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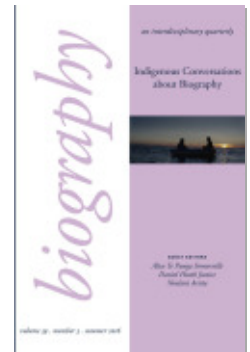
## Telling “Us” in the “Days Destined to You”

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# TELLING “US” IN THE “DAYS DESTINED TO YOU”<sup>1</sup>

NĒPIA MAHUIKA

A response to Warren Cariou, “Life-Telling: Indigenous Oral Autobiography and the Performance of Relation.” *Biography* 39.3 (Summer 2016): 314–27

This “tau-utuutu” (responsive) protocol feels familiar to me.<sup>2</sup> My turn to speak, to respond, to share in a conversation with Warren Cariou’s stimulating essay on “Life-Telling,” Indigenous autobiography, and Dovie Thomason. It reminds me of how life-telling, orality, and history, interweave and work in my tribal universe. At home, we take turns speaking. We inherit our words, we respond, carve, and weave new narratives—make them ours. Where I come from, lives are frequently “told,” sung, cried, carved, and performed, through tribal conversations, a chorus of textured tones, sometimes in a grand debate within which our personal and collective pasts, presents, and futures converge and diverge.<sup>3</sup> I am glad, then, to be invited, to add my voice to this present discussion. It feels natural . . . normal . . . Native.

Kia ora (greetings), Warren. I sat up when you wrote of finding “better ways” to understand the “uniquely oral aspects of Indigenous oral traditions” (Cariou 314). This is a passion I share alongside your view that the oral nature of life-telling is “crucial in the struggle to resist the colonization of Indigenous knowledge” (314). And, of “life-telling” I have so many thoughts and questions. It seems to me that life-telling, even in the striking example you give of Dovie Thomason’s performance, transcends a personal narrative that reveals the “us” of Indigenous biography. We, in my tribal experience, inherit our biographies. We weave our part of the pattern in the “days destined” to us, and then pass them to new “tellers.”<sup>4</sup> My people call this “kōreo tuku iho” (stories passed on; see Mahuika). In each autobiography, these are personal words, sometimes even individual twists and negotiations, perspectives told in what are really “collective” conversations across generations, genealogies, time, and

space. To me this is the Indigenous autobiography I know as oral, lived, connected, and nuanced. Perhaps it's the historian in me speaking, dragging to the fore the popularized view that our accounts are part of a never-ending conversation with the past.<sup>5</sup> But inside, right to my very bones (iwi), this connection between personal and collective Indigenous autobiography is imprinted in the DNA, transmitted as historical trauma, and also as resilience and determination. I have no Indigenous autobiography without it. It is mine to inherit, to reject, to assert or neglect, as I will in the days destined to me.

I think we tend to feel this as Indigenous peoples, and I think these were the very "connections" and "communities" you and others felt and responded to in Dovie's narrative performance. The very art and gravity of this interweaving, this telling, between private, personal, public, and collective lives can sometimes sneak up on you. In this, I was struck by your comment that "our connection to the story and to the teller was relational," and particularly, your observation that "we listeners had become, almost without knowing it, a community" (323). I like the organic nature of this act, and especially the co-constructedness of how this occurs in Native oral storytelling. It is different every time, because biographies are produced with audiences in mind, with contemporary politics often in the foreground, and generations of cultural grand narrative lingering in the narrator's historical consciousness. In this way, Indigenous autobiographical life-telling serves the needs of contemporary narrators, audiences, and collectives. They are fluid, malleable, and living stories.

Oral historians write about this. Some call it "composure," wherein oral testimony is composed in the individual negotiation of collective memories. Composure is also what narrators seek—yet many are unable to achieve—to settle unresolved tension, historical trauma, and contradictory identities (see Thomson). So too are Indigenous autobiographies "compositions," shaped in the unresolved tensions where colonization, self-determination, reconciliation, and finding ourselves as collectives and individuals collide in the realities of the nuanced and "connected" lives we lead.

Indeed, there is, as you pointed out, always a "living link between the stories and future generations" (315). For me, this is a key aspect of oral Indigenous autobiographical life-telling, and is something to ponder further. How is this continuity, this possibility of "us" within the collective narrative, known and relevant between personal and community life-tellings? How are individual narrators conscious of the "us" in Indigenous lives? How might the autobiographical Indigenous narrative, to borrow Greg Lehman's phrase, "tell *us* true"? After all, many have felt at some point orphaned, cut-off, estranged, and disconnected from their forebears and culture. This sense of

“orphanhood,” as you write, is “an ideology, a state of mind rather than an incontrovertible fact” (321). When Dovie loses a “bloodline,” she simply gets “another family.” She “reconnects,” she is “invited,” and born anew (321). I know so many of our own people whose life-telling’s speak of tribal abandonment, of being ostracized, left out because they cannot speak the language, and cut off because they no longer know anyone, recognize any stories, places, protocols, or the culture. They tell Indigenous stories too, but are unable to speak to the Indigenous “us” that carries the tribal collective narratives and refrains that Dovie inherited. Yes, one day, as you note, “we will be the story,” when we are invited, when we submit to the rituals of “familial inclusion,” and recognize that our individuality is inextricably connected to our collective communities. Is Indigenous autobiography, then, situated in this relationship between the individual and the collective? What happens to Indigenous life tellers that are never reborn as Dovie was, are never invited back, and disconnected from the tribe? Are they too telling the truth of “us”: that Indigenous biographies might include the disconnected among us? If their voices are distanced from the chorus that makes “us” an Indigenous collective, what should we make of their autobiographies?

Where I come from, the orality of our autobiographical accounts is tied together by collective Indigenous refrains. You cannot speak for “us,” tell “us,” unless you know us—not unlike Haunani-Kay Trask’s assertion that in order “to know” her people you should put down your books and take up the language and practices (171, 178). In my tribe, we aim to speak our stories using our language, our turning points, and our grand narratives. At home, we hear them, a reminder that each of us has a personal tribal voice or a particular accent in the collective chorus. These refrains are inherited. You refer to this empowering relationship when you write that “life-telling” is an “act of transmission” that enables “the next generation to understand who they are and where they belong” (317). Reading your essay, I recalled the times I also heard Dovie speak. I was fortunate to have been present on two separate occasions to hear her talk, to see her connect with listeners, and to feel the depth and impact of her message. She is a wonderful weaver of stories, has a masterful use of intonation and silence, and an intuition for the inclusivity of her audience. My wife and I commented on how much she reminded us of our own tribal storytellers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. In our tribes, oral life-telling is commonplace, a part of the culture and make up of our communities. I, like many of my generation, grew up listening to our elders tell their stories of “us.” Falling asleep in our tribal meeting houses as they spoke, sung, and spun our histories.

Life-telling, for us, has always been an oral performance. This “orality” is relative to “giving voice,” telling to heal, an intimate passing of knowledge, and is important to establishing relationships and learning to listen. You are right that the oral narrativizing of Indigenous lives has “received far less critical attention than its textual counterpart” (314). The textual nature of history-making has worked to displace oral accounts as unreliable and compromised by their subjectivity. The value and legitimacy of oral narratives and sources has been something mainstream oral historians have advocated for a number of decades now, yet even their understandings of oral history rarely align with Indigenous peoples’. Our oral life-tellings are much more than recorded interviews. If scholars overlook this, they will, as you argue, “miss out on several critical aspects of Indigenous forms of knowledge” (314). Relying on oral accounts flattened out on the page misses much of the sophisticated and deeply valuable cultural significance evident in Indigenous “life-telling.” My tribe have long been wary of the static conventions of written texts that have too regularly “fixed” our lives in narrow stereotypes, and reduced our oral traditions to the superstitions of “pre-history.” We see these presumptions as juxtaposed to the living and fluid nature of our orality. In telling our lives we are immediately accountable to our audience, our language is the expected mode of transmission, and the nuanced and chorused reality of our stories is enabled. In all this, Indigenous autobiographies are organic in their orality, and normalize our songs, dances, and other oral mediums of delivery. Most significantly, they are told by us, because, as you rightly point out, “the continued life of the story depends upon members of the community to do the work of remembering” (315). In my tribe we consider this a living history.

Thank you, Warren, for writing this piece. Indigenous biography, oral history, and life stories, for me, are interesting phenomena. They are, in my tribe, treasured gifts left for the days destined to each generation. These ongoing conversations—Indigenous biographies—are always “our” stories because they belong to us, and we belong to our communities. In our world they are part of whakapapa (genealogical) connections that situate you, include or exclude, and create a fluid biographical account between personal and collective lives. It is right that we might see them as “conversations” because this is what the dynamic living biography is. We could go as far as to argue that there is no such thing as an individual biography when your ancestors are alive in you. Biography is not simply a written pursuit. For our people they are oral, told, lived, and expressed in multiple mediums, song, food, music, and carvings. It was nice to hear Dovie’s voice again. I’ve always liked that she is a bird. Birds too are also common storytellers in the Indigenous world I call home. We speak of birds all the time.

Maybe this might be a good place for me to close. You've heard enough of my chattering already. Let me finish with part of a song that also speaks of a bird, of orality and its gift across generations. Whenever I think of oral tradition and history, of transmission, and now of "life-telling," I think of a lament composed by a tribal ancestor, Hinekauika. She composed this—and I only use a few of the closing lines here—after the loss of her son who was killed in a fire at Kereruhuahua.<sup>6</sup> In her grief she calls out "whakaangi mai rā, e tama, me he manu" (Soar hither o son like a bird). And then she pleads:

Mairātia iho te waha kai rongorongo e,  
Hei whakaoho pō i ahau ki te whare rā.

And leave behind the sweet sound of your voice,  
To comfort my wakeful nights within this house.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. The "days destined to you" is part of a translation from a famous proverb within my tribe, Ngāti Porou. It says, "E tipu e rea mo ngā ra o to ao" (Grow up in the days destined to you).
2. Tau-utuutu is a particular protocol used during whaikōrero (speeches) on various Māori tribal meeting grounds. Speakers take turns talking, replying to each other. This is different from "paeke," wherein all of the speakers on the host side speak in order followed by all the visiting speakers instead of back and forth replies. The hosts open and close proceedings whether tau-utuutu or paeke.
3. Home, for me, is found on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand. Our tribal boundaries sit between the Te Toka a Taiāu in the South and Potikirua in the North.
4. "E tipu e rea mo ngā ra o tou ao" (Grow up in the days destined to you). This tribal proverb has three other layers that I am not using here. I draw on these opening words to stress that where I come from, we are entrusted with our tribal narratives. They are gifts that we are expected to treasure and find new ways of affirming, articulating, and realizing in our day.
5. This is a common theme in historical scholarship. See for instance, Kenneth Burke 110–11; and Peter Geyl's contention that "history is an argument without end" (ctd. in Williams xiv).
6. Hinekauika was the grandmother of Rapata Wahawaha, an influential leader in our tribe, Ngāti Porou, during the nineteenth century.
7. For a fuller description of this waiata (song), see Rangatira Trust, *He Waiata Onamata* 43–44.

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