

The Collective Memory of the Hairy Man: Intangible Cultural Sovereignty, Identity and Connection to Country

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The following account is an example of First People's collective memory. It is an extension to the story of my mother's encounter with the Little People. For me the Hairy Man is one of the 'Little People' my mum and others of my family knew. It has not been written down until now, and the storystring continues through me.

I had my first encounter with this ancient being on Nyoongar country Western Australia, and unbeknownst to me, it wasn't to be my last. I was new to Perth, having moved from Bundjalung country on the Queensland New South Wales border on the other side of the country to study music at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander College of Performing Arts (Abmusic) in 1993. I found accommodation at the Allawah Grove Aboriginal hostel in the outer suburb of South Guildford. It was a trek travelling to and from Abmusic everyday by foot, bus, and train. I often returned to the hostel in the early evening or at night. I had to walk about two kilometres to and from the train station to the hostel along a secluded tree-lined road that followed a small creek then eventually crossed a bridge. Walking along this road at night wasn't one of my favourite parts of the day, as it was poorly lit and felt even more secluded at night—and if you come from my family, you don't like walking at night, especially by yourself.

The day is quite cloudy and windy. It's late afternoon, there are a few drops of rain and overcast conditions make the day grow darker. In fact, it's dark enough for the streetlights to start coming on. I get off the train and start my long walk back to the hostel. I'm heavily loaded up with my backpack and guitar. The road gradually gets lonelier and darker as I leave the lights of the township. After a few minutes walking, I hear rustling sounds in the bushes just off the edge of the road down by the creek. At first, I don't take too much notice. I grew up in a rural area and I've heard rustling noises like this before. It's either an animal or the wind blowing through the trees.

I keep walking but the noise gets closer, following me. I stop and look round to see what it is. The rustling stops. Thinking it's my imagination, I brush it off and keep moving. When I start walking, the rustling noise starts again behind me. Again, I stop, and so does the noise. I'm worried, the noises aren't behind me anymore: they are to the side of me, now they're ahead of me, now back behind me. I'm being circled. when I stop, the noise stops. I try to get away, but I can't.

I walk faster, weighed down by my heavy load. The noise pursues me, harasses me. I see the lights of the hostel in the distance. I'm exhausted, sweating, and shaken. I reach the door of the hostel and can't get inside fast enough. I drop my bags and collapse on a lounge chair, holding my head in my hands, trying to work out what had just happened. I'm rattled, and the caretaker says I look scared.

I calm down and regain my composure, eat dinner, take my stuff to my room, and have a shower. The hostel is quiet, almost empty, with only a few residents, so each of us have our own room. I've got half of the top floor to myself, and tonight the hostel is especially dark. It's so dark, you can't see your hand in front of your face. I'm still on edge and leave a light on in my room. I'm wary, but I lay back on my bed and drift off to sleep.

Sometime later, I'm slowly woken to the sensation of being shaken. I feel tapping on my shoulder. Still sleepy, I'm not sure if I'm dreaming. Thinking that it's one of my friends from the hostel trying to wake me, I slowly open my eyes. I'm confronted by the sight of a little hairy man. He's tiny, hunched over me on the edge of my bed. He is gnarled, sinewy with pronounced eyebrows, large piercing eyes, bony hands and knuckles and long fingernails. I can't look away. He stares at me. Not a word is said, I don't feel afraid. He seems familiar. Still staring at each other, he talks to me, but he makes no sound. A few minutes later, he waves his hand over my eyes, and I fall into a deep comfortable sleep. When I woke the next morning, I was still trying to make sense of the night's events. I felt welcome. I had made a new connection with an otherworld being from Nyoongar Country. I was confident that the Hairy Man knew I was there to be respectful of his Country.

The Hairy Man continues to be a part of my life. I feel his presence every day, watching over me, maybe even protecting me. Looking back, I realised what my mother was trying

to tell me. Mum taught me that I was very much connected to both the natural and spiritual world. I also realised how connected my family were to the land they lived on, as people from another land in diaspora. The Hairy Man appeared to me on Nyoongar country as I was a newcomer, just as he had appeared to my mother's family on Bundjalung country as they were newcomers. He was there to make sure they were being respectful, and he was also there to welcome them to his traditional lands.

Dr Curtis Roman, from Charles Darwin University, has collected the stories of people who have seen the little people, or had family members who have seen them. Roman states that

The little people were thought to be either good or mischievous, depending on where you sat. But the general view is that if you are on your traditional land then you probably won't see them. However, if you are a newcomer to a particular land, they will come out and check you out to make sure you do the right things. So, if you are catching too much fish and the country is not your country they may come out and appear and scare you or take your stuff or throw rocks at you, make noises in the bushes. The belief is if it's your land then it's good because they are watching over the land.

In EJ Garrett's article on the Hairy Man, Noel Pope makes it clear that '[i]f his old man said he'd seen a hairy man, then he'd certainly seen one.' Garrett then writes,

Why would anyone make that up? For me, there isn't any point denying that the hairy man is real. The hairy man is a force to be reckoned with, and the hairy man is real. Whatever you do, you don't doubt the hairy man. What I want to know is what's up with people wanting to deny the hairy man of his place in history in the first place? The hairy man has been around for thousands of years. He is a part of me. He is in my subconscious. Hairy man is with me when I'm on the road. There with me every film I make, every article I write, and on every visit I make to country - we know each other well. I've grown up knowing that the hairy man is there. The hairy man is taking care of things. He is a hero to me. Guardian and protector, hairy man protects me from the things about myself that I am yet to learn. The hairy man is from the land that I inhabit. The hairy man knows what's best, and in the hairy man I trust.

Over the years I've been reluctant to tell the story of my encounter with the Hairy Man as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories are often not given any credence by Western society. On the rare occasion that I've related my story to non-Indigenous people, the reaction has been one of disbelief and even disdain. White Australians have attempted to theorise or explain away my experience, informed only by their Western cultural framework, with no knowledge of Aboriginal culture, dismissing my reality as an Aboriginal person and what I consider vital to my cultural Identity and connection to Country.

As the Aboriginal mother of the narrator in Lisa Fuller's *Ghost Bird* explains

Remember daughter, the world is a lot bigger than anyone knows. There are things that science may never explain. Maybe some things that shouldn't be explained.

This motherly advice rings true to me. Having had many otherworld experiences over the years, I believe with conviction the stories of my Elders. Unless experienced firsthand, Western science will never have the capacity to accept or explain otherworld experiences. To non-Indigenous people, these stories are fiction. In this research, we are present only as objects of curiosity and subjects of research. To be seen but not asked, heard nor respected. So the research has been undertaken in the same way Captain James Cook falsely claimed the eastern coast of the land to become known as Australia as terra nullius (Martin and Mirraboopa).

However, to Aboriginal people the Hairy Man is very real. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemology, our theory of knowledge, methods, validity, and scope, has long been discounted by the dominant Western culture as having no basis for credibility and is quickly dismissed as myth, rather than accepted as justified belief. This limited 'myth-making' dismisses long-established and validated Aboriginal and Torres Strait epistemologies. This is clearly illustrated in Dale Kerwin's description of his son's classroom experience:

'Today class we are going to learn about the Bunyip and Yowie' said the year three primary school teacher, not knowing that in her class she had a couple of children of Aboriginal Australian descent. As the lesson progressed the teacher stated that these were mystical creatures that were not real and were only Aboriginal Dreamtime mythology. (Kerwin 1)

Kerwin's experience illustrates the harms of ignoring what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the 'epistemic complexity' of Indigenous communities (xvi). Moreton-Robinson theorises 'white possession' to explain how the core values of Australian national identity continue to have roots in Britishness and colonization that is built on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. Whiteness studies are central to Moreton-Robinson's reasoning, and she shows how blackness works as a white epistemological tool to bolster the social production of whiteness—displacing Indigenous sovereignties and rendering them invisible in a civil rights discourse, sidestepping issues of settler colonialism. In a similar vein, Robin Holland states that

White reconstruction anthropology (and some ethnocentric history) has provided a mental straightjacket for whites and blacks: a physical prototype, head banded, bearded, loin-clothed, and sometimes ochred, one foot up, a clutch of spears, ready to hunt or exhibiting eternal, mystical vigilance. (3)

The Hairy Man has been bound by this 'mental straitjacket' and my work here is an attempt to loosen these ties.

The ideological constraints of white possession analysed by Moreton-Robinson and Holland make clear the limitations of the Western humanism, a concept built on dualist thinking that ignores the reality of a world that includes Little People such as the Hairy Man. This results in the distorted perceptions and deeply ingrained destructive generalisations that consider white culture as sophisticated and civilised, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as irrelevant, primitive, uncivilised, and dying. This system excludes all those with knowledge of the world that does not fit the socially constructed models of what is considered to be acceptable for an individual or citizen of the state. In this context, it is, as Kerwin states, ironic to think that the term 'the dreaming' was originally coined by non-Aboriginal scholars.

Non-Aboriginal theorists and philosophers have been quite clever in constructing an Aboriginal 'reality.' Their musings are interesting reads and at times hilarious, though they are very convincing to those who know no better. They posit their assumptions as fact and their theories become coinage for all studies on Aboriginal society (1). My experiences with the Hairy Man have reinforced and shaped how I've come to view cultural heritage, sovereignty, identity, and connection to Country. The Enlightenment focus on the rational and explainable cannot sit comfortably with the worldviews of my family and other First

Peoples and their communities. In my lived experience, the concept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Identity, cultural heritage and sovereignty moves beyond the material world. It not only recognises and values the tangible, but also what Europeans consider as the ‘intangible’, as well as those parts of the world that are both tangible and intangible, like the Hairy Man. It is this non-dualistic view of the world that shapes our identity. Our world view values and celebrates the history, knowledge, and wisdom of our Elders and Ancestors. Cultural knowledge values the stories, thoughts, values, and ideals of both the material world, the creator beings and protector beings of Country whom we co-exist with, adding to a deep and profound spiritual connection to Country. The Landscape consists of powerful living entities with the ability to give life and heal the body, mind, and spirit. These entities are remembered, revered, and spoken of as fondly as the comforting arms of an old friend or mother.

In Jane Lavers’ study of the ‘tangible and intangible’ she considers cultural heritage practices that ‘turn physical spaces into meaningful places through engagement with sites and landscapes as a result of daily activities, beliefs, and values’, acknowledging ‘the multiplicities of meaning created by different individuals and communities at different times within a particular landscape’ that are ‘remembered and passed down from generation to generation of Aboriginal people’ (1). These ‘memoryscapes’ within land and water are ‘intangible’ cultural heritage rights that are vital to the maintenance of cultural heritage and sovereignty. The themes of Aboriginal pedagogy and theoretical discussion of history, ideas of time and place, and the evolution of knowledge systems and memory form the basis for this thinking. My work here, to foreground the Hairy Man in my family’s ‘memoryscapes’ is part of my work to honour our collective memory. As Auntie Betty Smart reminds Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane, ‘Remember, it’s your job not to forget!’ (248). Leane uses another helpful term, ‘memory politics’, to describe the ‘transgenerational, beyond the span of a lifetime’ histories that have formed ‘the greater body politic of Aboriginal memory’ from times ‘long before the invasion and intervention of state’ (248). For Leane

Our bodies are an archive where memories are etched, stored, and anchored. This is the living archive that I inherit, and my mind and body become a repository of my family’s Aboriginal history—even before it was told to me and even now as some of it still remains untold or is still missing. Thus, for me,

the politics of memory is to remember a dismembered but still living past as it haunts, pervades, and lives in the present (248).

My 'memory politics are 'dismembered' yet 'living' in my family's 'memoryscapes' in this way. To tell of the Hairy Man is a political act that is part of my cultural heritage. The Hairy Man story is one story of many, that I have been given by my family. As South Sea Islanders my mother's family were newcomers to the Tweed Caldera in the Bundjalung nation, having arrived in the mid eighteen-hundreds as so called 'indentured labour' (Kanakanaka slaves). As a Murray Islander my father was also an outsider and came to the Tweed from the Torres Straits to work the bananas and sugar cane plantations. Mum told me stories of these early days, remembering the forced cultural melding of displaced peoples and the deep distrust they had, not only of white people, but also of each other. Mum shared stories of conflict between 'Traditional Owners, the newly arrived South Pacific Islanders and 'Torres Strait Islanders. She told me how these conflicts were sometimes dealt with in traditional ways of physical conflict and sometimes sorcery, or what the Europeans labelled as 'black magic.' In our family, Indigenous knowledge systems have always included the realm of 'intangible' heritage which individuals with special powers and otherworld beings occupy, adding to the depth of connection to place. Over the years I've listened to many stories of the 'intangible' or more specifically, the 'peripheral' beings of other dimensions beyond our physical world.

Apart from creation stories, my 'memoryscape' includes stories of 'otherworld' beings. I took careful interest in accounts of shadow people, shape shifters and particularly the story of the Hairy Man. These stories tell of my family's experiences encountering 'otherworld' beings. They are told with belief and conviction, mostly within the confines of the family circle. These stories are often told in hushed tones, almost whispered, maybe for fear of the embarrassment of not being believed. In my family's case, this care was also for the fear of invoking the visitation of one of these 'otherworld' beings. But with experience, we found that these visitations either signified a form of help or welcoming, or a warning of dire consequences in retaliation for disrespecting country.

The telling of these stories, mostly at night or around campfires, filled me with fear and awe and made my imagination run wild. Having not yet experienced what my Elders had experienced, I tried hard to make sense of the stories. I tried to imagine what these beings looked like, and find some sort of explanation, a meaning or lesson to be learnt, at least in

my own mind. I'm ashamed to say that I dismissed these stories to some degree. But as I grew older and began to experience unexplainable experiences, these stories came flashing back to my mind, particularly when the Hairy Man brought me back to Mum's stories of the Little People. I thought to myself, this could very well be true: maybe I should stop trying to find explanations and accept these stories as a sign of a deeper connection to place.

I wasn't born on Bundjalung country, and respectfully acknowledge that the country I grew up on is not mine. However, I have first cousins born into Traditional Ownership and Heritage links to the Tweed, and it's through these family bloodlines that I am accepted and connected with a strong sense of belonging. My cultural heritage and traditional ownership belong to that of my parents' homelands on Murray Island in the Torres Straits and the Island of Ambae in Vanuatu. I was born and raised in Yuggera Country Brisbane and relocated to the Bundjalung Country at the age of nine. Growing up into adulthood I spent many years exploring the Tweed and I developed a deep and spiritual connection to this Country . Over the years the landscape has changed, but the old landscape and the old ways thoroughly inhabit my memoryscape. The 'Little People' have not yet appeared to me in the Tweed and will only do so if they choose to. I feel that because of my family's Traditional Owner connection and the respect I have shown for his Country, the Hairy Man just may consider me a Bundjalung countryman.

There is a saying that goes: 'History is written by the victors.' It implies that history is not grounded in facts, but that it is rather the conquerors' interpretation of history that prevails. The victors then have the power to enforce their narrative, however real or contrived, onto the people. From the very outset of the colonisation of Australia, land, culture and the identities of the original inhabitants were aggressively taken over, dismembered and transformed.

The telling of my experience with the Hairy Man is not only to honour my family's memoryscape and cultural beliefs, but also a political act aimed squarely at the colonial establishment. By telling my story I am decolonising myself and discrediting the settler colonial version of history by wrestling back control and reclaiming the authority to define my identity and beliefs through the framework of my cultural heritage continuum from time immemorial. The essence of the problem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people has been the total disregard for Indigenous ways of knowing and the patronising way in which they are considered inferior, rather than being recognised as integral to modern society and equally valid as Western ways.

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