller uses an ethnomusicological framework to provide another dimension to the analysis of collective identity formation through narrative. Miller examines the oral recital of the Ramayana epic, its exegesis through performance, and its continued relevance to identity formation among Indo-Fijian Hindus both within Fiji and its Pacific Rim diaspora. While the Ramayana is the seat of Hindu authority in Fiji, local interpreters and expounders mediate its meaning and didactic message at the site of its performance. In turn, the mediated discourse of the narrative contributes to Indo-Fijian enculturation and a shared sense of ethnicity, making the Ramayana recital a critical space for negotiating Indo-Fijian identity in microcosm, challenging or reifying distinctions based on gender or Indian region of origin.

Christopher Kaliko-Baker, Emma Kruse Va'ai and Hanne Birk's chapters address the issues associated with the changing forms of narrative from an oral, dynamic performance to a written form, in which identities are made fixed and stable through the writing. Kaliko-Baker discusses how *Kanaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian) identity construction is being carried out through the newspaper's reconstruction of oral narratives. While Kaliko-Baker's work deals with issues of ownership and authority over Hawaiian narrative reconstruction and representation, Kruse Va'ai's work on Samoan narratives identifies the benefits of the written narrative for identity 'maintenance' work in the wider diasporic community. In her study, Birk uses the lens of the fictional narrative genre to consider the written narrative's influence on collective memory construction. Focusing on a contemporary Māori novel, Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986), complemented by references to a First Australian text, Bruce Pascoe's *Earth* (2001), Birk asks what roles do such texts play in the construction processes of different versions of the past and of cultural identities?

The final chapter in the volume challenges our definition of narrative as an oral performance. David Atienza and Alexandre Coello de la Rosa focus on Guam Chamorros in their discussion of narrative as a physically-embodied performance,

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enacted through the visual representation of bodily tattoos, which carry cultural and historical identity motifs that can be 'read'.

The three thematic sections are representative of the continuum of narrative analysis: from the close analysis at the storyworld level to the analysis of situated performance in narrative construction, and finally to the macrolevel analysis of the interaction of narrative, identity and memory at the wider societal and institutional levels. The collective chapters provide a unique slant on narrative analysis by bringing to the fore issues of narrative and identity construction which are central to the Pacific region.

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