14. From Bare Feet to Clogs: One Aboriginal Woman's Experience in Holland

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'Like myself, my ego. Half wants to belong to the white world; the other yearns for the black of my mother's people.' Thomas Corbett.
(van den Berg 1994, p. 2)

Aboriginal life stories during the 1980s and 1990s changed the face of Australian history and literature. Aside from a few important exceptions, prior to these times Aboriginal life stories had not emerged as a genre and the majority of life stories at this time were penned by white writers and were semi-fictional. Sally Morgan's book *My Place* (Morgan 1988) marks the beginning of a new genre of Aboriginal life writing and other Aboriginal people followed her lead by publishing their stories. These stories made a significant intervention into Australian history, telling first-hand how Aboriginal people survived under the strict state government laws enforced upon them. It was something of a time of enlightenment for many of Australia's literati and the general public as Aboriginal people penned their way to a new genre. Now there are many life stories told by Aboriginal people and a developing critical literature growing up around Aboriginal life writing. Oliver Haag has written a comprehensive study of Aboriginal biography and autobiography in his paper, 'From the Margins to the Mainstream' (Haag 2008) and traces Aboriginal writing from David Unaipon in 1951, and Theresa Clements in 1954, to the current times. Anne Brewster's two books on Aboriginal autobiography and biography, *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, nationalism, globalism* and *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* (Brewster 1995, 1996), are significant contributions to the field. Both books give insights into Aboriginal writing of life stories, especially the latter, which studies Aboriginal women's life-story writers such as Ruby Langford and Doris Pilkington (Langford 1988; Pilkington 1991). Drawing on these surveys of the field, I argue that Aboriginal autobiographies are conceptually different from western forms of autobiography in that they spring from prior Indigenous sovereign traditions.

Aboriginal life stories are based on the experiences of the writer's life, with life experiences forming an archive for Aboriginal history. Many Aboriginal autobiographies do not delve intimately into their protagonists' individual selves. They do not have an ulterior motive driving them to uncover, for

example, an intense existential relation with the past, nor to examine in-depth their reason for being. Their primary intention seems to be to write their story, identify with their respective Aboriginal cultures, their old people, and, to quote Pierre Nora, 'give a definite continuity to their own existence' (Nora 2001, pp. 19–26). Aboriginal autobiography and biography seek to inform the reader of the struggles faced to survive the massive changes to their Aboriginal world. I argue that differences can be seen in the European conception of *ego-histoire* and the autobiographical style of Aboriginal writing. My reading of Nora's introduction to his original *ego-histoire* collection suggests it can be seen in some ways as a warning to other western historians attempting to write their memoirs to beware of the pitfalls involved in writing an autobiography. Drawing on these themes, Remond reminds historians that they, like other mere mortals, can fall into the trap of elaborating on their life stories, parts of which may be untrue (Remond 1987). Jeremy D. Popkin's review of *ego-histoire* explains:

A long tradition has taught [historians] to be on their guard against subjectivity, their own as much as others. They know from experience the precariousness of recollection, the unreliability of first-person testimony. Their professional training has taught them that everyone has an unconscious tendency to introduce a factitious coherence into the path of his life. They have no reason to believe that they are better armed against these distortions. They have no reason to think that they have any better chance to avoid the tricks of memory that they have learned to spy out in others. (Popkin 1999, pp. 725–748)

This is where the difference or the comparisons between western writing and Aboriginal writing of autobiography is most profound or acute, because the western criterion of objectivity and thus historical truthfulness, however contested, relies often upon written archives, whereas Aboriginal concepts of autobiography rely mainly on memory and oral traditions. The papers I have read on *ego-histoire* talk of European countries and the impact of other western cultures on their transnational experiences, and the writing of their histories. Pierre Nora writes of his own *ego-histoire* and mentions two characteristics of his personal situation: 'It's singular and unclassifiable character on the one hand ... and on the other, the belated character of my own historical work' (Nora 2001, pp. 19–26). In comparison, the only characteristic formulation of my writing in this area was informed by my desire to relate my husband's and my own history to our children. Like other Aboriginal story-telling/autobiographies, our stories are directly related to our own experiences, and reinforce my stance on Aboriginal storytelling as different to *ego-histoire*. Aboriginal people often tell their life stories chronologically or as their lives unfolded, without thought to the literary or theoretical implications placed on those stories by white academia.

In writing *Clogs and Bare Feet* (van den Berg 2009), I drew on my own and my husband's memories to write our stories with the express purpose of leaving our children a record of their parents' respective histories: my husband's childhood in Holland, my early life in Australia, and our lives together. I related my autobiography through memory, and my husband's biography is based on his memories. Our stories work in conjunction with each other, because they are related with intergenerational reminiscences (Brewster, 1995, pp. 51–53). My book relates intercultural and interracial memory. One instance is when my husband fought his boss for calling me derogatory names. Stephen Muecke points out that Aboriginal truth regimes and 'historical objectivity' rest on personal and intergenerational witnessing (Muecke 1983, p. 85). Telling biographies, in an Aboriginal context, means unfolding genealogies, personal memories and history, and is an important element to Aboriginal storytelling which aligns to Aboriginal modes of history. However, although ego-histoire and Aboriginal life stories emerge from different traditions, they both invite scholars to ponder their own life stories in relation to their research. My essay below is an example of the concept of ego-histoire meeting my attempt at Aboriginal life-story writing, thereby, I hope, extending what I consider the Eurocentric origins of Nora's ego-histoire.

Aboriginal culture was an oral culture and had been for millennia before colonisation and the British-style education that was foisted on Aboriginal people. Traditionally, Aboriginal people had to learn, digest and remember all the information they received from their elders. Their very lives could depend on this knowledge. Given these cultural reasons for sharp memory retention, when some Aboriginal people write their life stories, their memories can be acutely focused. I do know that when my elderly father permitted me to write his biography, *No Options No Choice: The Moore River Experience* (van den Berg 1994), he was alert and aware of what I was writing. If he thought I was deviating from his story, he would tell me so in no uncertain terms and I would have to rewrite a paragraph or sentence until he was satisfied. When my father died at 81, he was lucid. My family applauded the fact that our family history would contain the truth of our father's life. Reports in the Native Welfare Department's files were impersonal, but now we would have a personal account and knowledge of our father's life and times. His words were coming from his Aboriginal experiences, not from the perspective of a government bureaucracy. Writing my father's biography prepared me for always adhering to the truth of the story-teller in my research and subsequent writing and publications. In this case, this meant to tell his story 'like it is', without elaboration or distortion.

When I wrote *Clogs and Bare Feet*, I had retired from lecturing and tutoring at Murdoch University. With plenty of spare time on my hands and boredom setting in with mundane tasks around the home, I decided to write my story.

I wanted to give my children a sense of continuity in their lives with my history, so they would know their place in life and their history. But then I thought, 'Why just write my story?' I would write about my husband's early life in Holland as well, to give our children a clearer picture of both their parents' early lives, as well as combining the two stories after we married. Our children would know and understand their father's Dutch culture and heritage and their mother's Aboriginal culture and heritage. Suffice to say, details of our personal lives would remain private, but I would write about our respective childhoods in Holland and Australia, combined with stories of our married life which included our children. In effect, I wrote my husband's biography and my autobiography as a single book, with the title referring to 'clogs' for my husband's Dutch heritage, and 'bare feet' for my Aboriginal heritage. I thought the title represented our stories in a simple and concise way, without too many frills and fancy words.

My husband and I have a cross-cultural marriage. When we fell in love and married, we knew next to nothing about each other's cultures, but with time we learned to accept our idiosyncrasies. It is funny, but the issue of skin colour never came into our relationship. They say love is blind and in our case this was definitely the case. I personally think that our difference in character was the reason why our marriage lasted so long. Jack is an extrovert; I am an introvert, which is why we complement each other. In our case, opposites do attract. However, although our respective families did not take kindly to our marriage at first, in time, they came to accept we had married for life. We have been married for 47 years. We've had a good marriage; we have our five children, 26 grandchildren and 22 great-grandchildren, with four more on the way. They are all healthy, so we have much to be thankful for and to appreciate in life. We are not rich, but our lives are enriched by loving and caring for each other. What more can anyone ask for in this life? By writing our stories, I wanted to convey to our children the hardships their parents faced within a cross-cultural marriage, while living in a very racist country from 1966 onwards. Back then, Australia did not have a very good reputation in human rights and both Jack and I battled to find an easier path for our children to be accepted into the white world as people with as much right to live in Australia as anyone else.

Although I relied on my and my husband's memories to relate our stories in *Clogs and Bare Feet*, I realised that I had to conduct research for my book, including family photographs, and consulting historical and geographical texts in order to ensure ship movements and travel were correctly related in my husband's story. I did so with the purpose of authenticating his movements so there would be no mistake in his storyline. His memories coincided with the ships he named and the routes taken in relation to his work. I was satisfied that our memories held the guts or the essential parts of our stories.

Now I will speak about the formative experiences of the time we lived in Holland in 1978–1980. Following are excerpts from my manuscript, later published as the book *Clogs and Bare Feet*:

In early October 1978, with four of my children, I left my homeland, Australia, to travel to Holland, my husband's country. Jack had already gone on ahead and had sent for us to join him in Rotterdam. Our oldest daughter, Leanne, who had won a scholarship and was going to college at the time, was joining us as soon as the school term ended. Our younger children, Diane, Sharon, Peter and Valerie were so excited to be flying in an aeroplane to see their father again, and while I too was excited, I was filled with trepidation at the thought of going to a country that was so alien to us. Sitting there on the plane I wondered what lay in store for us. We were going to a strange land where English was not the spoken language, the currency was different from ours, where the climate was too cold and the people would all be white. White faces, white places. I hoped the kids would settle down but for myself, I had my doubts about whether I'd be able to adjust. I was an Aboriginal woman, my people were Aboriginal people, I would miss the sunshine and everything that was Australia. But for my husband's sake I would try living in Holland. It would be an experience for all of us and I sincerely hoped my husband's family would accept me as his wife and give me the respect that I hoped for. Jack and I had been through so much together and I didn't want his family to come between us. It would be a test for our love and relationship as husband and wife. Jack had shown himself to be a fair man when it came to meeting and mixing with my family and friends. He wasn't racist and treated everybody as he himself wanted to be treated. But if anyone of each other's cultures, white or Aboriginal did or said anything derogatory to me or our children, he would stand his ground and let people know his thoughts on the situation even if it meant fisticuffs. But that was in Australia. Would he be any different in Holland amongst his own people? As I sat in the plane contemplating these issues, I knew, in my heart, that Jack would not act any differently. He would stand by us and protect us come what may. As the plane came in to land at Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, I couldn't wait to see my husband again and to meet his family.

My thoughts on the plane while travelling to Amsterdam show the uncertainty I felt when leaving my homeland, family and friends behind. Yet I had faith in my husband's ability to look after us while we were living in Holland. My main concern was for our children should anything happen to Jack or me. However, on our arrival at the airport, and having passed through customs, more concern and uncertainty awaited me and my children:

I looked around for my husband among the waiting crowd of people eager to see their loved ones again. I could not see Jack anywhere and after awhile, Diane and Sharon started to worry as well. So we waited and waited in that strange place where language was a barrier to communication and everything was foreign and unsettling. Peter and Valerie were in their element playing and while I did not want them to be a nuisance to other people, I was glad their minds were occupied with playing. I didn't know what to do. After nearly an hour I tried to ring his mother's place, but not being wise in the ways of the world, I made a hash of the telephone call, so I just decided to wait and worry. Every so often I would go to the entrance of the airport and see if I could see him coming, and after a while I thought I'd better go to some official for help. Even my two youngest kids had given up playing their game and were sitting quietly waiting.

All sorts of things were going through my mind, none of them complimentary to Jack or his family, but I kept my frustration to myself for fear of upsetting my children, for I could see the worry on their faces with traces of the fear I felt inside.

Finally we saw Jack and his mother and sister and a couple of other people walk through the door. I breathed such a sigh of relief that I'm sure people nearby heard me. The children rushed up to their father and amid the hugs and kisses, we were able to meet Jack's family and hear his explanation of why they were late in meeting us. Apparently they were held up in a traffic jam on the main highway from Rotterdam to Amsterdam and just had to wait for it to clear before they could move. I was so glad to see Jack. All my worries had disappeared now that he was with us.

This was our introduction to Holland and the Dutch side of our family—the initial transnational experience that is so clear in my mind; it was like it happened yesterday. The impact of living in Holland and the experiences it afforded me were like nothing I had encountered in Australia.

As we made our way out of Schiphol Airport, I looked around for my first real look at Holland. We piled into two cars to accommodate all of us and then we were on the road to Rotterdam. I saw grey skies, leafless trees and picture post-card farms and villages with church spires so high one could see them for miles around. And the countryside was so flat. There was no comparison between my homeland and Jack's country. I marvelled at the Dutch road systems which had overpasses, underpasses, tunnels, concrete highways and cobblestone roads and canals; and everyone drove on the right hand side of the road. I would

have to teach my children the reverse road rules to that in Australia. On second thoughts, I had to learn about these rules myself; besides learning the language and currency, and other things about the Dutch that I didn't know. I knew then that I would be living a life-changing experience, starting right at that very moment. I wondered if it would change me and my outlook on life. Living in Holland would reveal a whole new world of 'whiteness', one that I, as an Aboriginal woman, would live in for who knew how long?

Australia at this time, in 1978, did not even have 200 years of British history behind it, yet here was Jack's homeland steeped in European history. His family was proud of their country and heritage and their independence as a nation. It was so different from the English traditions that were brought to Australia, with their ideas of white supremacy, racism and bigotry; and the pomp and ceremony and class system among their own people. They had no thought for the Aboriginal people whose lands they were claiming as their own. While the Netherlands did colonise some countries, such as Indonesia, Suriname and many Caribbean Islands, were they as harsh with the indigenous people as the British were to the Aborigines? I didn't really know. At this time, I only knew my world in Australia and the ugliness of the 'native' policies that were developed for the Aboriginal people. At this time, I was a housewife and mother. My entry into the world of academia came later, after we returned to Australia. So my experiences in Holland were based on emotive feelings and common sense, not the logic or analysis I was to apply to a situation after I studied for my degrees. That in itself would dictate the terms of my living in Holland. I was a novice in overseas travel and transnational experiences, with only my husband to guide me in the ways of the Dutch world. I was soon to discover that people the world over were human beings with all their foibles and frustrations regardless of the colour of their skin. All the fancy trappings of culture, class and affluence meant nothing when it came to the interactions of human relationships.

When we first came to Holland our family was divided with my two older girls Diane and Sharon remaining with their grandparents while Jack, Peter, Valerie and I were to stay at his sister's place with her husband and four children (they had the bigger house). When our eldest daughter Leanne arrived a month later, she stayed at Oma and Opa's house as well, so overcrowding and lack of privacy occurred. At first, everything was fine, but then, after the New Year, the vagaries of human nature between two women who were totally different in all aspects of inter-family relationships surfaced and mayhem ensued. We left Jack's sister's house and lived in a caravan where my husband worked. Even living in the caravan, I felt the freedom of having our own place, of being mistress of my own domain. Living here would suffice

until the government house my husband had applied for when we first arrived in Holland, became available. Not long after we were informed of the availability of a house and when we moved in, it was the happiest of days. My husband and I with our five children were together again under the one roof!

Once we were settled in our new home, a two-storey four bedroom place, life in Holland became more interesting for me. Jack had a good job and our children were attending school. When they first commenced classes at their respective schools (high school and primary), they became quite the celebrities because they came from Australia and could speak English. Yet all of them learned to speak Dutch; a language that I could not roll my tongue around. While I could understand Dutch if I listened really carefully, I felt so embarrassed trying to speak it that I gave up altogether and if Jack wasn't present I would have the kids translate for me. Eventually Jack bought a car which made life even more interesting and on weekends we could travel to places around Holland. Once we followed the Rhine River to Heidelberg in Germany, drove to Antwerp in Belgium and even to Paris, France.

In Holland, as in the countries we visited, I found the Europeans were polite and courteous; Jack and I being together, with our children, did not raise an eyebrow. Maybe there was racism, but I was treated as a human being, not as someone of dubious character because I was Aboriginal, a black person. I found this extraordinary. Perhaps this next excerpt from my manuscript would give a better comparison of the differences between Holland and Australia in their acceptance or denial of the human condition in each:

Those trips to Paris and Heidelberg opened up my mind to different people and cultures throughout the world. I found that living in Holland, with its acceptance of the various races that had migrated here from Turkey, Suriname and Indonesia, to name a few, was how people could live together without too many hassles. They were free citizens in every sense of the word, providing they obeyed the laws of the land. I thought about the way we Aborigines were treated in Australia and realised that racism played such a huge part in life in my country. Being a decent person was based on the colour of your skin. If you were any colour but white, you were looked on as inferior and had to try doubly hard to be accepted by mainstream Australians.

Although racism, bigotry and prejudice were a way of life for Aboriginal people in Australia, I found the Dutch and other Europeans more liberal in their thinking on matters of race. In these countries I found respect and concern for a fellow human being.

We had been in Holland for nearly a year when a sense of isolation began to sink into my psyche. Outwardly I was happy because I knew that Jack and our children were happy and they loved our life in Holland. There was plenty for them to do at work and school, and at home, but I was lonely. Although we had made friends with Jack's sister after the argument we had had earlier in the year; and my husband argued with his mother, but were reconciled later, I started to feel homesick for my own family. I felt a loneliness and isolation that went deeper than anything I had known before. I missed visiting my father and my siblings, the hills of home near Perth, and the sunshine on my bones, warming my whole outlook on life. In effect, I missed my homeland — Australia. Homesickness is a debilitating condition and at times I became nervous and scared and wondered what I was doing so far from my homeland and my own Aboriginal people. Every day I would look for letters from home in the letterbox or maybe receive an unlikely telephone call, but weeks would go by while I grew more depressed. My homesickness was like a toothache; it would not go away. I was happy when my husband and children were around me, but more and more I would sink into despair of maybe dying before I saw my father, sisters and brothers again; and of leaving my children in a strange land. I longed for the casual and carefree way we were in Australia without having to be on my guard all the time, afraid of saying something that would upset Jack's family. In my mind I was living in limbo, not belonging anywhere.

And so the weeks passed by. While there were days when I enjoyed being in Holland, the shopping, the visiting and having my husband and children around me, I kept getting sick. Jack was getting more worried by the day. My moods would change in a flash; one moment I'd be full of the joys of life, the next I would be miserable and morose, not saying much, crying when alone, and not sleeping. In our travels all over Holland, the flower markets of Amsterdam, Koekenhoff, Nijmegen, Haarlem, Hook of Holland, Den Haag, Delft, the Zuider Zee, and several of the seaside resorts, and even when we went to a place where the Dutch and Spanish fought back in the 1700s, I forgot my woes. I loved seeing historic places. Besides English, I'd loved history and geography at school. To learn how other people lived throughout the ages and where they came from gave me much pleasure. It was so interesting seeing these places, like the site of this old battle, the house in Amsterdam where Anne Frank and her family sought shelter from the Germans, and the historic sites around Paris, brought to life how people struggled for freedom and justice. But while Jack took me and the children to these places, for all his love and concern, when I returned home I could not

shake this feeling of doom or that I would die in Holland. In hindsight, I think I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. I just wanted to go back home to Australia.

One day, Jack and his mother came home, smiling from ear to ear. When I looked at them, I saw Jack waving some papers in his hands and when he told me they were tickets home to Australia for me and our children, I cried like a baby. I was so happy! I couldn't thank Jack and his mother enough. They had gone to the Australian Consulate in Den Haag and enquired about repatriation back to Australia for me and the children. After stating ill-health as the reason and convincing the Australian Embassy that I was in dire straits health-wise, the Australian government via the Embassy granted me and my children a free passage back to my homeland. My children and I were going home to Perth, Western Australia, the following week. In the flurry of readying for departure, I packed our cases. Although Jack had to remain behind until he finalised our affairs, I would miss him terribly, but I was so glad that I would once again see my family. And when I saw the Western Australian coastline from the plane, my joy knew no bounds.

My time spent in Holland with my family is an experience I will never forget. It remains stark in my memory. For me, it was a time of change, of growing and of looking at the world through a wider focus instead of being insulated or slotted into a pigeon-hole of invisibility because I was an Aboriginal person. In Holland I had a freedom in a white world that I could never hope to attain in my homeland. It opened my eyes to the worth of a human being, an individual, and not being judged by my race or the colour of my skin. It was an exhilarating experience. I was seen as a person in my own right, a human being, not as a nonentity in the country of my birth. Nevertheless, I knew the circumstances I would be returning to in Australia, the racism that would see me grind my teeth in frustration at being a second-class citizen. I knew that the Aboriginal people now had the right to vote with the Referendum of 1967; I knew that the federal government had enacted the *Racial Discrimination Act of 1975*, and that Australia was trying to implement other laws and statutes that would improve the lot of the Aboriginal people, but there would always be that element of insidious racism that was present in Aboriginal/white Australian relationships. Insidious racism is hard to explain but, to my way of thinking, it is a deliberate indifference to Aboriginal people that constitutes an invisibility of being. To the dominant culture, Aboriginal people are present but their presence is not acknowledged (except as nuisance value) because they have been relegated to the background as being of no consequence to white society. However, back in 1980, when my children and I returned to Australia, I could not foresee the racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people changing in the near future, but I did not care. I was going home to my homeland and I would fight for my right to be treated with respect for what I was, an Aboriginal person.

In hindsight, my own experiences in Europe in 1978–1980 have stood me in good stead for my writing as an Aboriginal person and as an academic with a PhD. During my studies for my MA in English and PhD, I gave several papers at conferences in Nijmegen and Utrecht in Holland and at Klagenfurt in Austria, and another paper in Delhi, India, in 2004. So my time in Holland gave me a grounding in international travel, meeting different peoples and cultures and, in essence, gave me the incentive to promote Aboriginal culture and people overseas and at home. My writing this paper on *ego-histoire* has enabled me to understand myself in a much more academic or objective way, instead of accepting my interlude in Holland as an inexperienced novice in writing auto/biography.

My writing for the past few years have been pro-Aboriginal and I make no apologies for it. I write about Aboriginal/Australian history, make political comment about the treatment Aboriginal people receive at the hands of the Australian governments, both federal and state, and generally promote Aboriginal people in a positive light. And yes, I did view Australia differently on my return from living overseas: I wondered why it was so racist towards Aboriginal people, which spurred me on to attain a higher education and to seek integrity and maturity in my writing abilities. This, in turn, would enable me to voice my concerns through literary and media outlets regarding the historical and contemporary injustices suffered by Aboriginal people in Australia since colonisation. Through my writing, I have tried to make readers see a different side to Aboriginal people and their cultures, a side that is not witnessed in the media. There definitely are some Aboriginal people who shed a negative light on our people, but there are many more who believe in the Dreamtime tenets of our ancestors and have not permitted ‘living white’—that is, being integrated into white society by government policies and laws—to interfere with our fundamental psyche of being Aboriginal. I want to show that the majority of Aboriginal people are a decent and law-abiding people from traditional times to this contemporary society. That is the reason for my writing.

The Aboriginal autobiographies/biographies I have written and read are stories of people who have been repressed and subjected to the harsh realities of colonialism and nationalism in Australia. What has emerged from their writing is that Australian history has had to recognise that this country has a ‘Black History’ as well as their own white history. Aboriginal literature speaks for itself. What can I say to future or emerging writers of Aboriginal auto/biographies? What can I say except follow your own truth, research background information and believe in yourselves and be proud of what you are doing for your people and your country.

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