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Representing Indigeneity: a reflection on motivation and issues

Abstract
Non-Indigenous Australian authors representing Indigeneity in their work need to address a number of issues, including the fundamental question of whether to do so. Having incorporated representations of Indigeneity in a children's novel written as part of my PhD thesis, I traced the origins and evolution of my representational practices in the novel through the other component of the thesis, a multi-genre exegesis. The processes of writing both components raised a range of issues, including questions of motivation; my right, responsibility and competence to represent; and the strategies employed in both components to address some of these questions. In this paper I reflect on these issues, and conclude that my efforts have been unavoidably far from perfect, yet worthwhile as a stage in ongoing negotiations of meaning and power between non-Indigenous and Indigenous cultures in Australia, and that non-Indigenous writers like myself need to be conscious that our efforts are never, and can never be, purely benevolent and/or selfless.

For my recently completed PhD thesis, I wrote a children's novel incorporating representations of Indigenous people, experience and culture and then framed an investigation of my practices of representation in a multi-genre exegesis incorporating an allegorical fiction, autobiographical/autoethnographic fragments, academic endnotes and footnoted commentary. My intention was to trace my representational practices through my subjectivity as a writer, interpreting them through a synthesis of theoretical perspectives. During the process, I inevitably faced a range of issues surrounding representation of Indigeneity by non-Indigenous writers.

It is my intention in this paper to do two main things: first, to outline briefly what I wanted to do in writing the novel and why, including why I incorporated representations of Indigeneity; and second, to discuss some of the major issues that I needed to consider, and that need to be considered by every non-Indigenous writer who represents Indigeneity. To illustrate how these were discussed in the thesis, I will periodically quote from both exegesis and novel.

Why did I write?

Leaving aside the obvious general questions of why anybody writes, I can, on reflection, point to a number of reasons I wrote *The diary of Jeremy Prior*, the children's novel that formed the creative component of my thesis. Of course, what follows cannot encompass the complete range of interlocking motivations, the serpentine plots and sub-plots of my intent - even if I knew

what they all were. Indeed, this complexity of motivations is one of the themes of the exegesis, and one of the reasons I explored my representational practice in such a variegated way. However, it should suffice to give a fair impression of my reasons for writing the novel, and what I wanted it to do.

My first motivation was a visual memory. CS Lewis's *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* grew from his youthful vision of a fawn with an umbrella carrying a brown paper parcel through a wood (Sayer 1997: 312). The vision that spawned my story was of a young boy in grey shorts and a brown jumper standing on a low, thinly grassed sandhill gazing across the Lower Murray River to its mouth, a hard southerly blowing sand into his eyes and hair. From this vision - a memory of my youth when my father would take us camping on Hindmarsh Island, and we would go out fishing in a small rowing boat, anchoring it (in a tribute to the triumph of hope over reason) with a rock with a rope tied round its middle - came not only the opening lines of the novel, but many of its major themes.

From it came the memory of how it had felt to stand there, and of the stories that I told myself about where I was, and who, and what I was doing there. These stories, of course, reflected the stories I read - and particularly my favourites, the children's novels of Arthur Ransome - as well as the stories I was told about who I was, where I was from and where I belonged.

From it came also the taste of salt and sand, the smell of romance in the wildness, the sense of mystery from considering the Coorong - that great, long, unique lagoon separated from union with the Southern Ocean only by the narrow strip of sand whitefella maps call the Younghusband Peninsula - and the possibility of its exploration. And later, these things came together with contemporary events to bring other realities into play: the fact that this was the country of the Indigenous peoples usually referred to as Ngarrindjeri (although, as discussed below, this too turns out to be largely a whitefella story), and had been thousands of years before the building of the pyramids and the writing of the Old Testament. But I didn't know that, standing on that sandhill all those years ago, imposing my European stories on a landscape to which they didn't belong. Indigenous people were as far away and exotic as Red Indians. I encountered them almost exclusively in books. In all my school days, I knew one Indigenous student, and that was only for a year, in primary school.

Yet more stories entered the field, with time. Stories of the Christian faith within which I grew up (though actual belief was sloughed off well before I reached my twenties) left me with certain notions about honesty, justice, fairness, modesty and compassion. The 11 years I spent in the United Kingdom gave me distance from my lived reality to that point, and set me physically closer to the stories I had absorbed growing up. I made pilgrimages to the places in which these were set. I cycled through the Lakes District, leaving my handwritten thanks under a small gravestone in the corner of Rusland Churchyard, and cycled, sailed and motored, on different occasions, through the Norfolk Broads, with the relevant Ransomes ready to hand. I stood over Walton Backwaters, watching clouds of crows circle over the stubbled fields fringing the Wade, and walked down to the Witch's house to contemplate the mud, stretching out to Horsey Island, and imagining the Israelites almost becoming Egyptians in the middle of the Red Sea.

Upon my return to Australia, I felt an even stronger attraction to the South Australian Lakes, though I saw them through different eyes. And I became more aware of Indigenous experience, bit by tiny bit. The issues that hit the headlines throughout the 1990s in particular - reconciliation, the 'sorry' debate, land rights, the stolen generation, black deaths in custody, the Hindmarsh

Island bridge affair - settled and condensed in my consciousness, telling stories that were revealing, disturbing and compelling. Then, with the commencement of university study in 2000, came stories of literary and cultural theory, linguistics, postcolonial critique, discourse analysis, self-reflexivity: new ways to tell stories about being in the world, and to understand the stories I already held inside. As each story washed into me, it mixed with previous layers of narrative and meaning, settling into a new coalescence, a new set of stories adding new voices to my story of self: and thence to the story that I wanted to tell.

When I had finished my undergraduate degree, something that my honours supervisor, Dr Mia Stephens, had mentioned in a linguistics class nagged at me. 'Knowledge of the environment,' she said, 'is encoded into Aboriginal languages.' This led eventually to my honours thesis (Robins 2003), which examined aspects of the linguistic pragmatics of the translation published by George Taplin (the founder and first Superintendent of the Port McLeay mission at Raukkan on the southeast corner of Lake Alexandrina) of some Biblical extracts into Yaralde (Taplin 1864), the language of one of the groups commonly subsumed under the appellation 'Ngarrindjeri'. The experience of researching and writing the thesis added yet another set of stories to the mix. The ingredients were almost starting to cook by themselves. They only needed the flame lit underneath them.

The flame was provided by my PhD supervisor, Professor Claire Woods, who, when I told her about the story that was crashing around in my consciousness looking for a way to be, encouraged me to pursue it within my thesis. The flame was lit, and I had space to cook.

Of course, what I was doing and why developed further with the stories I kept gathering throughout my candidature; more and more theory, more ideas about what literature was, and what it could do, and children's literature in particular, because the novel was always going to be for children (the target age is around 11 to 15). And of course the more I read about Indigenous culture, knowledge and experience, the more I realised how little I knew, and how complex was the terrain through which I had to navigate. I found more issues to contend with, more conflicting stories and feelings to try to reconcile, more challenges to my sense of self-worth, of integrity, of honesty, and of identity. I was coming to decide that what I was doing was, because of its context, always going to be inadequate, but that the best I could do was to acknowledge it and reduce its inadequacy as much as possible, while the worst I could do was to give up, leave it alone and do something easier.

Clare Bradford (2001), I had found, had already covered what was originally going to be a significant part of my thesis, which was to provide a critical overview of representational practice in Australian children's literature to date. Much of her critique, particularly of contemporary works, hit home to me identifying sins in existing texts of which I was either already guilty, or probably going to be. Her stories of what had been done by others to date, then, also entered the mix.

Indigenous voices, too, entered the mix. Anita Heiss (2003), in particular, brought the stories of Indigenous writers and scholars into my internal conversations, challenging my assumptions and demanding that I question my right and competence to represent Indigenous people. I discuss some of the issues raised by Heiss and others below.

So the novel that I finally wrote had all these stories feeding into it, like streams into a great lake, or perhaps more like nutrients leaking into a

primordial soup. But why, considering my doubts about my right and competence to represent Indigenous experience, did I feel I had to do so?

In fact, some of my reasons have already been touched upon. The increased prominence of Indigenous experiences in mainstream discourse, articulated by Indigenous voices; the political struggles over land rights and other issues; the realisation of past injustices; the distance afforded by my extended absence from the country (and in the old Imperial centre to boot); and the growing acceptance of responsibility (*not* guilt - see below) for the situation, and for the telling of stories about the situation, were just some of the factors that made it clear to me that no story of this country, and especially that part of the country which was the setting for the story I had to tell, could be adequately told without including Indigenous presence. Acceptance of that reality determined what I wanted the novel to do (and not to do), and what I wanted to do (and, again, not to do) in it.

What I wanted the novel to do can be seen on two principle levels. On one level, that of the children's fiction (which I will call the narrative level), I wanted to write a successful adventure story that would entertain and engage readers roughly in the age group 11 to 15. I wanted readers to feel involved, to identify with the characters and situation, and to invest emotionally in the narrative. I wanted them to be excited by the action, interested in the themes and ideas, and satisfied by the conclusion. This is nothing new: it is the aim of every children's novel.

Importantly, however, the novel's degree of success at the first level preconditions its potential for success at the second level, which is the level of theme and ideas. At this level, I wanted the novel to make its readers (at least its non-Indigenous readers!)[1] think about the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, cultures and ways of being in the world; to appreciate more fully the history of that relationship; and to understand that contemporary realities are the consequences of history, and can't be separated from it.

> "But it's the past!" Lenny sprang to his feet. "How the hell can you be writing the past now. This is now! We don't believe in crap like that now. We can't believe in it. It's unscientific, it's superstition, it's … it's … crap!"
> "I believe it." Middy's voice was quiet, but it was as if a door had opened in an unexpected place and another world was on the other side. (Robins 2007b: 107-8)

I wanted them to take away from their reading the sense that other ways of experiencing reality can be every bit as valid and valuable as the ways to which they are accustomed. What I did not want them to do, as I articulate in the exegesis, was to come away with guilt, or anxiety:

> guilt's no way to respond to that. It's useless! It's debilitating and infantile and leads to nothing worthwhile. What's needed here is responsibility, and respect. We can wail on all we like and beat our breasts but it does no-one any good. But if we acknowledge our mistakes and wrongs, and give respect, and let the land and the stories and the people change our stories - if we take responsibility, like the grown-ups we say we are - then we might have a chance of making things better. (Robins 2007a: 71)

What I wanted to do in the novel can also be seen on the two levels. On the narrative level, I wanted to celebrate the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong; to convey its uniqueness and my response to it. I also wanted to relive as a writer the type of sailing adventure I had loved, reading Ransome as a child, but in an Australian context; appropriating his stories, adapting them and inserting myself, through my characters, into them. This is a symptom of the extent to which reading subjects contribute to - become - writing subjects. Related to this was a desire to bring Ransome's legacy into a contemporary context, admitting what he excluded: teen sexuality, discourses of colonialism, complex and contested relationships of power, and notions of Imperial 'home' and exotic colonial Other.

On the thematic level, I wanted to investigate the differences between European and Indigenous ways of experiencing the world: of responding to physical reality, and particularly the relationship with the land; of making and communicating meaning; of creating, holding and disseminating knowledge. I wanted to accord Indigenous ways of knowing equal truth status with European ways, challenging the hegemony (though not the validity) of European ways of meaning-making and truth construction. I wanted to emphasise that these two ways of knowing have existed in the same places since colonisation, and that one has imposed its power on the other by force: of arms, of control of resources, of numbers.

Because texts are in and of the world, they have an effect on their readers that can translate into effects on extratextual realities: readers are conduits through which such effects can flow. What I ultimately wanted to do, then, was to encourage readers to derive new understandings from the novel and take them into the world to use to create new possibilities for transformation of the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians into one of greater equality and mutual respect.

Such an enterprise necessarily involves representing Indigenous beliefs in ways that give non-Indigenous readers an idea of some of their essential attributes. Clearly, then, what I did not want to do was create a false conception in readers' minds by misrepresenting them or the people who hold them. I did not want Indigenous people to suffer offence, diminishment or denigration through my representations. And finally, I did not want my story to come across as a patronising gesture of 'generosity'.

To avoid these traps, I needed to consider a range of issues surrounding non-Indigenous representations of Indigeneity, with the purpose of formulating an effective set of narrative and representational strategies.

Issues

I have classified the issues faced by any non-Indigenous writer in Australia (and, by extension, other postcolonial settler societies) into two main categories: context and content (these two categories, of course, are not discrete: they overlap and interconnect). Contextual issues include questions of the right to represent, ownership of experience and story, procedures and protocols developing around representations of Indigeneity, questions of cultural appropriation, and the social, cultural and material effects of representation. Issues of content include related questions of accuracy, competence and cross-cultural awareness. Each of these issues requires a response from the writer - a strategy that informs the writer's representational practice - and I situate this response at the intersection of context, content, the

writer's purpose in writing, and his or her subjectivity, as a writer and an individual.

Issues of context

The first contextual issue that arises is whether to represent Indigeneity at all, and it is clear that many choose not to. This may result from the particular story that the writer wishes to tell, from her or his ethnic background, or from other reasons. Whatever its rationale, however, this choice inevitably elides Indigenous presence. It is the literary equivalent of *terra nullius*; it quarantines Australia's history from its present and, by implication, its future. I do not mean by this to argue that all stories written in Australia should necessarily involve an Indigenous presence; rather, as with all stories, an awareness of what is left out, and what this might mean, is necessary.[2]

Having decided to incorporate representations of Indigeneity, a host of other contextual issues arise for the non-Indigenous writer: the right to represent; ownership of stories and experience; speaking for and about (thereby appropriating, and hence silencing, the voice of) the Indigenous Other; 'authenticity' (a problematic concept at the best of times) and how that is determined; writing Indigenous subjects from the outside, with its inherent risk of misrepresentation and objectification; the qualitatively different narrative and representational traditions of, and their place within, the meaning-making processes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures; and the ethical requirements imposed by universities and funding bodies. Rather than confront this level of complexity (and writing is certainly complex enough already), some non-Indigenous writers may either shrink from representing Indigeneity in their work, or ignore all or some of the issues involved. Such responses are understandable, but inadequate.

Many Indigenous writers and scholars consider that non-Indigenous writers have neither the right nor the competence to represent Indigenous experience and culture. Anita Heiss points out that 'There are strong and original arguments coming from people who believe that white[3] writers should not write about Aboriginal issues, especially sacred matters' (2003: 10), citing the views of Sandra Philips, Jackie Huggins, Kenny Laughton and Cathy Craigie, among others (Heiss 2003: 10-14).

Another central issue is the structure of custodianship of stories and the knowledge they embody in Indigenous cultures. In the novel, I attempt to articulate this notion in several ways. For example, reflecting on the sandhills that separate the Coorong from the Southern Ocean, a character explains to the principal protagonist (both are Anglo-Australians):

> "This is their country. They know it as well as they know their own selves. Roger[4] reckons they've got names for every sandhill, every bit of land there is, and the sea and the lagoon as well. They always knew it, and there's names for each bit and each bit has a story and each story belongs to a specific person or family." (Robins 2007b: 184)

In this section I make no attempt to articulate what those stories might be and I avoid explicit representation of Indigenous beliefs and stories as much as possible. However, total avoidance would have involved altering the plot in ways that would not have allowed me to explore the themes I wanted to explore. Thus I have inevitably violated a principle I agree with, but for reasons I consider supportable.

Another central issue is the danger of speaking for, and thereby appropriating (and hence silencing) the Indigenous voice. Derrida points out both the dual senses of representation (mimetic substitution and delegation) (1994: 15, 28), and that representation involves the absence of that represented (1994: 22). In any act of representation (and representation is unavoidable in all meaning-making), relationships of power between representer and represented are integral, so any representation of Indigeneity by non-Indigenous writers involves taking a position of power. In my exegesis, I articulate this through a discussion between the two characters:

> "So representing's a pretty powerful thing to do."
> "Oh yeah. They're inseparable. Power's built into the structure of representation through the relationship between subject and object. Relationships of symbolic, and therefore also material, power are always involved."
> "So my representing Aboriginal people gives me power over them."
> "Yes."
> "But I don't want power over them! That's not why I did the story!"
> "We can't avoid power, lad. We're always negotiating it. That's why you've got to be aware. Power's not a bad thing, you know, in itself. Power just means being able to act - to do things. Where would we be if we weren't able to do anything?"
> "Dead I s'pose."
> "Yep. Buggered. Up the proverbial. But the way we use power's so important. We always have to be aware of relations of power." (Robins 2007a: 56)

This is why a range of Indigenous writers and scholars emphasise the importance of, and the dangers inherent in, their representation by non-Indigenous writers. The appropriate response for a non-Indigenous writer, in my view, is to accept responsibility for the power inherent in representation and, to the best of one's ability, wield it with respect and consideration.

Another issue is the vexed and contested notion of 'authenticity'. To what extent, if any, can non-Indigenous representations ever be 'authentic'? The term goes to the heart of Indigenous identity. What does 'authentic' mean? The paradox here is that 'authenticity' in relation to Indigeneity has been largely defined by non-Indigenous anthropologists, and restricted to traditions, stories and practices that have either persisted uninterrupted through colonial history to the present (very few) or that have been documented. Indigenous writers and scholars, unsurprisingly, tend to reject such definitions. I would suppose that there are as many Indigenous definitions of Indigenous authenticity - and hence Indigenous identity - as there are Indigenous people. Heiss (2003: 19-23) cites a range of these, defined by criteria such as descent, immersion in culture, conceptual framework and community acceptance, that emerge from Indigenous people themselves.

Then there is the risk of objectification from writing about Indigeneity from the outside. Writing the Other is unavoidable in fiction: fiction must have characters. Also unavoidable is projecting the writer's assumptions onto that Other. Writing a character is an exercise in trying to occupy another subjectivity.

Because of the subject/object relationships inherent in representation, representing the Other always carries the risk of objectification: the denial of subjectivity to the object. Marcia Langton's proposes that a definition of

Aboriginality 'only has meaning when understood in terms of inter-subjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects' (cited Muecke 1997: 181). A Bakhtinian dialogic approach, acknowledging non-Indigenous outsideness, foregrounds the dual nature of self and other as both subject and object, and hence offers a conceptual foundation upon which to construct strategies to avoid such objectification.

Implicit in dialogism is the notion that 'the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*'; indeed, 'consciousness *is* otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center' (Holquist 1990: 18).

> "What you've discovered is that both of us - all of us - are both subject and object; object to each other, and to ourselves. Interesting word, 'other'. What does it mean?"
> "Something else. Not this one, the other one. Not me …"
> "Yes. Not me. Not us. Not this, not that. 'Other' means a 'not' something. In 'other' words, the object. The object of our consciousness is 'other' to our consciousness, is not our consciousness." (Robins 2007a: 32)

But Bakhtin sees the centre as relative, not fixed or absolute, 'and, as such, one with no claim to absolute privilege' (Holquist 1990: 18). Because other centres are not precluded by this relativity, the Other, or 'all that is not the center', may constitute another centre, for which the first centre itself forms part of 'all that is not' that centre. Bakhtin's dialogical concept of 'outsideness' (Bakhtin 1986: 6, 7; Holquist 1990: 30) or 'exotopy' (Todorov 1984: 99), then, 'suggests writing strategies which endorse or confirm the subjectivity of the other' (Ashcroft and Salter 1994: 78). Outsideness is acknowledged, but the subjectivity of the Other - who is, grammatically and unavoidably, the object of representation - is also acknowledged, through the representational practices employed: that is, the selection and organisation of signs.

This dialogic relation becomes not only more complex when writer and character are from different cultural groups, but also more important, particularly when relationships of power between the two cultures over time have been unequal. Bakhtin saw in outsideness an opportunity for better understanding of cultures of the Other:

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly … A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered … another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (Bakhtin 1986: 7)

His argument here seems to be that certain understandings may be available from outside a culture which are not available from inside it, and that it may be beneficial to attempt to glean understandings of one's own culture from those that view it from the outside:

> There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. … Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the world through its eyes, is a necessary

> part of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect of this understanding, it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding - in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others. (Bakhtin 1986: 6-7)

Thus the attempt to 'get inside' the experience of the represented Other is necessary, but so is the ability to stand outside and view the Other from a position from which he or she cannot possibly view themselves. Further, this exterior view may be beneficial to both the Other, in that 'We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself …'; and the self, in that 'we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths' (1986: 7).

This seems to imply that, with due care, non-Indigenous representations of Indigeneity may prove useful, not only to the representer, but also to the represented: as Indigenous people become more aware of how they are perceived, and the changes that take place in those perceptions over time, they may become more able to formulate more and more effective understandings, responses and counter-representations of their own.[5]

Misrepresentation, however, can arise from ignorance or disrespect. Non-Indigenous writers can do only so much to reduce their ignorance of the realities of Indigenous experience, culture and ways of being: they are not members of the culture. They have not had those experiences; they do not inhabit those ways. There are steps to take (consultation and research, for instance) which might reduce the risks somewhat, and this of course should be done. But there are always limits.

Disrespect, however, is easier to avoid, and acknowledgement of equal subjectivity is a vital first step. Gaining awareness at every opportunity is also vital, while acknowledging, as Kenny Laughton argues, 'that is our business and we should be the ones writing it; and receiving the appropriate recognition and status as the custodians and experts on that history' (Heiss 2003: 11).

Another issue is the range of qualitative differences in the narrative and representational traditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, and their place within their respective meaning-making processes. Stephen Muecke discusses differences in the relationship between representation and other aspects of ways of being in the world between Indigenous and Western cultures (1997: 69-70, 87-88). Briefly summarised, representation in Indigenous cultures appears to be conceptualised as part of reality, embedded in the material, in cultural practice, in spiritual belief: in short, as an integrated aspect of everyday life. This contrasts with the role of representation in Western cultures, where the sign, post-Saussure, has only an arbitrary relationship with its signifier, mediated through the mental concept of the signifier and all concepts associated with it in the consciousness of the subject.

Representation, then, has more potential power for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people. This explains why stories and knowledges have structures of custodianship and rules of transmittal around them: because they count. Their representation, then, can have consequences for Indigenous people that cannot be foreseen or fully appreciated by non-Indigenous writers. Diminution, inaccuracy and distortion of such stories can occur simply by being incorporated in Western structures of meaning-making, underpinned by such a different set of assumptions.

This being said, Indigenous people have, over the years, recognised the reality of Western hegemony and sought to accommodate it and adapt it to their own ends. David Unaipon, astutely recognising the status of literature in European culture, expressed the hope that 'Perhaps some day Australian writers will use Aboriginal myths and weave literature from them, the same as other writers have done with the Roman, Greek, Norse and Arthurian legends' (Unaipon 2001: 4). Indigenous responses to the challenges posed by colonisation/invasion have been nothing if not pragmatic.

Speaking of pragmatism, one very pragmatic issue to be considered here is that of the ethical requirements imposed by universities and funding bodies where Indigenous subject matter is incorporated into work supported by such bodies. These have developed as a response to the concerns of Indigenous people. In my own experience, my thesis seemed to require ethics clearance, so I prepared and submitted an ethics proposal in the first year of my candidature. I was advised, however, that because my research was archival, and no human subjects were directly involved, clearance was not required. However, although on the face of it I had wasted my time, as my supervisor said at the time, 'it is not a waste of time - it is helpful in focussing ideas and issues beyond your original proposal. And I believe that your project as now described is better for the process' (Woods 2004a) and 'because it deals with indigenous issues even textually, … it [the ethics proposal] should be submitted and on record' (Woods 2004b).

Funding bodies also impose consultation requirements. ArtsSA, for instance, requires all work submitted for its literature awards, prizes and development funding that incorporates Indigenous material, themes or references, to be considered by their Indigenous Arts Officer. While this could appear an impediment, it actually provides a valuable opportunity to engage with the issues and improve the quality of the work. Indeed, this process led to enhancements in my own awareness of the consequences of my own textual strategies, which I discuss below.

Issues of content

Content issues include the accuracy of representations, implying questions of the competence of the representer to represent, implying in turn issues of the representer's level of cross-cultural awareness. How can a non-Indigenous person accurately portray Indigenous experience, Indigenous reality? How can they be, or become competent to do this, and to what extent? Sandra Phillips writes, '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' (cited Heiss 2003: 10). Thus for Phillips, accuracy rests on competence which rests on cross-cultural awareness; on enculturation into (a particular) Indigenous culture.

But for the non-Indigenous writer living, as most do - and I do - in the suburbs of a capital city, how might they gain the necessary knowledge and understanding? How might they respond to their inherent lack: of insight, of

experience, of enculturation; in short, of Indigeneity? What strategies might they use to acknowledge and address these issues while at the same time accepting the responsibility of acknowledging Indigenous presences and voices in their writing, particularly without intruding - objectively, anthropologically - into the lives of Indigenous people?

On the strategy of not naming

One strategy I pursued in my novel was to avoid naming either the Indigenous group I had in mind or the places involved (all real places, though not necessarily in the same geographical relationship to each other as represented in the novel), and to be deliberately vague about some of the spiritual and religious beliefs and practices represented (although these were based on documented information, from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources, on particular beliefs and practices). The realities upon which my representations were based were implicit, not explicit, referred to obliquely, kept in the shadows. There were a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, I did not want to be seen to refer to real people, places and events. In this case, the particular Indigenous group and places are real, but the events are not (though some do represent, in the sense of acting as delegates for, certain actual events). Representing the people and places as they are in reality might pose the risk of the events taking on a 'reflected' reality effect from the other two elements. That is, it might position the fictional events closer to reality through their association with identifiably real people and places. By shrouding these in a mist of non-specificity through the substitution (in the case of place) or refusal (in the case of the Indigenous culture involved) of names, I hoped to place events less problematically in the 'fictional' realm; to avoid investing them with undue reality effects.

However, considering my aim on the thematic level - discussed above - to encourage readers to extrapolate new extratextual realities from the textual realities in the novel, this strategy raises a question: if the 'reality effect' of textual events is reduced, might readers be less likely to carry thematic meanings into their extratextual realities? The risk, I feel, is small. Fantasy novels, for instance, sit firmly in the 'fictional' realm, yet their underlying themes and values appear no less likely to be internalised by their readers. At any rate, I find the drive to avoid negative consequences on real people in the real world more compelling.

Any textual strategy has advantages and drawbacks, as well as intended and unintended consequences. In this case, my refusal to name the Indigenous culture involved enabled me to avoid a mistake due to ignorance. I, like most non-Indigenous Australians, identified the Indigenous people of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong as 'Ngarrindjeri' (also spelt 'Narrinyeri'), the term referred to in most non-Indigenous written texts on the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong peoples (see, for instance, Taplin 1874, Jenkin 1979 and Bell 1998). It is this name by which I would have referred to the Indigenous culture portrayed in the novel, had I not decided to avoid naming them.

However, Dr Irene Watson (2002), a Tanganekald and Meintangk scholar, points out that that appellation was applied to a number of groups in the area by non-Indigenous missionaries and anthropologists, and that not all 'Ngarrindjeri' people identify primarily as such (Watson 2002: 67-74). According to Dr Watson's descriptions of country (Watson 2002: 31-32), the group I portray in the novel appear to be either Tanganekald or, perhaps, Yaralde.

Thus, in this instance, my strategy of distance, of non-specificity, may have avoided some of the negative consequences of my ignorance. This should not be construed as cynical, or somehow 'cheating': I see it more as an acknowledgement of my inherent ignorance of - my innate inability to be anything *but* ignorant of - the specificity, the deep, rich detail of Indigenous experience. My hope - and this can only be evaluated by members of the Indigenous communities involved - is that this strategy has the effect of keeping a respectful distance, while at the same time allowing the evocation of something of the depth, complexity and power of Indigenous culture and belief, both in general and in respect of the particular culture represented.

Conclusion

I have sought in this paper to briefly discuss two questions: firstly, why I wrote *The diary of Jeremy Prior*, a children's novel incorporating representations of Indigeneity; and secondly what issues arose from its writing, during and since my investigations into the source of my representational practice via the discursive provenance of my writing subjectivity. I have also outlined one of the textual strategies I used to try to deal with some of those issues, and an unforeseen consequence of that strategy.

Before finishing, I would like to acknowledge that all representation is for the purposes and benefit of the representer, and representation of Indigeneity by non-Indigenous people is no exception. This is true even when the motives are of the purest; for example, to 'help', to 'empower', to 'behave responsibly'. Even these seemingly self-less enterprises work to satisfy the need of the non-Indigenous writer to satisfy a felt imperative to be a 'good' person, and to 'do good' by their writing. This is not to imply that such motives are not legitimate: quite the opposite. It is to acknowledge them, so that non-Indigenous writers like myself don't deceive ourselves, and fall into the trap mentioned briefly above: of thinking 'Aren't I a good person, doing a "good thing" for Indigenous people.' To do good for the Other is, I argue, often - if not always - to do good for the self. It is never, therefore, purely selfless, and hence never purely 'good'.

Finally, it is apparent that a comparative overview of contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous representational practice might generate significant insights into some of the issues discussed here. As such an enterprise could not be adequately incorporated into this paper, I intend to prepare a further paper with this aim for a future issue of *TEXT*.

Endnotes

1. I always imagine my readers as non-Indigenous - a regrettable result of my cultural positioning, of which I continually need to be aware. But how might Indigenous readers read the novel? What do I want them to take away from their reading? This question deserves its own investigations. return to text

2. One might argue that acceptance of the necessity of incorporating Indigeneity in literary representations is an exemplar of the necessity of incorporating it in the life of the nation. It is the acceptance of history and responsibility, and with it comes acceptance of the complexity of dealing with the issues. Again, the writer's acceptance of this sets - it is hoped - an example: he or she chooses to face the problems, challenges and complexity of the issues around representation and thus provides an example to readers of these issues and an encouragement to face them in everyday life; to gain an awareness of Indigenous experience. return to text

3. One wonders here about the description 'white': does this mean that non-Indigenous but non-'white' (for instance, Asian, African, African-American or Middle-Eastern) writers should do so? It also raises the whole issue of 'whiteness' and connects it with studies of this concept and its relationship to sociocultural identity. return to text

4. 'Roger', a fisherman and local Elder, is the novel's principal Indigenous character. return to text

5. There is, however, a risk in this argument: of repeating, cloaked by a plausible-sounding critical theory, the old, patronising refrain of 'we're doing them good'. On the other hand, while non-Indigenous writers inevitably represent Indigeneity from their own assumptions and for their own purposes (and I am certainly no exception in this regard), Indigenous people might be expected to do what many have done very effectively so far: appropriate non-Indigenous meanings, as necessary, for their own purposes. return to text

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