

# Respecting Protocols for Representing Aboriginal Cultures

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This essay undertakes a detailed discussion of how respecting protocols for representing Indigenous cultures supports the interests of Indigenous communities and producers of stories with Indigenous content. To highlight the importance of Indigenous protocols I review the prominence and reception of Aboriginal stories in Australian film and literature and discuss how protocol guidelines can prevent problematic representations. I demonstrate how protocols influenced writing *Calypso Summer* (2014), a novel exploring issues relating to my cultural group, the Nukunu, to illustrate the challenges encountered and benefits gained from employing Indigenous representation protocols.

The key ideas discussed in this paper are that observation of Indigenous protocols serves to maintain Aboriginal culture which underpins the protection of the environment and relations between individuals and communities. Representations of Aboriginal culture that are developed without observation of Indigenous protocols are more likely to misrepresent Aboriginal people and communities and undermine opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and strengthening of Aboriginal communities and their relationships with others. I show how Aboriginal people are taking the lead in representing our cultures, observing protocols in the development of artistic works and communicating protocols in order to protect the interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal producers of work that features Indigenous content and the communities such works relate to.

## Aboriginal Cultures: Engagement and Representation

In recent decades works of poetry, autobiography and fiction by Aboriginal people have gained national and international recognition. The success of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry from the 1960s demonstrated early interest in Aboriginal writing that has since considerably grown. According to Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss, '[w]hen [Noonuccal's] poetry collection *We Are Going* was first published in 1964 it began a new phase in communication and relations between black and white Australia. It met with great sympathy and understanding on the part of the white community, running through seven editions, which is remarkable for any book of poetry in Australia at any time before or since,' (Heiss, 'Black Poetics' 180). Oodgeroo's success led the way for generations of Aboriginal writers. Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), for instance, was 'one of the most successful Australian autobiographies ever published ... an immediate bestseller, receiving numerous awards and extensive critical attention' (Heiss and Minter, 115). These widespread successes point to Heiss and Peter Minter's affirmation in the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* that 'the resurgence of Aboriginal writing in recent years has taken place during a widespread and vigorous renewal in Aboriginal culture. In the visual arts, performance, film, photography and music, Aboriginal practitioners and their critical communities produce highly significant works that speak to audiences around the world' (7). More recently, this resurgence is evinced by the far-reaching success of works such as Doris Pilkington's autobiography *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996), and novels by authors such as Alexis Wright and Kim Scott, who

have both won Australia's prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award for *Carpentaria* (2007) and *That Deadman Dance* (2011) respectively.

Congruently, the increasing prominence of Aboriginal literature has also seen a greater emphasis on Aboriginal themes and content in celebrated works by non-Indigenous authors. Prizewinning books such as Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004), Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1993), among many others, demonstrate a renewed and sophisticated interest in the life and history of Aboriginal Australia. Grenville's *The Secret River* reveals the emergence of a positive and constructive approach by a non-Indigenous author to Aboriginal content. In the Australia Council for the Arts *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing* (2007), co-produced by Indigenous author and lawyer Terri Janke, Grenville highlights the benefits of respectful consultation:

I approached the Darug descendants diffidently because I knew that I was asking them to talk about traumatic events in their peoples' past, but I was overwhelmed by the generosity of their response. They told me many things I hadn't known, or hadn't realised the significance of—an example would be the 'yam daisies.' I'd had no idea from my reading in non-Indigenous sources that they were a staple in the Darug diet, and how the Europeans dug them up as weeds and replaced them with corn. Knowing about them made sense of what happened on those river flats. (Janke 6)

As we shall see in further detail below, and notwithstanding Grenville's claims, the complexities of consultation and representation can remain controversial, especially for non-Indigenous authors. Aboriginal author Bruce Pascoe questions the merits of Grenville's (and Tim Winton's) works, stating that, 'it is as if our most famous novels are trying to smooth the pillow of the dying race' because they 'persuade us we have "dealt" with the past and overcome it.' (17, 22) Pascoe's criticism highlights the fact that deeper levels of consultation are required beyond an understanding of Aboriginal material culture toward an understanding of Aboriginal ideology. Nevertheless, it is true that, unlike years ago, many prominent Australian authors are now attempting to address Indigenous protocols when producing writing featuring Indigenous content.

Alongside literature, these developments can also be observed in Australian film. Critic Dan Edwards writes:

There is no doubt that the most challenging local cinema in recent years has either come from Indigenous Australian filmmakers or dealt with Indigenous stories. The painfully slow lancing of the wound created by Australia's repressed history of race relations seems the only topic that can provoke even the mildest form of political engagement or formal experimentation in Australian filmmakers. (18)

Nationally and internationally celebrated films by Aboriginal people have included Wayne Blair's *The Sapphires* (2012), Rachel Perkins's *Bran Nue Dae* (2010), Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *Toomelah* (2011), and Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009). As has been the case in literature, there has also been remarkable growth in popular films by non-Indigenous film-makers that feature Aboriginal content. Phillip Noyce's film adaptation of Doris Pilkington's novel, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008),

and *Ten Canoes* (2006) by Rolf de Heer and the People of The Ramingining, have all enjoyed box-office success while making strong engagements with Aboriginal Australia.

However, as has been the case with Grenville's *The Secret River*, engagement with Aboriginal content in film has not been without controversy. Paul Goldman's *Australian Rules* (2002), produced by Mark Lazarus, has been criticised for its representation of events and locations that are significant to Aboriginal people. *Australian Rules* draws on the story of the 1977 shooting of two young Aboriginal men by a white publican in the South Australian town of Port Victoria, depicted in the controversial novel *Deadly Unna?* by non-Indigenous author Phillip Gwynne. The tangled relations between non-Indigenous authorship and the representation of Aboriginal content make the *Australian Rules* and *Deadly Unna?* duo a compelling case-study of the importance of observing cultural protocols, and how, in this example, respecting them may have resulted in a mutually beneficial, less painful and confronting experience for the Port Victoria Aboriginal community and the film's producers.

### Respecting Protocols: *Australian Rules*?

The film *Australian Rules* and novel *Deadly Unna?* are exemplary cases of the pitfalls faced by non-Indigenous creators when dealing with Indigenous material. *Deadly Unna?* is a story about a friendship between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal young men Blacky and Dumby Red. In *Australian Rules* the two young footballers, played by Nathan Phillips and Luke Carol, experience an inter-racial friendship amidst agonising racism in the fictionalised town of Prospect Bay. Some Prospect Bay scenes are filmed in Port Victoria, the town where author Phillip Gwynne lived between the age of six and fourteen, and where the two young Aboriginal men from the nearby Point Pearce Aboriginal community were killed. *Deadly Unna?* and *Australian Rules* depict the murder of Aboriginal character Dumby Red by Blacky's father, which is filmed in the same pub where the 1977 shooting occurred. Criticism of *Australian Rules* centres on this depiction.

The issues with *Australian Rules* can perhaps be sourced in Gwynne's original neglect in *Deadly Unna?* Psychoanalyst and writer Peter Ellingsen states that 'by drawing on a real incident in which two Point Pearce youths were killed by a white publican in a 1977 pub shooting, [Gwynne] has crossed a line. [Gwynne] wrote his story, a story he insists he has the right to tell. But it was someone else's story too, and that . . . prompted a backlash.' (n. pag.) He explains that, 'Penguin . . . which published *Deadly Unna?* in 1998, saw it as fiction, and did not check it for cultural sensitivity; neither, in any effective way, did those funding [*Australian Rules*],' and that 'David Wilson . . . an Aboriginal filmmaker . . . was asked to assess the script by one of the funding bodies, the Adelaide Festival. They, and the other main funding body, SBS Independent, bypassed his advice . . .'

Failure to ask permission to construct a narrative resembling the 1977 murders sparked the tension between filmmakers and the Point Pearce Aboriginal community. Ellingsen quotes Gordon Weetra, the father of one of the young men murdered in the tragedy, as saying that the filming of *Australian Rules* 'is nothing but pain. How could they do it? They never asked my permission,' and, '[we've] been trying to get that movie stopped . . . we done everything, but they wouldn't listen.' Similarly, Ida Wanganeen, a family friend of Weetra, criticised *Australian Rules* because it 'has ignored the "traditional practice" of first seeking permission from the family.' Ellingsen writes that, 'both Goldman . . . and producer Mark Lazarus, reject the notion that filmmakers need to comply with Indigenous protocols and quotes them stating, 'If you ask me, "should we have consulted earlier?" the answer is "yes" . . . If you say,

“should the shooting have been left out?” The answer is “no”.’ In relation to failing to comply with Indigenous protocols, Gwynne admits that he was ‘naïve.’

In an interview with Ann Barker (n. pag.), David Wilson states, ‘the main concern [with *Australian Rules*] is the lack of consultation from the concept stage, when the book was written. That’s where consultation with the whole community should have occurred.’ Indeed, if Gwynne had consulted with the family of the young deceased men when developing *Deadly, Unna?* they might have supported the representation and provided advice. Ultimately, the controversy surrounding *Deadly Unna?* and the production of *Australian Rules* is doubly unfortunate because the stories explore the futility of racism.

### **Respecting Protocols: Representation and Self-determination**

In her breakthrough work *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), prominent Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith explained how issues of representation and misrepresentation are also matters for self-determination:

A critical aspect of our struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history . . . and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to *rewriting* and *rewriting* our position in history, Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes. (Smith 28)

The *Deadly Unna?* / *Australian Rules* dispute highlights the importance of respectfully observing Indigenous protocol at all stages of a story’s creative development. Failure to engage with Aboriginal subjects can contravene cultural mores, offend and negatively impact upon Aboriginal people and communities and in turn discredit non-Indigenous creators. It can also impinge on the capacity for Aboriginal people to maintain a self-determining engagement with, in Smith’s words, the ‘various accounts’ of history and story. For instance, unlike the outcome of *Australian Rules*, Rolf de Heer’s *Ten Canoes* reaped the benefits of engaging with and observing Indigenous protocol. As outlined in *The Balanda and the Ten Canoes*—the documentary about the making of *Ten Canoes*—De Heer embarked on a lengthy and elaborate encounter with the Ramingining people that enabled the emergence of a culturally complex and highly significant work of art.

De Heer’s success, echoing Smith’s emphasis on the centrality of protocol engagement and Aboriginal self-determination, is further echoed by Aboriginal editor Sandra Phillips. In Anita Heiss’s *Dhuuluu-Yala [To Talk Straight]: Publishing Indigenous Literature* (2003), Phillips observes:

For a non-Indigenous author to achieve a true feel to their representation on Indigenous subject matter and character they would need to be very enculturated within Indigenous culture. And if they are not, they are writing as outsiders to that culture and their representation would be vastly different to the representation defined, developed and refined by an Indigenous writer. (10)

Alexis Wright concurs, affirming that in ‘the bulk of academic writings and books about Aboriginal people . . . most of our people would not have a clue about what was written about them’ (13). Similarly, Aboriginal author and human rights ambassador Jackie Huggins writes

in *Sister Girl: The Writings of Aboriginal Activist and Historian Jackie Huggins* (1998) that historians have a responsibility to include Aboriginal people and that '[e]xclusion is a sorry story.' She warns, 'I would not want to be included if people didn't go about the process in a culturally appropriate way' (125).

The centrality of protocol engagement, cultural respect and Aboriginal autonomy are conversely highlighted by examples of blatant identity fraud and fabrication. Heiss writes that 'the 1990s saw increased discussion on the issue of non-Aboriginal writers writing about Aboriginal society and culture and highlighted the need to define authenticity in Aboriginal writing' (2). Heiss cites the example of white male taxi driver Leon Carmen, who fabricated the autobiography *My Own Sweet Time* (1994) by invented Pitjantjatjara woman, Wanda Koolmatrie. In another infamous case, white American author Marlo Morgan fabricated Indigenous experience in *Mutant Message Down Under* (1995). Australian scholar Cath Ellis writes:

Marlo Morgan, a white, middle-aged allied health care professional from Lee's Summit, Missouri . . . [began telling] audiences that during her time in Australia she had helped . . . indigent Aboriginal youths set up a fly-screen business. She then told of how she was . . . kidnapped by a 'Tribe' of Aboriginal Australians and forced to go 'walkabout' across the desert. She claimed that her kidnappers had used ti-tree oil to cure injuries that she sustained . . . during the walk and it was . . . the same oil contained in the products she had available for sale. (151)

In her Australian literature and Australian studies courses, Ellis encounters many North American students who have read *Mutant Message Down Under* as if it is a real account of Aboriginal culture. She is disturbed 'precisely because the book, which is routinely taken by non-Australian readers to be an accurate, non-fictional account of Australian Indigenous culture, is in fact a complete fabrication' (150).

### **Lore and Law**

Indigenous identity fraud and fabrication is the apogee of disrespecting Aboriginal cultural autonomy and protocol. It affects the reception and understanding of Indigenous people and stories and has a profound impact upon the confidence of Aboriginal people and communities to share stories and cultural knowledge. Contributing to the dilemma faced by Indigenous communities represented in film and literature is a lack of formal laws that prescribe the protection of special Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights. At present, a key document assisting Indigenous people to assert their ownership and Indigenous cultural heritage rights is the 2007 *Protocols for Producing Australian Indigenous Writing* (henceforth '*Protocols*') produced for the Australia Council for the Arts by Terri Janke, lawyer and author of the acclaimed novel, *Butterfly Song* (2005).

Janke makes it clear that there are currently few legal protections for Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights:

Australia's current legal framework provides limited recognition and protection of these rights. *Our Culture: Our Future* recommended significant changes to legislation, policy and procedures. . . . In the absence of laws, much of the rights and recognition has been done at an industry and practitioner level, through the

development of protocols and use of contracts to support the cultural rights of Indigenous people. (8)

In the absence of adequate legal recognition of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights, Janke adds:

Across the world, Indigenous people continue to call for rights at a national and international level. Indigenous people are developing statements and declarations that assert their ownership and associated rights to Indigenous cultural heritage [in order to] set standards and develop an Indigenous discourse that will, over time, ensure that Indigenous people's cultural heritage is respected and protected. (8)

Drawing on the spirit and substance of key international benchmarks, such as the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2006), Janke and the Australia Council for the Arts assert a set of nine 'principles and protocols' for respecting Indigenous material: respect; Indigenous control; communication, consultation and consent; interpretation, integrity and authenticity; secrecy and confidentiality; attribution and copyright; proper returns and royalties; continuing cultures; and recognition and protection.

These principles can be applied to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators. In 'Politics of Writing' (2002) Alexis Wright writes of her own respect for consultation: 'In writing . . . *Carpentaria*, I have asked for help from my own people to protect their interests in my writing . . . They help me to see many things I would not even be able to dream about' (14). Wright acknowledges that the act of engaging with the Aboriginal people represented by the work is liberating as it assists in seeing things one may not have considered. Engaging with Aboriginal people associated with a representation is an educational experience which contributes to the integrity of representation. For instance, when working as Second Assistant Director on Rachel Perkin's *One Night the Moon*, filmed in Adnyamathanha country in the Northern Flinders Ranges, I personally experienced how cultural liaison could strengthen and deepen my relationships with Adnyamathanha people. Janke's 'principles and protocols' also informed my approach to the writing of *Calypso Summer*. As a Nukunu man my writing engaged specifically with Nukunu cultural protocols, a set of practices and confidences that can also be understood via Janke's principles, such as respect, control, communication, consultation and consent, and secrecy and confidentiality. I explore these in detail below.

### ***Calypso Summer*: Nukunu Respect, Control, Consent and Confidence**

*Calypso Summer* features twenty-year-old fictional Nukunu character 'Calypso' who has adopted a Rastafarian guise. He gains work in Henley Beach Health Food and Products store and his boss pressures him to gather Aboriginal plants for production. With little Nukunu cultural knowledge, Calypso endeavours to find the appropriate native plants. Calypso's adventure leads him to his family, the virtues of Nukunu knowledge, and consideration of his Rastafarian facade.

The writing of *Calypso Summer* was influenced by knowledge and practice of Nukunu protocols attained through being a Nukunu person, serving in various Nukunu People's Council roles, and representing Nukunu life in public media such as theatre, film and fiction. It is enhanced by engagement with views about Aboriginal authorship and through working in positions such as Manager of Indigenous Arts and Culture, in Arts South Australia and as

Portfolio Holder of the Australian Society of Authors, where Indigenous representation protocols are advocated. Respect for Aboriginal people, culture and spirit is integral to any representation of Aboriginal people and culture. As the first principal in *Protocols*, ‘respectful use of Indigenous cultural material, including stories, traditional knowledge and information about life experience, is a basic principle’(11).

### **Nukunu Respect**

My respect for Nukunu people and culture was paramount when writing *Calypso Summer*. I was very mindful that inappropriate representation could result in lack of trust and ostracism from my family and my roles as a Nukunu person, including, in varying degrees, a variety of exclusions that would result in the reduction of responsibility and authority. I have already mistakenly shared aspects of Nukunu culture in the past, and my elders have reprimanded me and delayed further teaching of Nukunu knowledge until I made amends and restored trust. In the Nukunu culture the simplest way to demonstrate respect is to ask for permission when traveling onto tracts of land and when representing aspects of a person’s culture including stories, practices, experiences and issues. To understand how asking permission indicates respect, awareness of the function and importance of The Dreaming is important.

The Nukunu word for The Dreaming is *wipma* and I sometimes use the Adnyamathanha term *yura muda* when referring to The Dreaming and its concepts, as it is common for some Nukunu people to use the term through friendships and family connections with the Adnyamathanha. Adnyamathanha are north eastern neighbours of the Nukunu. I first acquired permission from Adnyamathanha people to use the term when developing the play *Love, Land and Money* produced by Junction Theatre for the 2002 Adelaide Fringe Festival.

*Wipma* is the stories of creation and the actions of animal ancestors during the formation of the earth. The stories provide examples of how to live responsibly, ensuring protection of people and the environment. *Dangora* is the word Nukunu use to describe totemic stories or those that belong to individuals descended from particular ancestors. *Wipma* reveal our connection to every natural physical and spiritual element within our cosmos. There are various access points to *wipma*. Some stories can be shared amongst the group, others can only be told amongst certain members of a group or gender. Some individuals are responsible for the sharing of particular stories. Stories can be told with gruesome elements or sexual detail or can be modified for specific audiences. Greater levels of knowledge are contained within more detailed versions of a particular story.

Restrictions inherent in Indigenous storytelling are sometimes deemed a form of censorship but should not be viewed negatively as they reinforce social cohesion and cultural and environmental sustainability. Although stories are regulated according to age, gender and position, by the same token they can be shared widely. Proof of this is the fact that despite the hundreds of Indigenous language groups, we all share The Dreaming as our common governance, economic and spiritual framework and stories deriving from one language group and location traverse expanses of land and language groups. In *The Nukunu Dictionary* Louise Hercus writes:

Nukunu land contained some of the most important sites in the county: by ‘important’ is meant not secret and unmentionable, but on the contrary talked about, celebrated in myth and song. Nukunu country contained the sites which

marked the beginning of the longest known continuous song-line, the *Urumbula* which goes from Port Augusta to the Gulf of Carpentaria. (13)

The *Urumbula* continues to be important to many Aboriginal people and groups including those thousands of kilometres from Nukunu country. Despite colonisation, there still exists a rich knowledge of Dreaming stories and strict protocols are abided by. In many cases Aboriginal people and communities feel that they have the authority to dictate how stories are shared within and outside of their own group. As Janke explains, '[i]n Indigenous communities, the telling of stories is a right given to particular and qualified individuals. The re-telling of those stories by unqualified outsiders may be offensive to customary law beliefs' (6).

In addition to my cultural responsibility, I believe that I am the first person to fictionalise Nukunu life, therefore increasing the importance for me to ask permission from relevant Nukunu people when contemplating writing about Nukunu experience. This was also the case when developing my play *Flash Red Ford* (1999). This play is about my great-grandfather Alexander Thomas, who bet on himself when competing in the Stawell Gift, winning money and then returning to Port Augusta to purchase some of his traditional land only to be denied his dream due to being Aboriginal. When contemplating writing *Flash Red Ford* I initiated a process of showing respect by asking permission to research and write the story, cognisant of vested Nukunu interests in the story. My Uncle Lindsay Thomas ingrained in me the concept of 'always ask' when regularly on country with me and other family members. It is protocol to request permission when we're venturing onto particular tracts of land. This is so elders have the opportunity to share place-specific stories that can equip us to take care of ourselves and country. Uncle Lindsay also ensured we sought permission from pastoralists to venture onto pastoral land situated in our traditional lands.

Being respectful when writing a story featuring Nukunu content involves frequently checking with Nukunu people that appropriate representation of cultural practices, principles and viewpoints is occurring. For example, requesting permission from Aunty Patricia Russell, nee Thomas, Alexander's last surviving child, was essential when writing *Flash Red Ford* as Alexander's story belongs to his family members and the impact of its telling are most significant to them. Through requesting permission family members provided practical advice for representing Alexander and anticipating potential impacts of telling the story upon Nukunu and other Aboriginal people living in Port Augusta.

Similarly, before writing *Calypso Summer* I asked my elders' permission, explained the novel's storyline, being clear about sensitivities such as discussion of native plants and their medicinal uses. Discussions with Nukunu family members showed respect and opportunity for them to share advice and knowledge that would enrich the story. It is in this sense that, within the framework of the principle of respect, Janke emphasises the importance of accurate representation:

Representation of Indigenous cultures should reflect Indigenous cultural values and respect customary laws. It is respectful to write and speak about Indigenous cultures in a manner preferred by those cultures, avoiding inappropriate or out-dated terms and perspectives. It is important to consult with relevant groups about preferred language and terms. (12)

Continual involvement of the Nukunu in aspects of the development of *Calypso Summer* hopefully contributes to a representation of Nukunu culture that is most importantly valued by Nukunu people.

### **Nukunu Control**

The second key principle I wish to discuss is that of Indigenous control. In *Protocols*, Janke writes:

Indigenous people have the right to self-determination in . . . the expression of their cultural material . . . This right can be respected in the development and production of literary works. One significant way is to discuss how Indigenous control over a project will be exercised . . . [including] who can represent language groups and who can give clearances of traditionally and collectively owned material. (12)

The issue of Indigenous control in regard to *Calypso Summer* was partly negotiated by applying the first principle of ‘respect’ and ‘always ask.’ I made it clear that if elements of the story were deemed inappropriate they would be removed or alternatives negotiated. Striving for an accurate representation of the Nukunu is important because representations can impact negatively on the lives of the Nukunu and understandings of Nukunu culture and experience. Nukunu attribute reverence to information shared by relatives in historical records as this information conveys the culture, attitudes and desires of our predecessors, which assist conscientious actions. I do not want to negatively interfere with the knowledge transferred by my ancestors.

I am privileged to know who to ask for permission to use *some* traditional and collectively owned Nukunu material, as it is always under the control of specific individuals. This knowledge is derived from family interactions and serving on the Nukunu Peoples Council which includes fielding requests from people wanting to conduct activities on our country or relating to our culture. However, I continue to ask permission for new activities because Nukunu knowledge is sometimes provided on a ‘need to know’ or ‘once only’ basis. It is only through asking that I find family members who possess knowledge and the ability to give clearance for specific traditional and collectively owned material to be used in my work.

### **Nukunu Consent**

The third key principle in *Protocols* is communication, consultation and consent, which entails ‘communicating and consulting with the relevant Indigenous people in authority, and seeking their consent for each project’ (13). This task can be a challenge for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Janke cites Aboriginal author Bruce Pascoe, who says: ‘Consent . . . is a priority. People . . . should discuss their artistic ideas with Indigenous friends and acquaintances as well as consulting protocols. If the non-Indigenous writer doesn’t know any Indigenous people to consult with then that is a great reason to abandon the project’ (11).

Pascoe’s view is shared by Jackie Huggins who writes in *Sister Girl* that ‘I’d prefer whitefellas, if they weren’t sure of speaking about Aboriginal people, not to’ (125). In *Protocols*, Huggins emphasises the importance of gaining consent by warning:

Some of us will be more open and tolerant than others. There is a long history of violence, mistrust, guilt and fear that cannot be erased overnight. Know when you are becoming an intruder rather than an accomplice. Do some homework first. Read books, watch films, and do some Aboriginal studies courses. (14)

While I believe Huggins's statement is intended for non-Indigenous people, her advice is highly relevant to me when writing about Indigenous cultures. As Sandra Phillips is quoted as suggesting in *Dhuuluu-Yala*, I always 'strive to become very enculturated in the culture I wish to represent' (10).

My efforts to encapsulate Nukunu life in fiction can impact on ordinary interactions with my family. Due to this I need to negotiate time with them to discuss issues relating to my work and remunerate them appropriately. It is important not to ask elders questions relating to things they feel they've already taught me as it can cause offence and undermine my suitability as a receiver of knowledge. In this regard my family are less forgiving of me than outsiders. One should also factor in adequate time and flexibility for consultation, taking into account that Aboriginal people have other priorities and can often lack resources to expedite requests. In the Nukunu context, sometimes only a small number of people would be comfortable responding to such requests. Considering this, I was appreciative of people's time when I called upon them to give feedback on sections or entire drafts of *Calypso Summer*. Key family members read *Calypso Summer* before publication and all Nukunu people had the opportunity to read it before publication.

In the article *On the Impossibility of Pleasing Everyone: The Legitimate Role of White Filmmakers Making Black Films* (2002), Frances Peters-Little raises issues that concern those seeking feedback from Aboriginal people on the merits of their representation:

Expecting those interviewed, the talent, to take equal control during a film's production can actually heighten their defensiveness and unease, particularly during the post-production stages. Bringing people into the editing suites or sending them videotapes of the process can actually induce anxieties that are needless as it's not easy to know how to view material that is still in the process of being edited. Viewing a rough-cut is very different from viewing the final film. (7)

Peters-Little's comments are just as relevant to novelists. I am conscious of this issue when my family members view pre- and post- edited versions of work. People can be perplexed about retaining or deleting elements, and the intricacies of publishing and editing must be explained. In the event of strong family aversion to aspects of *Calypso Summer*, elements that caused offence or unease are removed or discussions about alternative ways for dealing with the content occur. In future there may be views I wish to express about Nukunu life and experience that people disagree with. I will at least be able to make an informed decision as to whether to continue my representation based on asking permission and consultation.

### **Nukunu Confidence**

This point brings me to the final principle of Janke's work on writing: secrecy and confidentiality. When writing the novel there were serious cultural requirements and expectations regarding the confidentiality and dissemination of certain information. In *Protocols*, secret and sacred information or material is identified as that which, under

customary law, is ‘made available only to the initiated; used for a particular purpose; used for a particular time; [and is] information or material that can only be seen and heard by particular language group members (such as men or women or people with certain knowledge).’ (21) Janke writes:

[S]ome Indigenous cultural material is not suitable for wide dissemination on the grounds of secrecy and confidentiality. It is the responsibility of . . . those working on writing projects, to discuss any restrictions on use with the relevant Indigenous groups . . . [and that the] reproduction of secret and sacred material may be a transgression of Indigenous law. (20, 21)

Two key points I strive to make through *Calypso Summer* are that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people must undertake a process when acquiring and utilising Indigenous knowledge; and that frameworks exist to support Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage protection. I also promote the idea that economies which use Indigenous plants possessing medicinal qualities can be positive for Aboriginal communities when based on traditional Aboriginal principals and practice. I communicate these points by showing how Calypso’s reengagement with his family and acquisition of knowledge reconciles a family rift and underpins his development. The discussion of traditional knowledge relating to plants can fall into the realm of secret and sacred material, but in the case of *Calypso Summer*, confidentiality regarding traditional uses of plants and the portrayal of family divisions is exercised.

I declared my interest in speaking about traditional uses of plants with family and emphasised their control. Even though my writing about this issue was approved, I later realised that writing about particular plants and their properties leaves the Nukunu open to appropriation of our intellectual and cultural property. Alexis Wright raises similar considerations:

I felt literature, the work of fiction was the best way of presenting truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell. In being an Aboriginal person, we can feel constrained by cultural values on some issues . . . This is to do with safeguarding . . . interests of the individual, the family, community, or Aboriginal people as a whole . . . (‘Politics’ 13)

I also discussed my concerns about sharing actual Nukunu medicinal use of native plants with Professor Nicholas Jose, who asked the question: ‘Do the plants need to be identified within the novel?’ Desiring to accurately represent and share virtues of Nukunu knowledge I, at first, thought, ‘Yes.’ I then talked further with family about the issue and Uncle Doug Turner was particularly concerned about revealing actual plants used by the Nukunu for medicinal purposes. He did however encourage me to develop the story.

In my novel, Calypso embarks on a quest to discover plants used by his people for their medicinal qualities. Calypso’s family members are portrayed as hesitant about sharing information due to potential exploitation. When the plants possessing medicinal qualities are revealed to Calypso, the appearance and names of the plants are not revealed to the reader. The scenario helps to exemplify, and educate people about, real issues experienced by the Nukunu, while the secrecy surrounding knowledge of the plants serves to heighten suspense throughout the story. The issue of secrecy relating to Nukunu traditional knowledge that had caused anxiety developed into a strength, and not naming actual plants used medicinally by the Nukunu doesn’t detract from the message I wished to convey. In fact, I believe it enhances it.

## Respectfully

I am an emerging storyteller continually learning about writing and my culture. By highlighting issues relating to Aboriginal representation and sharing information about the way Indigenous writing and cultural protocols influenced my writing of *Calypso Summer*, I hope to have shared some insights into how protocols for representing Indigenous cultures can support both the interests of Indigenous communities and producers of stories with Indigenous content.

I have witnessed much positive collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, communities and publishers. I envisage that through observing such protocols, producers of stories featuring Aboriginal content and themes can not only aim for commercial success but enable the development of knowledge and positive relationships that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers can appreciate.

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