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Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Worldwide knowledge and understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures, past and present

Applying the practical to the unattainable

I suppose I was asked to speak here today partly because of my recent involvement with the Aboriginal Studies Press, which is where I have just submitted my manuscript for publication and partly because of my background, working in the media as a radio journalist for ten years and a television producer for another seven. But most of all, I expect my invitation to speak today as an Indigenous writer and academic is perhaps what qualifies me the most, even though I must admit that have been an academic and a writer for only a few short years. And of course I don't make any apologies for that in any way shape or form.

Adding to my uncertainty or lets say, newness, on becoming an Indigenous writer and academic, has been for me, trying to balance the various values and experiences that I have learnt from being a media maker, writer and an academic, and as an Indigenous person. But instead of finding my various backgrounds to be an entire waste of time, or that my prior disciplines to be somewhat disconnected from each other or indeed chaotic, I have found that my past experiences have allowed me to be able to, what I call, learn how to apply the practical to the unattainable.

Yet the urge for academics, artists and media makers to oscillate between the disciplines is not uncommon but mutually shared, as pointed out by ANU scholars Denoon, Suzuki and Lal,¹ who in March this year, stated that it was not unusual for academics to describe themselves as closeted novelists, while journalists would frequently take time away from their bread and butter, to write academically. However, Denoon argued that the advantage that journalists seemed to have was that they perhaps were more capable of being able to write political columns without needing to condescend their readers, and blames academia for rewarding scholars to get published, rather than being widely reader- understood. Lal on the other hand goes further and says that much of academic writing is self-referential, jargon filled, the converted talking to the converted, with no sense of a wide readership while Suzuki said that a great deal of it, is unreadable, which is indeed a grand pity, since much of it is very interesting.

So that in trying to understand the importance of applying the practical to the unattainable, is perhaps the best way to describe what I think is the most appealing feature of Indigenous writing. Which leads me onto the point I wish to raise later, that is why I think it is vital to maintain or support those Indigenous

¹ Donald Denoon, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Brij V. Lal, 'Creative Endeavours' in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies *Quarterly Bulletin*, March 2004, p. 9.

publishing houses which currently exist, so that they may in turn not only publish literature about Indigenous topics by academics, but that they endeavour to publish more Indigenous writers.

To explain why I think this is important, I refer to a statement by another scholar Robert Hodge², who I incidentally used in my manuscript, about Aboriginal public television. Hodges statement argued, very compellingly, how it is mainly non-Aboriginal people, who wrote about Aboriginal people, in ways that makes them/us (Aborigines) the endlessly fascinating object of the academic gaze. And that it was fundamentally incommunicable and incomprehensible for not only Aboriginal people, but ordinary non-Aboriginal people. That knowledge of Aboriginality then becomes knowledge that only belongs or circulates amongst a privileged class of interpreters. Who may in turn complain about media makers for always sending the wrong message to the public. Yet from where I stand I can assure you that I have read my fair share of academics who I consider have been sending their own brand of wrong messages to the public for as long a time as the Australian media, if not longer. But having said all that, I must also must make it clear that I do not think that academic writing and Indigenous writing are so diametrically opposed to Indigenous writing, but that it is interesting to note that more Aboriginal people prefer to be media makers and artists than to become academics.

But of course before one can learn from Indigenous writing, then perhaps we might need to understand Indigenous writing. Even though Indigenous writing has really only become accessible in the last 40–50 years, Indigenous writing has nevertheless, become a vital part of Indigenous society. In the protocols and guidelines of the Australia Council, this year the ATSIA board have confirmed that Indigenous writing and writers take on the responsibilities of being more than academics and artists, but take on the role of being educators. They are the informants of Indigenous history, art, law and culture. In which ever way they tell their stories, as autobiographies, or oral histories, theatre etc. And that the way they write seem somewhat more accessible, coherent, unconstrained and humanistic than many of their academic contemporaries. In other words, I think that Indigenous writing is the embodiment of how to apply the practical to the unattainable.

However, in order to do this, we need to be published. We need publishers like the ASP. And this is not to confuse Indigenous writing to be the lesser or as one Indigenous writer describes as the little sister of the Indigenous arts and culture industries, in comparison to Indigenous visual arts, performing arts etc. Nor is it appropriate to suppose Indigenous writing as having a lesser quality of literary or educational value and worth. Indigenous writers want to be read, and understood by the ordinary, so that they may learn about the extraordinary.

Indigenous writing should not be seen as second-rate writing but that it is about being able to teach our kids our cultural heritages, languages, knowledge of land and living skills, and we want to be able to

² Robert Hodge, 'Aboriginal Truth and White Media: Eric Michaels Meets the Spirit of Aboriginalism', in *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 3.

teach non-Aboriginal people these things. We want to be able to share our stories directly from our hearts, and we would like to be able to show the rest of the world, what makes us survive, and how the oldest living culture known to mankind has kept the treasured stories and values of our forefathers. And more so, it is about being able to see a future whereby Indigenous writers can and will be able to contribute towards the Australian literary world, socially, culturally and indeed economically.

For if there is anyone who is out there thinking that Indigenous writing can only contribute socially, culturally or economically, to the Indigenous community only, then please let me remind you of the remarkable ways in which books like Witi's *Whale Rider* or Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, and of course (although not Indigenous to NZ) the remarkable novel *Lord of the Rings*, by Tolkein, and how these literary works have helped doubling NZ's economy making its unemployment rate at an all time low. In fact, I wonder about how extraordinary it might be if we were able to celebrate Indigenous writers the way we revere our Indigenous sports men and women. And what that would do for the Australian economy, if not the Australian psyche.

Just as important as it is to have more Indigenous fiction, more Indigenous non-fiction and more communicable Indigenous academic writing, so to is it important to maintain the work done by Indigenous publishing houses such as the ASP, who are I think in reality at the cold face of knowing how to apply the practical to the unattainable, that is, getting Indigenous writing published and widely read. That is of course only if we are truly committed to having our nations stories told, and our history and future understood and cherished, by the next generation of writers, and the many generations or readers that we expect to follow.

Thank you.

Frances Peters-Little.