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63.2

New Writing from
Western Australia
Fiction
Creative Non-Fiction
Poetry
Essays

Westerly



**Literature, Resistance,
and First Nations Futures:
storytelling from an
Australian Indigenous
women's standpoint in
the twenty-first century
and beyond**
Ambelin Kwaymullina

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Narrative has long played a significant role in the rich First Nations cultures of the earth, including the culture of my people, the Palyku. But in the wake of colonialism, storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint can be a complex task. This paper explores Indigenous standpoint theory and examines the considerations and contexts that affect my work as a First Nations storyteller who writes speculative fiction stories for young adults.

INDIGENOUS STANDPOINT THEORY

Indigenous standpoint theory has emerged as a means for First Nations peoples to articulate critical viewpoints founded in the embodied experience of being Indigenous whilst negotiating the complex intersections of oppression emerging from colonialism. While some iterations of Indigenous standpoint theory have drawn from the works of feminist scholars, it is important to recognise that the ancient knowledge-ways of First Nations peoples have always required locating oneself amongst the networks of relationships that comprise our realities. In this sense, Indigenous standpoint theory can be viewed as part of a larger continuing project by First Nations peoples to actualise Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing both within and outside the academy. Standpoint is closely related to the substantial body of First Nations scholarship concerning 'Indigenous research', which for present purposes can be defined as research that is 'made up of vital, transformative practices that emerge from and for Indigenous peoples' (Coburn et al. 331). But Indigenous research did not begin and does not end with academia. First Nations peoples 'have always done research. That is, they have always asked questions that mattered to them and they have always

sought to answer them, mobilizing all relevant sources of knowledge' (Coburn et al. 331). Much of the way in which these questions were asked and answered was through story.

An Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory

This article is written from an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint, as set out in the watershed work of Geonpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

Moreton-Robinson defines an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint as being:

ascribed through inheritance and achieved through struggle. It is constituted by our sovereignty and constitutive of the interconnectedness of our ontology (our way of being); our epistemology (our way of knowing) and our axiology (our way of doing). ('Standpoint Theory' 340)

The sovereignty that constitutes standpoint is defined by Moreton-Robinson as arising from Indigenous interconnectedness to our homelands ('Standpoint Theory' 335). This interconnectedness also founds our ways of being, knowing and doing. Thus, Moreton-Robinson characterises an Indigenous women's way of being as derived from our embodied relations to our living Countries. This informs our way of knowing, which is constituted by what Moreton-Robinson terms 'relationality', whereby 'one is connected by descent, country, place and shared experiences where one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, co-existence, co-operation and social memory' ('Standpoint Theory' 341). Indigenous women's ways of being and knowing in turn inform our way of doing, which is 'an extension of our communal responsibilities and sovereignties' (Moreton-Robinson 'Standpoint Theory' 343).

Configuring Standpoint

As Moreton-Robinson notes, an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint 'can be reconfigured to suit the specificities of the cultural and social location of Australian Indigenous women scholars when developing their methodology' ('Standpoint Theory' 339). Further, 'intersecting oppressions will situate us in different power relations and affect our different individual experiences under social, political, historical and material conditions that we share either consciously or unconsciously' ('Standpoint Theory' 340). This section offers some thoughts on how I configure standpoint to my particular context.

I am a sovereign (interconnected) Palyku woman. The homeland (Country) of my people lies in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. It is inland Country; I am a freshwater person. My Country, and all Aboriginal Countries, were created by the Ancestor Beings who embodied reality through movement. They danced, sang, fought and slept; they shifted between different forms; and they continue to exist in Country. I am connected to the Ancestor Beings, and to Palyku Country, through the Palyku bloodline.

Through the stories of the Ancestors and through the inherited teachings of my family, I understand reality to be holistic and animate. All life in Country, including human beings, embodies and is embodied by Country. Everything lives—not only animals, plants and humans, but also wind, rain, stars, sun, moon and all else in Country—and everything is related, and therefore only meaningfully exists in relationship to each other.

I live and work in the homeland of the Whadjuk Noongar, and I respect their sovereignty over their own Country. The presence of my family in Whadjuk Noongar Country is a consequence of a journey made by my great-grandmother that was not her choice. Both my great-grandmother and my grandmother are members of the Stolen Generations, and so I am the inheritor of one of the greatest traumas inscribed upon the bodies, hearts and souls of First Nations women by the white patriarchal state.

The laws and policies that created the Stolen Generations, like all forms of violence enacted by the colonial project, were sustained by the denial of Indigenous humanity that was also the source of the settler claim to our land. As someone trained in the Western knowledge-discipline of law, I possess the understanding required to locate and analyse the multiplicity of Anglo-Australian laws that shape the lives of First Nations women, including those that now purport to offer us equality. I also understand that while law can regulate behaviour, it is often far less successful at changing attitudes. But attitudes can certainly subvert the law and especially the principle of equality before the law. And representation—or rather misrepresentation—in story is not separate from discrimination; it is part of what enables it.

In the crucial moments when others are making choices that will influence our fate, it is the stories they know about us that can alter perception and displace empathy. I therefore understand myself to be vulnerable in that the protection purportedly offered by the rule of law may not be extended to me. Further, whatever equality Indigenous women possess under the laws of the settler state, I do not believe it to be sufficient to allow us to fully realise our humanity as sovereign Indigenous

women. My initial motivation to study the law therefore persists: I was/am seeking justice, which in Indigenous systems generally equates to balance. But the legal system of the Anglo-Australian nation-state, unlike Indigenous legal systems, is not constituted by the ways of living in Country that sustain Country, and has yet to fully genuinely acknowledge the presence and significance of the systems that went before.

I recognise the value of my own experience within the shared knowledges and experiences that shape the lives of all Indigenous women. As Moreton-Robinson ('Standpoint Theory' 341–342) notes, these shared conditions include the continual denial of our sovereignties; the politics of dispossession; our respective countries' histories of colonisation; multiple oppressions; living in a hegemonic white patriarchal society; lacking epistemic authority within the academy; and resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with our own representations. Some of these experiences also intersect with the lives of other women, for example Women of Colour, although the unique position of Indigenous women must always be acknowledged. We are First Peoples, First Women, and we are connected to our Countries in a way that is not shared by the other women who now dwell within the boundaries of our lands. Further, in order for the patriarchal settler state to acknowledge our right to be different (and hence the validity of our difference), it must acknowledge the originating war crimes of colonialism in enacting the violence—including the sexual violence against women—that was required to dispossess us of our Countries. There is thus a dimension to dialogues surrounding Indigenous women that is not present in relation to other women. Things are, as they always were, about the land and our relationships to land. And all those who now dwell on Indigenous land—including non-Indigenous women—benefit in some way from our dispossession.

I also acknowledge the experiences of Indigenous women who are subject to intersections of oppression which I do not share. While I am Indigenous and female, I am also heterosexual, cis-gendered, binary-gendered, and middle-class. As a storyteller, I acknowledge the limitations of my own standpoint and that my task is not to embody the experiences of others into narrative as if those experiences were my own, but rather to support others to tell their own stories.

Finally, I understand the path I walk now was formed by the passage of those who went before, including the generations of Palyku who were born into the trauma of colonialism. And I know that it is only because of their courage and their strength of will that my path exists at all. My voice is part of a continuum of Indigenous voices, and any wisdom I have did not begin—and will not end—with me. Any mistakes are entirely my own.

STANDPOINT AND STORYTELLING

First Nations peoples have always come to know our worlds through story, including the stories that make all others possible, the tales of the Ancestor Beings. These tales told us of a living world made up of many beings who speak in many voices. I have previously conceptualised holism in an Aboriginal context as a pattern that has many threads of many colours ('Light' 12). Every thread connects to (and therefore has a relationship with) all of the others. Human beings are neither the most nor the least important thread—we are one amongst many; equal with the rest. The pattern made by the whole is in each thread, and all the threads together make the whole. The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern of reality created by the Ancestors. It exists within and between all life, and is grounded in Aboriginal Countries.

Storytelling is one of the primary processes through which the 'whole' of the connections that comprise a living world are known and sustained. Locating oneself amongst the web of relationships that comprise the world requires an intuitive, fluid means of interaction that my mother once spoke of as 'learning to read the signs'. That was how it was described to her by one of our Aboriginal grandfathers. He characterised Captain James Cook—the 'discoverer' of Australia in Eurocentric mythology—as a man who couldn't read the signs, explaining to my mother, 'If a man can't read the signs, then he might get out of his depth and end up in dangerous waters. He might muck things up for other people too' (Morgan 270). Cook's actions, like those of all the other 'discoverers' of Indigenous territories, endangered worlds of knowledge and stories. Present-day manifestations of the lie that it is possible to 'discover' (and thereby claim ownership of) that which is already known endanger us still. As Mary Graham (Kombu-merri and Wakka Wakka) has written:

To the Aboriginal mindset phenomena are received, and if there is one rule it is to 'behold' [...] the world reveals itself to us and to itself—we don't 'discover' anything. The same mindset perceives the Western method of inquiry as being inextricably attached to discovery and therefore to ownership. That is why, to Indigenous people in many places, there is often a sense of something predatory about the Western process of inquiry. (76)

Process in Indigenous systems is itself a whole that must embody that which it wishes to sustain. In other words, the process of storytelling is not independent (disconnected) from the result of story. And First

Nations peoples have long challenged the predatory processes through which non-Indigenous peoples purport to 'discover' our stories:

Over time many Indigenous Australians have worked in good faith with researchers and writers [...] [some of whom] have gone on to publish the material in their own name, because they wrote the text and so asserted copyright over the material. Sometimes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were called 'informants', an expression that doesn't capture anything like the full weight of the intellectual property that belongs to them. Many times the relevant people were not provided with sufficient information in advance (or at all) to provide prior and informed consent to the use of their knowledge. (Aboriginal Studies Press 21)

The stories of Indigenous worlds told before colonisation were whole stories that upheld the wholeness of the world. But the arrival of Cook—the man who couldn't read the signs—and the colonisers who followed him brought a different kind of story into the worlds of my ancestors, the tales of the bewildering, brutal violence of dispossession. And dispossession extended further than our lands to our cultures, identities—and stories.

Holism, Storytelling and Appropriation

The holism that has always informed Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing means that storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint acknowledges the position of the self as a part of a larger collective (whole) that in turn informs the self. But the storytelling traditions of the colonial project never engaged with Indigenous peoples as whole beings who were part of whole systems of knowledge. Instead, Indigenous peoples were positioned as native informants whose cultures, histories and knowledges were interpreted through a Eurocentric gaze and appropriated by the colonial project for its own ends (Smith; Moreton-Robinson 'Representation'). And the use of Indigenous cultures in circumstances that fail to respect the living (and vulnerable) communities that create, and are sustained by, the cultures continues to be a source of concern (see e.g. Bodkin-Andrews et al.; Leane 'Indigenous Australia', 'Aboriginal Representation'; Lucashenko).

There are extensive ethical protocols in Australia relating to storytelling and Indigenous peoples across all aspects of the Arts (Australia Council for the Arts; Janke; AIATSIS). These protocols provide valuable guidance for those seeking to ethically engage with Indigenous peoples. But they exist in part due to the deficiencies in legal protection,

including a lack of protection for the valuable Indigenous ecological knowledge that is of interest to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. One of the complexities that Indigenous writers negotiate is finding pathways to tell stories grounded in our interconnected worlds in a way that does not put those worlds (or connections) at risk. Nukunu author Jared Thomas has written of how he dealt with incorporating plant knowledge into his YA novel *Calypso Summer*, noting that although the use of the information was approved by the Elders: 'it later crossed my mind that if I wrote about particular plants and their properties, it left Nukunu open to appropriation of our spiritual and cultural knowledge' (39). Thomas ultimately decided not to include the names of any plants in the book. This exemplifies one of the strategies pursued by Indigenous writers—the avoidance of cultural specifics as a means of protection.

This is not to say that Indigenous authors can never speak to cultural specifics. This is a matter for each storyteller to consider in relation to the particular story they are telling. But it is worth noting that books written by cultural insiders may contain less cultural information than the ones written by outsider authors, who might not be as aware of the issues surrounding the protection of Indigenous knowledges. This in itself can cause difficulties for Indigenous writers when our own narratives are viewed as 'inauthentic' to the extent that they challenge outsider expectations of who we are and what we should be telling stories about. Indigenous narratives are too-often read by reference to what non-Indigenous peoples already know (or think they know) about us. Such expectations can be formed by outsider stories that historically,

have in the main portrayed half-truths and negative images, and have portrayed our many distinct groups of Indigenous Australians as living in a disjointed and static society all speaking the same language and incapable of adjusting to change. (Torres 30)

The lived experience of the harm that can be wrought by stories is part of what informs my standpoint, including the damage that has been, and continues to be, inflicted by toxic stereotypes about Indigenous women (see Atkinson; Behrendt; Dudgeon; Watson). This means it is of central importance that I speak as a whole person in a way that does not compromise the ability of others to manifest their own wholeness. As such, I need to find pathways that allow me to honour my responsibilities to the collectives that shape my existence whilst respecting the boundaries of other collectives, including those influenced by conditions of oppression that I do not share.

I speak from a particular position, and that means not all stories are mine to tell. The proposition that location both informs and limits what stories can be told is not a new or controversial proposition within Indigenous systems, where respecting boundaries was always part of sustaining the whole of Country and hence ourselves. As Arrernte Elder Margaret Kemarre Turner has said: 'In the eyes of Aboriginal people, and in their ways of thinking, you never tell someone else's Story. You only gotta tell your own true story' (126). But acknowledging standpoint (and the limits thereof) has never been a feature of Eurocentric literary traditions. In the words of Bunurong author Bruce Pascoe:

Western literature is considered a free agent to set its stories against any texture, any colour, any metaphor [...] perhaps a time will come when Australian authors will not snatch misinformed stereotypes off the shelf to act as background to what many see as their more civilised, more important, more cognitively sophisticated white selves. (211)

In children's literature, questions concerning who should tell whose stories are part of an international dialogue being engaged in by teachers, award judges, librarians, authors, illustrators, reviewers and readers. In the US there are now dedicated websites that provide book reviews and commentary regarding representation issues from the perspectives of those being represented (or misrepresented), including American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL), GayYA, Rich in Color, Disability in Kidlit and Reading While White. Australia does not yet have the equivalent of these websites, but there is a web-based discussion happening here as well. While much of this dialogue is not 'new' in that Indigenous and other marginalised writers are repeating cycles of conversations that have been had before (particularly concerning systemic exclusion within the literary industry), the use of the web gives these discussions an enduring global presence.

Conversations relating to standpoint in children's literature have coalesced around the concept of 'own voices'. 'Own voices' began as a twitter hashtag invented by Corinne Duyvis, a writer with autism and one of the founders of Disability in KidLit (a website which comments on portrayal of disability from disabled perspectives). The phrase 'Own Voices' is now used as shorthand to describe books written about diverse protagonists by authors who share that identity (in other words, by authors writing from their own standpoint). I identify myself as an Own Voices advocate, and in this context, I have said that I do not believe the lack of diversity in children's literature to be a 'diversity problem'

(‘Privilege’). The origin of a body of literature that fails to reflect the actual make-up of the planet springs from, and is maintained by, a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another, and hence, a lack of diversity is a privilege problem. Such a problem cannot be solved by more voices of privilege writing the lives of the marginalised; it can only be addressed by Own Voices stories.

The need for non-Indigenous writers to step away from (rather than into) the story spaces of Indigenous peoples is an issue that has been raised many times over. In the words of Wiradjuri poet Aunty Kerry Reed-Gilbert:

Some (people) believe if it’s done by a white person that’s better than if it’s not done at all. But now we are getting Indigenous writers who can do it, but they are not recognised by the white publishing world. (McDonald 13)

There are far more published Indigenous authors now than there were in the 1990s when those words were spoken, and much of the credit for this belongs to Indigenous presses such as Magabala Books, Aboriginal Studies Press and IAD Press. Alliances and networks between Indigenous storytellers—most recently the First Nations Australia Writers Network—have also helped to strengthen our presence and our voices. But the privileging of the voices of cultural outsiders over cultural insiders remains a live issue across the Australian literary landscape. As Jeanine Leane (Wiradjuri) puts it:

The fact that Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005), a rewriting of colonial history by a settler author, has been the most taught text in Australian secondary schools since 2009 speaks loudly to the persistent use of settler literature as a tool of cognitive imperialism. It allows for the cultural transmission of settler narratives and values, and in doing so overwrites Aboriginal history and experience. I am not suggesting that this work and others like it be scrapped—they are important texts that reveal synchronic slices of settler consciousness of and about Aboriginal people at any given time. But I am challenging the notion that these are Aboriginal stories. They are not. (‘Stories’ 42)

Among the boundaries I believe that non-Indigenous authors should observe in relation to writing Indigenous characters is that they should not do so from an Indigenous perspective—or as Melissa Lucashenko (Goorie) puts it: ‘don’t steal Aboriginal voices by pretending that you can get inside

an Aboriginal mind’. This leads me to consider what boundaries I place on my own work, and in this regard, I emphasise that the choices I make regarding the stories I tell (and the ones I don’t) flow from my interpretation of how I should act in order to sustain the many wholes that are the world. But within my own practice, I do not write the stories of other marginalised peoples as if that experience is my own (e.g. from first person or deep third). This position is not changed by the fact that I am a speculative fiction author who writes of future worlds. Stories are not created or read in a vacuum. While I can (and do) imagine worlds free from some of the biases present in this one, that doesn’t alter the fact that neither myself nor any other author *actually* exists in a world free of oppression.

Holism, Futurisms and Decolonisation

I am an author of Indigenous Futurisms, a phrase coined by Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon to describe a form of storytelling whereby Indigenous authors use the speculative fiction genre to challenge colonialism and imagine Indigenous futures (Dillon 1–3). Embodying Indigenous wholeness across speculative fiction contexts brings with it many challenges, including navigating the harmful ways in which the genre has dealt with Indigenous peoples. Speculative fiction has long told stories of ‘exotic’ cultures that are appropriated from the very real cultures of Indigenous and non-Western peoples; reproduced offensive stereotypes; and consistently founded stories of exploration in what amount to iterations of the discovery doctrine. This doctrine—which asserted that territory belonged not to its Indigenous inhabitants but to the first Christian Western European nation to claim the land and hold it through cycles of violence—is underlain by a characterisation of Indigenous peoples as ‘less than’ (Miller et al.). Within speculative fiction, discovery often manifests through the portrayal of alien (Indigenous) peoples as backward populations to be conquered or childlike/tragic peoples in dire need of a white saviour (Dillon; Reider). Perhaps among the most well-known recent example of problematic treatment in the fantasy/children’s literature sphere is bestselling author J. K. Rowling’s incorporation of North American Indigenous cultures in her *History of Magic in North America*. It has drawn sustained criticism from Indigenous commentators for a stereotypical, poorly researched portrayal of Native cultures that has negative real-world impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities. In the words of Cherokee scholar Adrienne Keene:

We fight so hard every single day as Native peoples to be seen as contemporary, real, full, and complete human beings and

to push away from the stereotypes that restrict us in stock categories of mystical-connected-to-nature-shamans or violent-savage-warriors. Colonization erases our humanity, tells us that we are less than, that our beliefs and religions are ‘uncivilized’, that our existence is incongruent with modernity. This is not ancient history, this is not ‘the past.’ The ongoing oppression of Native peoples is reinscribed everyday through texts and images. (np)

A further complexity that Indigenous peoples must grapple with in entering speculative fiction spaces is that the very notion of what is speculative and what is not depends on how ‘the real’ is defined. Many things viewed as being within the realm of the speculative—such as time travel, cross-species communication, and multidimensionality—are aspects of Indigenous realities. To the extent that Indigenous stories present a view of reality at odds with what Eurocentric traditions define as ‘the real’—and to the extent that our stories challenge settler myths regarding Indigenous peoples—all of our narratives might be characterised as speculative. To the extent that our narratives embody Indigenous truths, none of them are. No Indigenous person, for example, needs to invent the experience of a world-altering cataclysm, or the dystopia that follows. As Noongar writer Claire G. Coleman has pointed out, speaking of her groundbreaking speculative fiction work *Terra Nullius*: ‘Aboriginal people live in a dystopia every day. The problem is that the world we live in, people don’t understand that’ (Sullivan). And if the apocalypse is characterised by the chaotic violence of the frontier, then the dystopia is forged out of the structural violence that comes after.

Within my own creative practice, I wrote some of the Australian dystopia into *The Tribe* series in the form of an exclusionary law which I named the ‘Citizenship Accords’. These Accords were based on a real-life law: the *Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944* (WA). The ‘citizenship’ the Act offered came in the form of Aboriginal people being exempted from racially-based restrictions that only applied in the first place because they were Aboriginal. Citizenship was easily lost (including by associating with Aboriginal people who did not have their citizenship) and anyone applying was required to pledge that they would give up practising Aboriginal culture. As such, this was a form of citizenship that was deeply hostile to Aboriginality and offered no true belonging nor equality.

The real-life *Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act* was repealed in the 1970s; the attitudes that informed that regime persist. However, dealing with the legal embodiment of a past ideology in a future context allowed me to

ask, what if? What if an alliance of the privileged and the oppressed could fundamentally transform not only the laws of a society but the attitudes that sustained discrimination on a grand scale? As an Indigenous Futurist, I could end the Citizenship Accords within narrative space in a way that I could not end the actual laws that so blighted the lives of my ancestors.

But Indigenous Futurist storytellers do not only address the profound injustices of settler-colonialism. We also look to futures shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. In the words of Lou Cornum (Dine):

Indigenous futurism seeks to challenge notions of what constitutes advanced technology and consequently advanced civilizations [...] Extractive and exploitative endeavors are just one mark of the settler death drive, which indigenous futurism seeks to overcome by imagining different ways of relating to notions of progress and civilization. Advanced technologies are not finely tuned mechanisms of endless destruction. Advanced technologies should foster and improve human relationships with the non-human world. (np)

In Indigenous worldviews, the pattern of creation is comprised of living wholes. Because everything lives, everything moves, and in a constantly shifting reality, position is always relative—which is to say, determined by relationships. Indigenous kinship systems map connections (relationships), and the concept of ‘family’ is not confined to human beings but extends to animals and plants and every other shape of life in the world. As has been said by many Indigenous people before: all are our relations. And all of our relations have stories. The extent to which humans can understand the voices—and the stories—of other lifeforms depends, of course, on relationships. Every human cannot understand the language of every animal, but a human with (for example) a totemic connection to a particular animal will have greater insight into the stories of that shape of life. And all stories are valuable and valued. While the tales of humans offer a different perspective on the nature of being to the tales of (for example) crows, human stories are not inherently ‘better’. In any event, that which is human may one day be crow (and vice versa), as relationships stretch across spacetime to connect all life through the greater movements of existence. In this regard, Indigenous Futurisms provides a means for Indigenous peoples to carry our ancient knowledges into future worlds and, in so doing, change this one.

Conclusion

The many Indigenous nations of the globe have always been storytellers, and our stories tell of an animate reality in which everything lives and everything connects. The arrival of colonisers in Indigenous homelands engulfed us in cycles of cataclysmic violence that sought to annihilate our ways of being, knowing and doing. But Indigenous peoples and cultures survived the colonial apocalypse. We are storytellers still. And when readers of Indigenous stories have sufficient knowledge to first, identify and interrogate their own standpoint and second, interact with Indigenous standpoints as equal ways of knowing, new dialogues follow. And narratives told from Indigenous standpoints—in speaking the language of possibility—open the way to futures free of the colonial project; a world that can only be imagined because it does not (yet) exist.

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