

Grand narratives

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Dear friends,

Barthes claimed the death of the author in 1967. This claim asked us to reject, or at least challenge, the practice of interpreting texts through the lens of “authorial intent” or biography. A repositioning of the human in a text. Critically, the theory posits that once a work is created, it exists independently of its creator’s intended meaning, background, or historical context. Instead, meaning emerges through the interaction between the text and each individual reader, who brings their own experiences and cultural context to the interpretation.

Theoretically, here, poststructuralism is coming to the fore. The poststructuralist critique of authorship, from Barthes to Foucault, fundamentally challenges traditional notions of creative authority and textual meaning. Rather than viewing authors as the source of definitive meaning, poststructuralism sees them as sites where language, culture, and various discourses intersect and play out. This perspective aligns with broader poststructuralist concerns about the instability of meaning and the rejection of fixed, universal truths. Poststructuralism is interesting to us because it deconstructs established hierarchies and questioning assumed relationships between language, meaning, and power. In the case of the author, poststructuralists might aim to destabilise the author’s authority, enabling new meaning to be made by the reader (agent). Within this tradition, grand narratives are also “over”, in a similar way.

The end of grand narratives, or metanarratives, is a defining feature of postmodernism, most notably from Lyotard in “The Postmodern Condition” (1979). These grand narratives are the overarching stories that cultures tell about themselves to legitimate knowledge, progress, and social practices –or, in Marxian terms, the hegemony perpetuates and legitimates through traditional intellectual structures to coerce the citizenry toward capitalist production. Grand narratives, in the “west” have included the Enlightenment’s faith in “rational progress”, Marxism’s vision of proletarian emancipation, or Christianity’s path to salvation. These historically, poststructuralists argue, previously served to provide unified meaning and direction to human history and knowledge. Their decline reflects a broader postmodern scepticism toward universal truths and totalising explanations of reality. Instead of these comprehensive frameworks, Lyotard suggests that knowledge and social bonds now operate through smaller, localized narratives that acknowledge their own contingency and limitations. This shift fundamentally challenges how we understand and legitimate knowledge, moving from universal claims to more contextual, plural, and contested forms of understanding that better reflect the complexity and diversity of human experience. But is this true? Because while we are continually atomised (particularly by neoliberal modes), the capitalist realist frame still drives us collectively (by consent or force, deployed at intersections) toward heat death. We just have individualised, non-communal, ways of explaining this.

We know story, and specifically narratives, compel human being. Story, in particular, offers a simultaneous movement from science into art, and when done ‘properly’ can both provide a framework and actual vision for a future –independently of the authors intention (or not, depending on your worldview). So, its worth taking a moment to consider the role of story in constructing our realities, even if we feel that there is structure or an ontic “other”. Story and storytelling in a decolonial frame present a complex counterpoint to Lyotard’s end of grand narratives. They function both as resistance to colonial metanarratives and as ways of preserving and transmitting alternative epistemologies. Storytelling traditions offer

ways of knowing that exist outside of and often in opposition to “western” epistemological frameworks, while simultaneously providing their own coherent understanding of the world, history, and human relationships to land and community. Ogres have layers, Donkey.

These “stories” represent deeper and layered ways of working in relation, often weaving in relevant messaging for their audience, connection to both local and broader communal experience, and are done in relational ways which centre specific place and people. However, they also contain universal elements without claiming universal authority. Yarning with an Elder, for instance, might offer contextualised and timely information to a participant –and because this mode of story is deeply relational, participant becomes an important phrase. “Western” frames have also held these traditions, except that broader narratives have been replaced by capitalist realism, while story is relegated to childhood. This has infantilised the role of story, and by so doing, decayed the potential of shared story that creates change –instead, this role is left to the powerful, and the fundamentally human nature of story is warped and bifurcated for capitalists’ advancement. Big yikes.

In the global south, story is both particular and profound, carrying framework and creativity, heart and brain, analytical and emotive, challenging the binary between local knowledge and grand narrative that postmodernism tends to assume. Stories in decolonial contexts often serve multiple functions: they are repositories of practical knowledge, carriers of historical memory, tools for cultural survival, and frameworks for understanding relationships between humans and non-human worlds.

If we follow this to its conclusion, we could perhaps identify that the “end of grand narratives” is a “western” phenomenon. Quite literally a deliberate tool of ‘European crisis’ (of meaning) that doesn’t translate to other cultural contexts where different relationships to story, truth, and knowledge persist. Particularly when we acknowledge the fundamentally human nature of being “moved” by story. And, in particular, storywork. So let’s come closer to home, to family, and to contexts that I’ve been talking around through this piece so far –

Aboriginal storywork is a multi-layered “tool” –but it is much more than this. Practices such as Songlines, simultaneously operate as navigational tools, legal frameworks, historical records, and ways of understanding and interpreting Country. A single story can function as both practical knowledge (teaching where to find water or when certain plants will flower) and as a deeper epistemological framework for understanding relationships between people, Country, law, and Law. The Seven Sisters is a particularly prominent public story which appears across many mobs’ story. On one level, this story functions as astronomical knowledge, tracking the movement of the “Pleiades star cluster” and its relationship to seasonal changes. But concurrently, it carries Law about proper relationships, kinship responsibilities, and ethical behaviour. But we’re not done there, versions of the story also map important water sources and trading routes across vast distances, embedding practical knowledge within its narrative structure. To be slightly less obtuse, here’s the ultimate condensation of this story:

Seven sisters are being pursued across the land, sky, and underground by a male ancestral being (Wati Nyiru, Yurlu) who seeks to capture the eldest or youngest sister. As they flee across Countries, the sisters create landforms and sacred sites, with the story mapping vast distances across the continent. The pursuing ancestor is sometimes a clever man who can shape-shift into various forms like trees or animals to deceive the sisters. In some points across the story, one sister is nearly caught, becomes injured, or is temporarily captured, but the other sisters always help her escape. The sisters eventually ascend into the sky to become Kungkarangkalpa, while their pursuer becomes “Orion”, forever chasing them across the night sky. This story in varied telling and interpretation contains deep layers of cultural knowledge about Law, kinship rules, ethical behaviour, and relationships to Country, while also serving as an astronomical calendar marking seasonal changes and as

a map of water sources and travel routes.

This type of storywork differs fundamentally from “western” narrative traditions in that it does not seek to separate practical knowledge from spiritual or social knowledge. Story is not infantilised. Rather the complex parts of knowing, being and doing are understood as naturally interconnected –as they are and should be in a “mentally healthy human” . Story itself becomes a form of praxis and a place where knowledge is always understood as relational. This also challenges “western” academic tendencies to separate different types of knowledge into discrete categories. In many knowledge systems, a story about Country is simultaneously ecological knowledge, moral teaching, historical record, and legal precedent. Categories that “western” knowledge has been warped to treat as separate domains. Stories, in their true form, function not just as carriers of information but as active frameworks for maintaining and transmitting complex, interconnected systems of knowledge across generations –and more recently serving as forms of resistance to colonial epistemologies by preserving alternative ways of knowing, being and becoming.

So, practice your layered and relational raconteuring –its fundamentally human to tell story, and to imbue it with feeling, thinking and planning. We need these stories, because we need something to change in the way we relate. Let’ s go –

In a world where stories had been partitioned into neat boxes labelled fiction and fact, there lived a grey-haired wanderer who carried a crusty old book with empty pages. They had inherited it from their grandfather, who had received it from his grandmother, and so on stretching back through time immemorial. This book, despite its blank pages, was said to contain every story ever told –you just had to know how to read the spaces between its pages.

As the old wanderer travelled from the concrete canyons of cities to the red earth of distant lands, they encountered people who had forgotten how to read these spaces. In the cities, they met scholars who insisted that stories must be dissected, their meanings pinned down like butterflies in a display case. These scholars spoke of the death of authors and the end of grand narratives, yet could not explain why their hearts still quickened at the sound of a well-told tale. In the universities, they debated poststructuralism and the nature of truth, while in the streets, people hungrily consumed stories through screens, seeking connection in disconnected narratives.

But as the wanderer journeyed ever further, they met Elders who read the world differently. These knowledge keepers showed them how even a single story could be a map, a law book, a history, and a guide to the stars all at once. They taught the wanderer about the Seven Sisters, whose journey across the sky was also a map of water sources, a teaching of kinship, and a reminder of the seasons. The wanderer began to understand that what the city scholars called the “end of grand narratives” was perhaps just the beginning of remembering human ways of knowing.

The wanderer started recording these stories in a way that felt natural to them –art, words, tears, all blurred into their book, not words reading and writing the spaces between. They wrote, spoke, and shared how the Seven Sisters’ star maps and survival guides offered endless possibility, physical and moral navigation, and collective transformation. They yarned with friends and enemies about story that was simultaneously particular and universal, blurring relationships and connections through negotiated deep truth. As they wrote, wove, drew, and connected the blank pages began to fill with further invisible ink that could only be read by those who understood that stories were never meant to be contained in boxes.

Nearing the end of their journey, the wanderer realised that what they carried wasn’ t a “book of stories” but rather a collection of experiences, shared stories, and connections that could never be tangibly captured –only learnt through relationship. In the “pages” lay a challenge to idea that knowledge could be captured and understood in segregated disciplines,

that stories themselves were merely entertainment, and that truth must be either universal or particular. The book, now ready to be passed on, had taught them that wisdom could reside in the spaces between “choices” . They had learned again that story could guide you to water and teach you about the stars, could help you navigate both the physical world and the moral one, and could also develop in relation, offering joy and entertainment and practical “applications” . So the wanderer continued their journey, sharing these stories – not as physical relics, but as seeds of a future way of understanding.

With love,

Aidan