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Six groundings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story in the Australian creative writing classroom: Part 2

Abstract

'All Australian children deserve to know the country that they share through the stories that Aboriginal people can tell them', write Gladys Idjirrimoonra Milroy and Jill Milroy (2008: 42). If country and story, place and voice are intertwined, it is vital that we make space in Australian creative writing classrooms for the reading and writing of Australian Indigenous story. What principles and questions can allow us to begin? We propose six groundings for this work:

- 1. Indigenous story is literary history, literary history is creative power.*
- 2. We do culture together: culture becomes in collaboration, conscious or unconscious.*
- 3. There is no such thing as Indigenous story, and yet it can be performed and known.*
- 4. Country speaks, to our conceptions of voice and point of view.*
- 5. History and memory are written in the land and on the body in bodies of practice.*
- 6. Story transmits narrative responsibility. Narrative responsibility requires fierce listening.*

This two-part paper discusses each of these groundings as orienting and motivating principles for work we do as teachers of introductory creative writing units at the University of Canberra. Part 1 discussed the first three groundings and was published in TEXT Vol 21, No 2, October 2017. Part 2 discusses the remaining three groundings.

Key Words: Indigenous story, creative writing pedagogy, Indigenous knowledge

This is the second part of a two-part paper which proposes a set of principles or 'groundings' for orienting engagement with Indigenous Australian story in the teaching of creative writing. These ideas are based on the authors' experiences of teaching creative writing at the University of Canberra, and on our recent efforts to develop a pedagogy which engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral and written literature not only as source material, but as epistemology and a body of practices.

We propose that the effective development of such a pedagogy can help to support the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, while also developing the cultural competency of all students. Our teaching efforts have evolved into a research project, Story Ground [1], which

aims to develop and test our praxis in a range of teaching situations, including intensive workshops designed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and community members, and two first-year units in creative writing available for course credit to students of the University of Canberra. This paper is based on our teaching work within those first-year units, Introduction to Creative Writing and Writing Short Narratives.

The first part of this paper (see Collis & Crawford 2017) covered the first three of our six ‘groundings’ – that is, the principles that compel us to do this work, and that orient us as we do it. In that publication we defined Indigenous Australian story as a form of literary history, discussed the underpinnings of our work as cultural collaboration in the context of that history, and described our engagement, in collaboration with students, with the question of what an Indigenous story might be. The three groundings we discuss in this second part of the paper develop the implications of a pedagogy which considers language and place to be inextricably linked. We consider the presence of country as manifest in understandings of literary voice and point of view, and bring disciplinary boundaries into conversation with the history and memory of the land, before discussing story as the transmission of narrative responsibility. There is much more that can be written about each of these subjects, but in covering the six across this two-part paper we hope to introduce a linked set of ideas that will be broadly useful to those who would like to begin or expand their work in this area.

4. Country speaks, to our conceptions of voice and point of view.

Culture is expressed in creative writing at every level of process and product. Yet it’s possible for those who teach creative writing from within a majority culture to be unaware of how culturally specific familiar instructional principles and requirements really are, and of the ways these can create a student experience of being in the classroom as being *off Country*. The ways that cultural specificity plays out in creative writing instruction are many and varied, but we will here attend to two issues: instruction on written voice (diction, style, the use of ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ grammar and punctuation), and point of view (narrative perspective or focalisation). We will offer contextualising discussion for each and describe our approaches in the classroom.

Of the 250 Indigenous Australian languages present at the beginning of European colonisation, only 120 have at this point survived that colonisation, with most of the survivors at risk (Marmion, Obata & Troy 2014: xii). This paper addresses creative writing as taught in English, and so there is a sense in which its pedagogy is inextricable from colonial conditions. Despite this, we believe that through attentive teaching practices, creative writing instruction can take up a positive, generative relationship with the lived language experience of our students, including those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for whom English usage is a daily reality. Attentiveness is necessary for this work because although the kinds of English used within any Australian classroom are highly likely to be diverse, educators may not always recognise or value the established patterns of those varieties they encounter, or the work that those patterns do in speaking relationship to place and community.

The relationships between voice and Country can be particularly important for individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as they navigate university education. There are a number of reasons for this, including the lived experience some will have of connection to Country being fundamental to their

identity. Some students will have needed to leave home to access university education, and some will experience being the only person in their university community who can speak English in the way it is spoken in their home community. This linguistic particularity is both valuable and significant. There are many varieties of Australian Aboriginal English, each bearing traces of influence from traditional languages. Linguist Jean Harkins finds that ‘the level of regional variation [in Australian Aboriginal Englishes] is somewhat greater than in other Australian English’ (Harkins 2000: 61-62) and that ‘regional and local variations are important to the speakers as signals of their local group affiliations’ (61). These usages express individuals’ belonging to those communities and to specific places even when they are away from home, providing ongoing connection to Country. Yet precisely because varieties of Australian Aboriginal English have kinship with ‘Standard Australian English’ (or other varieties of Australian English), they are often misrecognised. Sociolinguist Diana Eades notes that when they are recognised at all these varieties are subject to ‘a widespread tendency among non-Aboriginal Australians to regard Aboriginal Australian as a deficient variety of English,’ despite Aboriginal English being a ‘perfectly adaptable, rule-governed language’ (Eades 2013: 61).

A further consideration is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, like other students skilled in multiple languages or dialects, are often adept at code-switching in their daily lives as they move between different communities and language situations. For some students, code-switching is a survival mechanism; exposure of linguistic difference may be associated with profoundly negative experiences for them and their communities, including in education. We bear in mind that for much of the history of the Australian education system Indigenous Australian students have been given in schools and universities little to no contact with their own culture and history, whose traces in their own voices (and those of their parents and grandparents) have been actively suppressed by that same system [2].

It is worth exploring the political dimension of this language situation a little further, and Frantz Fanon’s observation that ‘the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man’ (Fanon 1967: 110) is apposite. Placed in the position of no ontological resistance the Indigenous student in the classroom – child, young person or adult – is silenced. For education to fulfil its colonising functions, reshaping in the image of the white man is all that matters. Thus Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students often have personal or familial experience of situations in which unexpected or unusual ways of using language have been forbidden, ignored, corrected, critiqued or laughed at – heartily or with pity, in the mode of ‘Poor little picaninny, you don’t understand’.

Such uses of language as shibboleth [3] are deeply bound up with the operations of the colonial state – and indeed, the carceral state. Paul recounts a story from his family, versions of which are widely known in Aboriginal communities, that expresses the way language difference can be parlayed into escalating oppressive effects:

An Aboriginal man stands before the court to thank the magistrate for giving him six months. ‘Thank you,’ the man says, ‘I can do that standing on my head.’

‘Twelve months,’ responds the magistrate.

Crossing the road afterwards with my father the man could only ask, ‘What happened to me?’

In this story, the magistrate's interpretation of gratitude as insolence reveals friction between linguistic contexts; within the judicial system, as within schools and universities, these differences become fuel for the mechanisms of colonisation. In the opening of their recent volume, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*, H Samy Alim and Django Paris put it this way:

What is the purpose of schooling? In the context of ... nation-states living out the legacies of genocide, land theft, enslavement, and various forms of colonialism, the answer to this question for communities of color has been rather clear: The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures and histories in order to achieve in schools. (Alim & Paris 2017: 1)

These legacies play out vividly in the classroom, where language usage is not only foregrounded as a basis for assessing academic performance and achievement (Sharifian 2008), but is also used to measure goodwill. The stakes are high and the underlying dynamics of friction may not be visible to individuals in the moment. Consider an Aboriginal child who, as in Koori tradition, is brought up within the understanding that it is an adult's obligation to provide for their needs, and their own obligation to accept the parent or adult's help or guidance, with articulated thanks not needed and possibly even inappropriate. This child, finding themselves expected to regularly express appreciation in the white classroom, must acquire a double consciousness (to use WEB Du Bois' term (2005 [1903]: 7) and negotiate a double performance through language, risking disapproval and punishment for missteps. Each step of this performance is an alienation from a sense of self as being in continuity with environment and community.

There is a substantial body of work in the intersection of linguistics and education that considers the pedagogical implications of this situation, and that can be of use to educators who wish to counter it in their teaching. Eades notes that '[m]ost linguists who have worked on Aboriginal English have commented on educational implications of dialectal differences' (Eades 2014: 425). Amongst this research is work which considers how distinctive features of Aboriginal English, including grammatical features, lexica, discourse structures, pragmatics and cultural schemas play into intercultural communications, including in the classroom (see Eades 2014 for a comprehensive survey of the work in these areas to 2014). Eades notes the ongoing relevance of the principles of Ian Malcolm's bidialectal education within this body of work, including the injunction to teachers to 'appreciate Aboriginal English and creoles as 'language varieties with expressive and creative potential, and as assets rather than hindrances in the acquisition of [Standard Australian English]' (Eagleson, Kaldor & Malcolm 1982: 214, cited in Eades 2014: 426).

Teachers of creative writing at universities are not bound by state mandates to establish their students' mastery of 'Standard Australian English', and so they are in a strong position to be able to welcome and explore with their students the creative potential of diverse English usages. In creative writing the expressive power of the voice does not depend on its conventional correctness, but on its synthesis of textual elements – a performance which is open to all voices and language backgrounds. Creative writing tends to value expressive particularity both in and of itself, as well as its implicit communications, so those who have the capacity to hear and draw on their own expressive particularity are in a strong position. Further, those who have experience in

code-switching, and the mobility of language and perspective and the audience awareness it requires, have an additional asset – code-switching is positively associated with the innovative capacities required for creative thinking (Kharkhurin & Li: 2015). Yet students who are new to creative writing may not be familiar with its particular value system. And not all students will emerge from their sociolinguistic histories and circumstances conscious of their language capacities as assets, particularly if they see nothing of their linguistic experience reflected or validated in the educational world around them. Conscious work may need to be done before students (as well as their teachers) recognise what they bring to the classroom, how they might use it, and that they can use it openly.

We attend to this work firstly in our choices of teaching resource, making sure that multiple varieties of English are present in reading and audio-visual materials. The aim here is not to reflect every possible variety of English that our students may know and use – that is likely not possible – but to at least give enough different models of English that students will recognise a diversity of possibilities, including ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ forms, ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers, and examples that include blends and switches of language code. We invite discussions of the ways voice signifies, including how it articulates relationships to place and community. Recognising that all language use is situated, we prompt these discussions across the syllabus, rather than tying them to ‘non-standard’ examples of English.

We use exercise work to make further invitations to students to explore the creative potential of the voices they are familiar with. One tutorial task asks students to write a piece in the same voice they use when they talk with their friends, inviting them to try to draw on its vocabulary and cadences. Although the instruction is simple, for many the results are startlingly different to the writing they have done to this point, opening more flexibility in their choices of voice in future work. A variation of the task explicitly connects voice to Country, asking students to write about a river, creek or other body of water they know well, and to use in the piece the voices they associate with that place. The aim with these exercises is not to restrict students to draw only on what they know or to privilege familiar voices over imaginative exploration, but to countermand some of the implicit prohibitions that can make students rule out what is familiar to them before their writing even begins.

The third area of our teaching where we consciously work to address the cultural dialectics of voice is in feedback processes. Although tertiary teachers of creative writing may not face the same pressures to help students develop competency in ‘standard English’ that school teachers do, some students may themselves hold this as a goal, while others do not. As students have varied needs, our preference is to approach student work through dialogic investigation and judgement-free description, rather than automatic correction. This requires both explicit recognition of our own responses as subjective and situated, and openness to student guidance on their intentions for a given piece. We invite students to think about and discuss the effects of their language use in relation to different readerships and their own priorities as writers, and – if they choose – to educate their teachers and peers on features of the language they use. In this context, discussions of the tensions between conventions of correctness and an embrace of dialectal usage provide useful ‘handles’ by which classes and teachers can pick up and explore many critical issues around voice and expression, tradition, authority, evaluation and readership.

There are times when engaging with Indigenous Australian voice and epistemology through story means finding places where the standard tools of Western creative writing pedagogy fail; we find one of these places in the

teaching of the theory of point of view and its application. A range of teaching conventions offer that point of view in fiction can be categorised as subjective, objective or omniscient, or that focalisation can be internal, external, or ‘zero’; that narration may be intradiegetic or extradiegetic; that temporal and psychic distance are also in play and to be controlled. As descriptively flexible as these concepts may be, their limitations become apparent in certain cross-cultural applications. How might we use these tools to read work that engages ‘the possibility of an intercorporeal subjectivity between humans, trees, birds, animals and earth’ (Morrissey 2015: 3), as found in the work of Bunitj elder Bill Neidjie, for example? We don’t suggest that all Indigenous Australian students share Neidjie’s understanding or experience of being in the world. Still, it is a valuable thought experiment to imagine the creative writing experience of the student who does. What might that student’s writing look like? What kinds of correction, shaping and evaluation would it be subject to in our classes? What kinds of thought or expression may be implicitly discouraged or explicitly ruled out by whichever set of standard guidelines we present or apply? How might these guidelines affect a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom?

To consider some of the implications via an example of published writing that we use in our classes, we briefly discuss here the narratology of Kim Scott’s short story ‘A Refreshing Sleep’ (2009). On one level this story appears to be told through the point of view of the protagonist Warren, who is visiting his family’s country for the first time with his cousin, Leanne. Introduced originally as ‘the man’ and ‘the woman’, the two are given their first names early in the story, only to become ‘the man’ and ‘the woman’ again for later periods. In these moments the containment of Warren’s third-person limited perspective seems to dissolve into something larger. This might appear to a popular writing pedagogue such as John Gardner as an error of psychic distance. ‘A piece of fiction containing sudden and inexplicable shifts in psychic distance,’ Gardner asserts in one of his more mildly acerbic passages, ‘looks amateur and tends to drive the reader away’ (Gardner 1991: 112). But time spent with Scott’s story connects this ‘inconsistency’ with other significant features: the explicit identification of characters with birds, as in, ‘It’s us, ours’ (2009: 41); collective articulations such as ‘We will all be back’ (Scott 2009: 48); and a lack of quotation marks or attributions for speech that seems to leave open the possibility that some utterances may come from Country itself, beyond yet inclusive of the characters [4]. There are various ways one might use narratological terminology to describe what is happening in this story – perhaps it is variably focalised, or is third-person limited narration with omniscient breaches. But the terminology expresses assumptions about the scope and limits of personhood that seem out of place for this work. It seems more valuable to us to develop more apt descriptions through the work of reading together with students on the story’s own terms. In doing so, our hope is to provide opportunities for students to develop a critical vocabulary that is supportive of whatever epistemological and ontological groundings they bring into the classroom.

Conventional narratology doesn’t describe the gestalt of Scott’s story in any satisfying way, any more than it can describe the epistemological relations in Bill Neidjie’s *Story About Feeling*, to consider another example. Philip Morrissey notes that in this work ‘Feeling is not limited by time or space but is manifested through a combination of story and the disposition of the auditor/reader’. Morrissey writes that Neidjie offers ‘one of the most powerful descriptions of the agency of feeling’ (2015: 3) in the text:

They [his uncles] told me, taught me
and I can feeling.

Feeling with my blood or body,
feeling all this tree and country.
While you sitting down e blow,
you feel it wind
and same this country you can look
but feeling make you.

Feeling make you out there with wind, open place
because e coming through your body
because you're like that. (Neidjie 1989, cited in Morrissey
2015: 3)

In these kinds of narrative situations, country is thinking and speaking with, through and beyond character, narrator, and/or speaker. We can recognise this with our students, and look at the limitations of the received pedagogy alongside listening to the work itself. In doing so we notice that sometimes student writing also works outside the boundaries of our familiar pedagogical schemes; it seems important to recognise the limits of those schemes, so we don't impose them without understanding what we may unknowingly rule out.

5. History and memory are written in the land and on the body in bodies of practice.

In developing a pedagogy that is consciously related to the living history of oral literature in this country, we recognise tensions in the relationship between story and the idea of writing as archive. To fix story in the written archive carries risks, including the risk of corrupting the story's correctness and continuity, and the risk of diminishing its responsive liveliness, its response-ability, alongside the responsibilities of the storyteller and the listeners. The *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* notes that

[b]oth topography and social structure are integral ingredients in the interpretative strategies Aboriginal people bring to the stories they hear. Human contact is an important social factor that cannot be conveyed in a book. The interaction between the storyteller and the audience, particularly a young audience, is not only about conveying information but also about human relationships and human dignity.

Aboriginal people had opportunities to develop a literate form of communication (for example by the development of message sticks), but saw the inherent dangers of misinterpretation. It was considered far better to have face-to-face interaction, where a discrepancy could be cleared up immediately and where social bonds could be strengthened. (Horton 1994: 828)

With these points noted, we also acknowledge the work numerous writers have done to make more visible the rich history of Indigenous Australian literacy, challenging the view that, David Unaipon excepted, Indigenous writing did not exist before the 1970s. It is worth reproducing Anita Heiss's useful gloss here:

Penny van Toorn qualifies this generally accepted view commenting that, "Aboriginal people began using the technologies of alphabetic writing and print far earlier than the dominant literary historical narrative would suggest." She points out that this writing and printing was in fact used as early as 1796 when Bennelong dictated a letter to Lord

Sydney's steward. Van Toorn notes that letters, poems, essays, pamphlets, newsletters, newspaper articles, petitions, speeches and traditional stories written and printed by Aboriginal people have been overlooked as legitimate forms of literature and publishing.

Non-Indigenous academic, Stephen Muecke, also argues that Aboriginal people considered to be "illiterate" have always read or written in the broad sense, but that these forms of writing have simply been valued differently by other (mostly colonising) peoples. Muecke draws on Paddy Roe (from whom he recorded *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* [1983]) as an example of an author who uses an "abstract signifying system of lines, dots, circles and so on," as a form of writing, and asks, "do we fail to call it writing because it is kept from white people?". (van Toorn 1996 and Muecke 1984, cited in Heiss 2003: 25)

Accordingly, we claim space for story on the page and on the voice, but we also claim a larger conception of writing. Stories are not only those things written or spoken. There are other ways of telling stories too, other ways of seeing and, therefore, other ways of knowing. When we dance, we perform our stories. When we paint, we visualize our stories. When we do rock art, we engrave our stories. These stories are expressed beyond the written or spoken word, but their relationship to thought and linguistic utterance is complex, multidirectional and inextricable from our shared negotiations of a contemporary literate society. The space of the creative writing classroom can be open to relationships with these forms of story-thought and story-activity just as it is open to relationship with story on the stage, screen or in other forms of performance and representation.

To separate writing from the totality of story both privileges it above all other forms, and makes it terribly frail – as does isolating any single practice. Rock art, for example, might separately be seen as something ancient and disconnected from ongoing practice and knowing. When multiple art forms are gathered they make for powerful ways of knowing and being in the world. It may be institutionally given that we work within creative writing as a distinct discipline, but we can recognise that history and memory are written in the land and on the body in bodies of practice. A pedagogy that is open at its boundaries and that welcomes modal and disciplinary exchange may help to honour students' full human experience and expression and the continuity of practice and culture.

In keeping with this understanding, we arrange experiences within our teaching that physically engage our students in expanded practice. These include welcome to Country, smoke ceremony and walks, and we ask students to think about these activities as part of their writing practice – which is necessarily embodied, and held within the land. At the same time, students are learning about research as fundamental to creative writing, and we also ask them to be conscious of their experience as a form of research. Overlaying several frames around our activities like this – experiential, embodied, cerebral, methodological, community-based and place-oriented – broadens the experience itself, and gives students different reflective possibilities for approaching something like a welcome ceremony. This seems to take the emphasis off ideologically and emotionally loaded questions that arise for some of how familiar they are or are not with Indigenous Australian culture, and how much they do or don't identify with it. As we've pursued this work and have developed progressively stronger conceptual links between our engagement

with Indigenous Australian epistemology and the other aspects of our teaching program, students have grown more receptive. It may be for this reason that we have not for some time seen feedback responses in the vein of ‘too much Aboriginal stuff’, which we occasionally saw to begin with.

To build on students’ sense of an expanded and embodied practice, we use teaching resources drawn from different media, including spoken story, song, film and the visual arts. We build invitations to oral narrative into our class work, asking students who are comfortable to tell stories to partners, groups or the class, and we take opportunities as we do this to consider the relationships between memory, body, voice and place. In one response to this prompt, a student who had previously been silent in tutorials across multiple units told his class the story of his name, its connection to his family’s Pacific Island home, his genealogy and an associated story cycle. Time given to the sharing of oral narratives let him invoke the Pasifika traditions of introduction which he had grown up with, allowing him to begin his oral engagement in a way that was consistent with the protocols he was most at home in. After class he told us of his renewed commitment to completing the unit and his degree, attributing this directly to the unit’s engagement with Indigenous story practice and the visible presence of Indigenous teachers.

It is worth noting that we have also discovered risk elements in our engagement with oral narratives. The relatively impromptu nature of oral sharing can reduce participants’ editorial filtering of their own ideas before they share them. We have had occasions where highly confronting material is spoken, including, once, a graphic account of racial violence that many listeners found disturbing. We now have a policy of including oral narratives explicitly in the usual discussion of sharing guidelines we conduct at the beginning of semester, and of giving a reminder of these protocols before oral storytelling sessions. These guidelines are co-created with students with our input, and generally amount to asking those who share to consider the wellbeing of their listeners and to give warnings where it seems appropriate. These discussions also include consideration of the positive potentials of confronting material, and of the diversity of individual responses, so students are asked to engage ongoingly with ethical considerations of some complexity while they make together a mutually respectful culture of creativity. This modified approach has so far been successful in that we’ve had no further instances of sharing that seems likely to cause harm, yet students still activate a great range of expressive possibilities.

In working with writing as part of a greater body of story we also ask students to combine and/or complement pieces of their own writing with expression in various other media. One tutorial exercise has students leave the classroom to find physical materials for mixed-media writing, and the resulting responses have included everything from film montage to writings on fallen leaves. For assessment we allow students to submit or perform works in oral and mixed modes, and some will expand upon this tutorial work to do so, submitting comics, zines, songs, photo-collages, writing sculptures and so on. These invitations provoke interesting work in themselves, but they also signal to students that different modes of participation are welcome more generally, allowing them to bring competencies to bear on their creative writing experience that might otherwise have been kept separate. We have seen individual students draw or collage their way through every class, and have been told privately on a couple of occasions by students with strong visual arts interests that being able to engage in these ways, rather than through purely verbal oral and written responses, has been a game-changer for them. With the door to their ‘other’ skill-sets open, anxieties about the spoken and written word tend to diminish, and the exchange between media becomes fertile.

These engagements with an expanded understanding of writing practice cannot by any means address all of the paradigmatic relations and disjunctions between oral and written traditions, nor eliminate all of the received boundaries of a culturally segmented arts practice. They can, we hope, provide students with diverse opportunities to think and work through these inheritances creatively as they write, speak and make.

6. Story transmits narrative responsibility. Narrative responsibility requires *fierce listening*.

A strong thematic thread that emerges through all this work, central to both story practice and cross-cultural engagement, is listening. Lawrence Perry's account of Indigenous Australian story addresses the role of the listener directly:

[T]his type of discourse is about life itself and is interpersonal in nature, that is, the narrator of the story enters into a relationship with the listener and is reciprocated... Once the storyteller takes the time to tell the story and you listen, the relationship is engaged and it benefits everyone who is present. (Perry 2014: 8)

Another way of seeing this is that if an Indigenous person gives you a story, and you accept the story, you become a part of it.

Through this relationality stories connect people, and it is in connecting that knowledge and story grow. Perry reminds us of the importance that stories can play in our lives when he writes:

Perhaps one small story may not change the path that you travel, but it has that possibility... Stories and the many storytellers that you have heard can transform into a bigger picture that can be only seen by you and can help your own personal and cultural growth. This means, of course, that all those stories have brought you closer to different peoples' perspectives on life and their experiences that have triggered thought processes and ideas to help us as Indigenous peoples arrive where we are today in the world. (Perry 2014: 9)

Perry is describing a kind of emergent thinking that becomes possible through listening, and which we see as being at the dynamic core of the work of writers and teachers of writing. We therefore claim listening itself as a skill we are concerned to teach, and an indispensable part of the creative writing curriculum. The Irish writer Dermot Healy, in a set of notes intended for writing students, reaches similar ground when he writes that 'Listening to the people will already have provided a writer with much of what they write. Thinking also comes from all the listening the others have done on your behalf before you came into the world' (Healy 2013: np).

Of course, there are different ways in which a writer may listen, and these temper the kinds of relationality that are available to one's work. Ian Baucom has made distinctions that are valuable to us in describing the states and acts of listening in Fanon's writing, which is alive with listening in different agentic modes. '*Black Skin, White Masks* indicates that we are never in control of our acts of listening, that we are constantly hearing more than we think, registering stray utterances we had not set out to hear', writes Baucom (2001: 22-23). This sensory openness, localised and receptive, can provide much of the substrate

for written text. Elsewhere, however, Fanon invokes a more active mode of listening,

describing a complex labor in which subjects are at once gatherers and scatterers of the narratives of identity to which their ears are tuned. [H]e is describing a process in which the collective identity of the listening group cohabits with each interpreter's difference. And this, for Fanon, is one of the ways in which solidarities are fabricated. (Baucom 2001: 25)

This kind of listening is creatively intentional in orienting its thinking towards the big picture of collective cultural production. It aligns well with what John Tidwell and Mark Sanders have described as ‘the Lakota tradition of “fierce listening”, that is, listening with purpose, commitment, and responsibility – a responsibility to convey the story to the next generation’ (Tidwell & Sanders 2007: 15). ‘Fierce listening’, in its orientation to the future, has valuable work to do in countering the loss of language, epistemology and story itself from cultures subsumed by hegemony.

We focus in the creative classroom on listening as a skill that can be practiced and developed especially within the context of discussions of writing as an ethical engagement. We use listening exercises with a number of variations and emphases to help build on students’ skill in listening itself – hearing what is said – and in establishing for themselves a considered ethical as well as technical framework for the role of listening within their writing practice. The core task we use is to have students choose a story of their own that they feel is theirs to tell, and to tell that story to a partner, knowing that they are passing that story over to be used further in our classroom context. The partner who hears the story is then to write it, becoming *part* of it in some way.

Already this task is challenging in its requirements and implications. We don’t determine for the students what approach they should use in the speaking and writing of these stories, but we do introduce them, to begin with, to a range of takes on the storyteller and her or his relational context and responsibilities. These include Perry’s comments on the reciprocal relationship between storyteller and listener, and these words from Bill Neidjie:

My people...
all dead.
We only got few left...
that's all.
Not many.
We getting too old.
Young people...
I don't know if they can hang onto this story.
But, now you know this story,
and you'll be coming to earth.
You'll be part of earth when you die.
You responsible now.
You got to go with us...
to earth.
Might be you can hang on...
hang onto this story...
to this earth. (1989: 92)

Our reference points also include a quote from Lionel Shriver’s somewhat infamous speech to the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016:

What stories are “implicitly ours to tell,” and what boundaries around our own lives are we mandated to remain within? I would argue that any story you can make yours is yours to tell, and trying to push the boundaries of the author’s personal experience is part of a fiction writer’s job. (Shriver 2016)

By putting Shriver’s position in dialogue with Perry’s and Neidjie’s, we hope to make visible to students that the terms of individual freedoms, rights and mandates to claim or possess story are not the only way to cast questions of cross-cultural literary engagement. Though they do not provide direct answers to the question of who is entitled to tell whose story (more on this point follows), Perry and Neidjie’s perspectives open different doors in the discussion, adding a consciousness of relationality, and responsibility to community and the future, to considerations of the dynamics between those who transmit and receive story.

The exercise work that follows this discussion helps to expand students’ felt experience of the issues at hand. We work slowly: the instruction for each student to choose a story that is ‘theirs to tell’ becomes more significant thanks to the discussion. One white Australian student reported realising through her decision-making process that she had more ethical boundaries protecting what she was willing to share than she was previously conscious of, and this altered her perception of Indigenous Australian story as being unusually boundaried. For related reasons, we sometimes put more pressure on this stage of the task by asking students to tell a *family* story that they feel they have the right to tell, and to choose one that they feel *represents* their family. Many students find this difficult, and we take the time to talk through why. Beyond the desire to protect family members and the complexities of thinking through privacy ethics, many report that their family experiences are too diverse for any to be truly representative. Exploring this can shed new light on the work of representation that is automatically assigned to minority literatures. It can also shed light on the unspoken boundaries of public discourse: one capable and engaged student, apparently unable to find anything to share with her partner, eventually said that she had no story to tell because her family ‘was not a typical Aussie family’. All she could think of when she tried, she noted with some embarrassment, was the one show on television that featured a family of her own ethnicity. Our impression was not that she lacked either material to draw on or expressive skill, but that she feared her experiences could not be adequately held and reflected in the culture around her, with its dearth of relevant reference points.

Alongside such arresting moments are many in which students relish the opportunity to speak from their own experience, and in doing so are met with what we would describe as ‘fierce listening’. Charged with the responsibility to go on to write the stories they hear, the alertness of those in the listening role is marked, and the energy between partners is visibly reciprocal. For the listening partner (each student will have a turn), the prospect of writing the story they hear and then sharing that version brings socio-textual independence and accountability together in immediate and unusual ways. Their ethical considerations spring into creative application as they think through what relationship the different versions of the story will have to each other, and how their written story might be received by their partner, its recent source. Ethical considerations become technical concerns as they lead students into diverse textual strategies for engaging their narrative responsibilities as they understand them. Some opt for recounts with a high degree of verbal reproduction. Some make their own role as narrator as transparent as possible. Others feel they can best respect or protect the story by transforming it, while attempting to stay true to a kernel of what they’ve heard. Others still conclude

that their written version cannot be responsibly shared, and decide to keep it to themselves. Across a class, the interplay of versions and approaches offer a collective insight into creative work and ethical work as occurring together, spinning into and out of each other's opportunities and conditions, rather than the one being a flat imposition on the other.

Like many of those who engage with Indigenous cultural material in literary or educational settings, we are frequently met with the question that Jeanine Leane discusses in her article 'Other Peoples' Stories': whether non-Aboriginal authors 'should or could write an Aboriginal character into their fiction' (Leane 2016). This question is often in the background, and sometimes the foreground, of the discussion and exercise work we do on listening. By having students write one another's stories, and indeed by engaging with Indigenous Australian story more broadly in our teaching, we are not implicitly providing non-Indigenous students with permission to write Indigenous Australian story as their own – like Leane, we doubt that this can be given in any general sense by individual Indigenous people, let alone others, and we make our students aware of this. As the issue arises we find it useful to refer students to a range of perspectives that address it directly, including Melissa Lucashenko's 'Muwi muwi-nyhin, binung goonj: boastful talk and broken ears' (Lucashenko 2009), and Leane's article, which includes a useful list of questions:

Why do you want to write Aboriginal characters? Do you *know* any Aboriginal people? And if so, how? Have you read any of our books? What is your motivation? What do you want to say? Whose story is it going to be? Have you sought appropriate permission from the parties involved? What do you hope to achieve through this representation? Finally, why do you want to speak about Aboriginal people when you can never speak *for* Aboriginal people or *be* an Aboriginal voice, just like I can't be a white one, even though, like a lot of Aboriginal people today, I am immersed in settler culture on a daily basis? (Leane 2016)

The discussions and exercise task complement the necessary reflective challenge of answering such questions with active ethical-creative work. By providing a negotiated, mutually consenting arrangement for the transmission of story, the task gives students the chance to experience the vulnerabilities, responsibilities and possibilities of this transmission from different positions, and to tease out the implications for their own creative ethics.

It is galvanising to witness students' responsive creative capacities in the face of the complexity this work proposes. In their work and ours, engagement with Indigenous Australian story is not reducible to the matter of representation alone, and is not resolvable through permission slips. For us as teachers, working with story has required that we go beyond first steps of including work by Indigenous Australian writers in our syllabi, so as to think of story not only as a set of individual written artefacts but as a living body of thought, experience, feeling and practice. Our work to think through the implications for our teaching and collaboration continues.

Notes

[1] This project, including the development of this paper, has been supported by an Indigenous Language and Arts Program grant from the Commonwealth Department of Communications and the Arts. return to text

[2] A concise precis of the suppression of Aboriginal languages in relation to the development of Aboriginal Englishes and their written features is provided by Katherine E Russo in “Talking About our Own”: Nyoongah Aboriginal English in Jack Davis’s *In Our Town*’ (Russo 2010). return to text

[3] A shibboleth is an aspect of language or culture used to sort a group into ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, often violently. The Parsley Massacre of 1937 is one example: thousands of Haitians in the Dominican Republic were murdered on the basis of their pronunciation of the word ‘perejil’ (Spanish for parsley). Pronunciation of the word with French, rather than Spanish, inflection was taken as revealing immigrant status. return to text

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TEXT

Vol 22 No 2 October 2018

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

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