

Telling Other Peoples' Stories in a Multicultural Society

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Because 98% of the Australian people are from immigrant stock the Storytelling revival of the 1970s-80s was not a matter of Storytellers remembering lost stories and traditions but of going to the library. We learnt our stories in books that had collected folktales from all around the world and these were the stories we told in a multicultural society where our people, our stories, our festivals come from all over the world.

But how much right does someone outside a culture have to tell that culture's stories? If we tell, how should it be done? The most contentious negotiation for most Australian Storytellers is the rights and wrongs of telling Aboriginal Dreaming stories so that will be my focus today, but it is my hope that this will illuminate the path to take in any cross cultural storytelling.

Why we shouldn't tell

Much has been taken from indigenous Australians: land, citizenship, health, family. Practices of successful invaders include the abolition of language, and thus of story and cultural identity. Colonialism extends from appropriating not only the material but the intangible: taking their paintings and putting them on tea towels, taking their stories and telling them in ways never intended by the communities, then consigning the culture holders to invisibility. (Maddern, 2011; Langrish, 2010; Rose, 2011; Brian Attebery in Finch, 2012)

For Indigenous cultures, drama and performance are central to identity, place and belonging and are an expression of a unique and continuing tradition (Australia Council, Performing arts, 2007). Extending historical appropriations, telling other peoples' stories manifests the practice of the powerful speaking on behalf of powerless: men for women, adults for children, able bodied for people with disabilities - and invaders for indigenous people.

Thus a culture and its values can be misrepresented and its meanings abused so that tragedy becomes sentimental and mystery ridiculous, with the trappings of culture merely gimmickry. (Welch, 2008, 10; Toelken in Welch, 2008, 3)

Although we now have a range of stories published by indigenous Australians, particularly picture books, many of the stories we can access through books are the result of the appropriation of Dreaming stories by non indigenous anthropologists, missionaries and collectors who were not guided by respect for the original cultures. The people who shared those stories rarely understood the implications of publication to unknown numbers of readers. Stories which may have been sacred, or particular to a certain nation or gender were gathered together, "tidied up" and disseminated. (Karntawarra)

One fundamental reason for this clumsy collection was due to the chasm between traditional indigenous stories and Western narrative structure and purpose. Klapproth reports on a Pitjantjatjara- Yankunytjatjara story structure as being Journey and Retrace, replicating life as movement between camps. Unlike a western narrative structure which builds to a climax, indigenous structure is relatively flat. Western stories are driven by complication toward problem solving with a focus on the individual protagonist. Indigenous stories focus on problem –avoidance, of maintaining the balance, and conveying key cultural concepts in an age appropriate manner. (Klapproth, 2004, 282-5)

Western collectors encountering these flat narratives would restructure them to include what they considered essential elements to a story. In contrast, what is essential to good storytelling and art in indigenous communities is accuracy: seriousness of intent, veracity, and good composition. (Klapproth, 2004, 287) Their purpose, after all, is spiritual not entertainment.

The story is the most powerful thing on earth because it will last as long as there are two people left on it. And when there is only one she will whisper these stories to remind herself of what has been lost and, in that way, she will have the company of her ancestors.

(Bruce Pascoe, in Australia Council , Writing)

Because of this importance, telling stories must be treated with care and deep understanding; but tellers may not discern a sacred story within a culture if it does not resemble sacred stories from their own. (Bruchac, 1996, 95, 96; Bonilla, 2013; Welch, 2008, 15)

If anyone started telling the stories of Jesus, having turned him into a girl with a squint and a penchant for revenge, there would probably be lots of people objecting. But even so, such ‘artistic’ messing with the sacred, by those with no apparent appreciation of sacredness, does go on.

(Tim Sheppard, in Welch, 2008, 15)

Joseph Bruchac is a Native American Storyteller, but his words are applicable to other indigenous cultures.

A story is not just a story. It is alive and it carries great responsibility...the oral re-enactment of powerful happenings which often relate very specifically to a particular Native nation and a specific physical place.

Stories make things happen. (Bruchac, 1996, 97)

Performance of any story necessarily involves some level of interpretation and adaptation to suit the individual Storyteller and their intended audience, and will, in part, be according to their cultural perspective, whether the story is first encountered by the Storyteller in a published book or at mother's knee. But interpretation of what is not fully understood will almost certainly result in misrepresentation, to an unforeseeable level of offence. There is nothing in the nature of simply being a teller of stories to privilege the Storyteller's interpretation, to authorise him or her as a bridge between the cultural origins of the story and a new audience. The real authority can only come from the culture holders and how much they have invested cultural wisdom in the teller.

Why we should tell

A story is only a story when it is told. According to the African proverb, when an old man dies a library burns to the ground – but that is less true if all the books have been loaned out.

Sprenghether felt that passing the stories on was the most important element of showing respect: making sure the stories stayed active. I woke up this morning with a phrase from the efforts to save endangered animals: *Extinction Is Forever*. (Welch, 2008, 11)

Like endangered animals, stories and language may need to have a controlled population being perpetuated in a metaphorical zoo so they do not become extinct, and this would be the outsider Storytellers. Obviously it would always be better for an indigenous storyteller to tell indigenous stories, to maintain not only the stories as artefacts, but as integral elements of a living culture, but there are situations, for instance outside Australia where there are fewer indigenous storytellers, when non indigenous Storytellers might tell Dreaming stories. At home, rather than accepting gigs we need to pass them on to authentic indigenous performers. (Maddern, 2011)

For the sake of the global community stories need to be shared. The wisdom and beauty of stories is part of our human heritage, spreading cultural understanding by concentrating on universals. (Bonilla, 2013; Burrows; Kinsella; Diane Wolkstein in Finch, 2012). “[T]he focus on dissimilarities ... obscures a true understanding of how intercultural communications can be enabled by a fundamental similarity: the human impulse to make sense of the world through narrative.” (Rose, 2011)

Not telling stories, siloing them according to members and non members, is to focus on “the soulless binaries of Us and Them”, preoccupied with difference (Rose, 2011). Racism has been defined as this concentration on the differences rather than to seek the human commonality. To inter weave, to achieve harmony within a multicultural society, each community is called on to generously give and respectfully receive.

But let's not dismiss these divisions too lightly. Judaism is just one culture that has insisted on maintaining the integrity of its cultural membership, particularly in terms of inter-faith marriages because the more cross-cultural marriages and families proliferate, the more the distinguishing

characteristics of Judaism are diffused. It is a challenge in each individual's life: the balance between the compromises necessary to be part of the wider community, and maintaining an independent, inviolable sense of selfhood.

Writers, in particular, twitch under the yoke of limitation to their creative scope. (David, 2010)

Aren't we novelists, isn't it our job to be able to create and imagine other lives from the inside out, to think ourselves into other people's shoes? ...I don't believe any subjects should be out of bounds for any writer. ...The way in which you do so, however, is important. ...My own feeling is that we need to understand one another, and rather than forbidding writers to stray beyond the boundaries of their own culture, we should be encouraging a better awareness of the sensitivities involved (Langrish, 2010)

How we should tell

- ***Who owns the story?***

Telling someone else's stories as your own is a storytelling taboo, be they personal, literary or cultural stories. (Welch, 2008, 5) Stories generally need to be separated by sufficient time from a living culture to be truly in the public domain. Beyond that pool of stories caution should be applied: someone or some group may own the story and if we wish to use it we should ask the story owners for permission (Karntawarra)

Cultural ownership refers to the perceived prerogative of an individual to tell a story by virtue of being a member of the distinctive group that produced it. The entitlement to tell a story via cultural ownership stems from participating in the tale's ethnicity, religion,... or other factors that have actual boundaries. (Welch, 2008, 6)

In fact, there are no stories where an individual can claim they have appropriated nothing: even personal stories have shared ownership with the other participants in the experience. (David, 2010) Most folktales within living cultures including, for example, Scotland or Native American communities, are owned by individuals or families, who need to give permission for that story to be shared. Within some communities, particularly indigenous Australians, there are elders, specifically qualified within the community, who hold authority to teach, preserve and perpetuate their stories within their culture. Unqualified outsiders re-telling those stories is offensive. (Bruchac, 1996, 96; Kinsella; Australia Council, Writing , 2007)

Determining the rights of cultural inclusion can be a bit like a delta. Eric Maddern believes that we need to start with our relationship to a particular story.

[F]irst you have to find a story you like. A storyteller may read dozens of stories before finding one he or she wants to tell. And then it's not just a matter of liking it. You've got

to develop a relationship with it. Learning it for telling requires effort. In time you must grow to love your story. If you don't it won't survive in your repertoire. The more you love and relate to a story the more meaningful it becomes. It helps if you care about its culture of origin. You have to make the story your own, but in the telling you have to show an appreciation of its source. As you get inside the story so, to a degree, do you get inside the culture itself. The story should help you cultivate an empathy for the culture that you will convey in the telling.

It makes sense to look, initially, for stories from cultures you already have some relationship with, whether it be ancestral, geographic or perhaps through travel. Knowing what is your 'own culture' is not always easy these days.(Maddern, 2011)

These are the three broad ways we might claim a cultural affinity with a particular story or type of story

- Bloodline: culture by ancestry
- Research: which might include living in a community over time as well as learning through books, online and interviews.
- Sympathy of mind: perhaps the truest connection, most noted in those who made space in their lives to find out how to do something they loved. (Welch, 2008, 7)

One of the paths to that sympathy – in a way, circling back to the beginning of our right to tell - is exposure to the experiences and values of others through the stories we read and hear, which behoves us to learn and tell stories from different cultures.

- *Intellectual property*

Stories which belong to individuals can be copyrighted if there is a material form. Within intangible culture there is a definite taboo against telling someone else's story as your own, that this is plagiarism and intellectual theft.

In practice, there are differing interpretations regarding the protection of the intellectual property of storytelling. Traditional European storytelling relies on a personal request and permission for collecting stories that have been heard. Performance storytelling in Australia is much more concerned with the legalistic copyright requirements of literary material; the protocols of not plagiarising heard stories are bound by an honour system of not telling other Storytellers' stories. It is the traditional European method that lends itself to appropriate protocols for telling indigenous stories.

However, there is now more than an honour system in place. After more than two centuries of appropriation, Aboriginal intangible culture is now protected by major international legislation:

<p>1989</p> <p>Paris General Conference</p>	<p>UNESCO</p> <p><i>Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore.</i> Section F: Protection of Folklore</p>	<p>whether it be individual or collective it [folklore] deserves to be protected in a manner inspired by the protection provided for intellectual productions</p>
<p>January 2002</p> <p>Muscat, Oman</p>	<p>World Intellectual Property Organisation</p> <p><i>International Forum, Intellectual Property and Traditional Knowledge: Our Identity, Our Future</i></p>	<p>traditional knowledge plays a vital role in building bridges between civilisations and cultures, in creating wealth and in promoting the human dignity and cultural identity of traditional communities</p>
		<p>TCEs (traditional cultural expressions) of particular religious and cultural significance should be noted in a public register so there is certainty as to which are protected and for whose benefit. The items in the register would be afforded a form of protection similar to that given by intellectual property rights legislation.</p>
		<p>With TCEs other than words, signs and names, these acts include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the reproduction, publication, adaptation and communication to the public and adaptation of its traditional cultural expressions • any use of traditional cultural expression which does not acknowledge in an appropriate way the community as the source • any distortions, mutilations or other modification of or inappropriate action in relation to the traditional cultural expression • the acquisition or exercise of intellectual property rights over the traditional cultural expression adaptations of them.
<p>July 2002</p>	<p><i>The Pacific Regional Framework for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture</i></p>	<p>The prior and informed consent of the traditional owners is required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reproduce or publish the traditional

2006

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Article 31

knowledge or expressions of culture

- perform or display the traditional knowledge or expressions of culture in public
- make available online or electronically transmit to the public (whether over a path or a combination of paths, or both) traditional knowledge or expression of culture
- use the traditional knowledge or expression of culture in any other form.

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts.

They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

(Welch, 2008, 2; Australia Council, Performing , 2007; Australia Council, Writing , 2007)

- ***Principles and protocols***

Partly arising from these documents, the Australia Council for the Arts has created *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts* and the *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing* advising on the appropriate use and transmission of Aboriginal intangible culture.

Indigenous peoples' heritage is a living heritage and includes objects, knowledge, artistic, literary, musical and performance works, which may be created now or in the future, and based on that heritage. Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights include the right to:

- own and control Indigenous cultural and intellectual property
- ensure that any means of protecting Indigenous cultural and intellectual self-determination

(Australia Council, Performing , 2007)

The principles outlined below are a framework for respecting Indigenous heritage.

1. Respect

When organising a performance or event of local, state or national significance, it is respectful to invite a representative of the traditional owners to attend and present a 'welcome to country' address.

2. Indigenous control

All participants in a project discuss how Indigenous control over a project will be exercised. This raises the issue of who can represent language groups and who can give clearance of traditionally and collectively owned material. To consult effectively and gain consent for the use of Indigenous cultural material in a particular project, the Indigenous people with authority for specific stories, geographic locations, dances or performances need to be identified. Speaking to the right people is very important

3. Communication, consultation and consent

When a non-Indigenous group collaborates with Indigenous performers and the community, it is best to invite an Indigenous person to work as a cultural consultant or have in place a clear process to enable a two-way exchange and meaningful partnership. Copyright owners have the right to prevent others from using the work without their permission.

4. Interpretation, integrity and authenticity

Giving proper consideration to authenticity and integrity means respecting any customary law or cultural obligations associated with the work. These include gender, correct language, sensitivity to the context of the work's performance, and respecting cultural norms in promotional material

5. Secrecy and confidentiality

6. Attribution

7. Proper returns

8. Continuing cultures

9. Recognition and protection

(Australia Council, Performing , 2007)

“Respect” remains the bedrock of justification for tellers who present rather than represent cultural narratives , but that covers four responses:

- not telling the story;
- researching to ensure accuracy;
- passing it on by telling it;
- telling with participant understanding. (Welch, 2008, 9)

“Respect” does not necessarily mean outright *verboden*, but rather making the story’s cultural features as accurate as possible, (Welch, 2008, 9)although there will be times when the culture

holder that is checking your story will insist on certain words for the right meaning to be conveyed, as well as avoiding outdated or inappropriate perspectives and terminology. (Protocols performing) For instance, it is more appropriate to say the Dreaming rather than Dreamtime, elders rather than chiefs or kings, nations or communities rather than tribes. (Craven, 1996, 3,14, 10)

Throughout our exploration of *Why not to tell*, the issues of not understanding, and therefore misrepresenting kept recurring. Deep research is the ladder out of this hole: finding out as much as possible about the culture holders and cultural context of the story, gaining permission, be willing to hand over power over the story to those culture holders, actively collaborating to produce a presentation of story which is as authentic as possible, and paying royalties for the privilege. ((Australia Council, Performing , 2007; Karntawarra) If your reaction (after an initial wriggle of impatience) continues to be frustration or resentment with these demands, then the story is not for you.

Respect starts with an acknowledgement that the Storyteller is presenting the cultural story not representing the culture. Enactment - attempting an accent for instance - is a crucial issue in cross cultural offence. The most obvious example would be American blackface performers of the past, but at the recent Australian Folklore Network conference during a discussion about the pleasure with which some Anglo Australians had taken up Baltic folk dancing, someone said how inappropriate it would be for them to participate in Korean or Vietnamese dancing, that *this level* of enactment would be wrong.

So the four main steps in telling a cultural story are:

1. Research
2. Obtaining informed permission
3. Checking with the cultural consultant and rewriting as necessary
4. Introducing the story to the audience so they can enter into genuine understanding

(Langrish,2010; Burrows; Maddern, 2011)

The checking makes the story a collaborative construction of meaning rather than merely consultative, forging an empathetic connection, ensuring that the culture holder retains authority over the story. (Rose, Performing Protocol) Accuracy remains a crucial criterion for the value of any traditional cultural expression. (Klapproth, 2004; Maddern, 2011)

[E]ven when a storyteller spins a thread of connection with someone from another culture, that narrative thread is always fragile, always partial, because of the inevitable lacunas of understanding that make some of the deep meaning of the story, its cultural particularity, inaccessible to the outsider. But ...understanding between two people, in the sense of a sympathetic connection, is not dependent upon total comprehension. (Rose, 2011)

- *Performing for culture holders*

When the storyteller tells stories not of their own culture before an audience of that culture, a range of reactions is possible: somewhere along the continuum from outrage, through annoyance to pride. Many storytellers have experienced an audience member's excitement at having their stories told, of their expressed pride and empowerment at having a positive light shone on their culture by a prestigious visitor. (Bonilla, 2013; Strauss, 1996,105; Maddern, 2011) One method is to express deference and open-ness by inviting the audience to share their insights into the story and its meanings, even after extensive pre performance research. (Bonilla, 2013)

I have concentrated here on the telling of Aboriginal stories, because these are the most fraught as well as the most frequently encountered in an Australian context, but in multicultural Australia there are so many stories and cultures we can interact with: for Chinese New Year and Diwali to St Patrick's Day and Mardi Gras. To ascertain how each group feels about a cultural outsider telling their stories, I can start with extending empathy about how I feel when non Australians tell Australian stories.

It depends on the performance. I resent the assumption commonly made outside Australia that the only Australian stories are Aboriginal, particularly since I am so cautious about telling Dreaming stories. There are many other Australian stories that anyone could tell. What I ask is an absence of clichés and bad accents, an effort to look for fresh, interesting stories. Since this is how I would wish to be treated, this is my starting point in how I treat others. If I want to know more about the particular sensitivities of a specific community, then I need to ask.

The protocols and simple good manners of transmitting any of these stories requires careful investigation with due consideration for the story, the culture and the community. This demands an engagement of mind and time, as well as heart. Respect must be genuine.

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