

“Taste good iny?”: Images of and from Australian Indigenous Literature

Jared Thomas Speaks with
Teresa Podemska-Abt

TPA: Hi Jared, thanks for dedicating this time.

JT: Not at all, a pleasure.

TPA: Tell me, have you ever met a Polish person?

JT: I've had the pleasure of meeting a few Polish people and each and every one of them is very impressive.

TPA: Would you tell me about your “meeting” with Polish culture, perhaps you have read some Polish literature?

JT: My engagement with Polish people and culture is minimal in comparison with my interaction with people of other cultures but very positive. I first became aware of the plight of Polish immigrants and their culture through a friendship with young Australian Polish theatre director Magdalena Grubski. Stories of Magdalena's parents' immigration to Australia and their efforts to carve out a positive life for their family in the face of adversity are remarkable. Magdalena's parents' key concern when arriving

to Australia was ensuring that their children become very skilled English communicators. Subsequently Magdalena is today a significant creative and cultural producer living and working in Tasmania. Most recent engagement with Polish people and culture is that of working with Australian Polish students. Similarly, stories of their parents' immigration to Australia are fascinating and reveal much accomplishment. I enjoy speaking with these students about how they continue to practise Polish culture and how they envisage maintaining cultural practice into the future. In terms of Polish literature and culture, I am aware of its wealth and I hope to, one day, experience it.

TPA: What is your definition of literature, especially Aboriginal literature?

JT: I grew up in a very working class family with both parents being of Aboriginal ancestry. My maternal grandfather Jim Fitzpatrick was Aboriginal Irish and until his grandparents landed in Australia and demanded that my great grandfather

leave my great grandmother due to her Aboriginality, my grandfather experienced a privileged western education. He embedded in me a respect for the power of language, articulation, story and reading while many of the people I grew up with in the working class town of Port Augusta didn't seem to care much for these things. Due to this, I have always been interested in stories that transcend class and culture, and therefore I value not only the written word as a form of literature but oral stories. My paternal great uncles have been recorded singing stories that continue for weeks, as the stories told of land and legends between the expanses of the Southern and Northern poles of Australia.

In regard to a definition of Aboriginal Australian literature, it is stories written and told by Aboriginal people and stories that discuss any aspect of Aboriginal life, culture and imaginings. In fact, Dreaming stories are still the most important stories told by Aboriginal people because they impart so much valuable knowledge about the land and our culture. I love reading works of fiction where the writers incorporate elements of Dreaming stories, place names and culture. Many fiction writers such as Kim Scott, Terri Janke, Larrissa Behrendt and of course Alexis Wright are doing this so effectively. Wright's writing is infused with cultural knowledge and all narrative is framed by a world in which dreaming continues rather

than being portrayed as a thing of the past.

TPA: Where do you think runs the borderline between Australian and Aboriginal literatures, if there is any?

JT: The writings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are distinctly different to those authored by non-Indigenous authors because they draw on lived experience as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There are many non-Indigenous writers that include Aboriginal characters and issues in their work but without being Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander I think it impossible to truly convey the voice of Indigenous people. And essentially we are speaking from two opposing positions of those who have benefited from colonisation and the dispossessed. The power held by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors to comment on the nature of colonial Australia is inequitable as non-Indigenous writers often write from a cultural standpoint that is valued by the dominating status quo. The role of Aboriginal writers is to challenge the status quo. I would like to see more non-Aboriginal Australian authors acknowledge and surrender their privilege when writing about us and shared experience.

There are works by non-Aboriginal authors that are important discussions of Aboriginal Australia

such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* by Thomas Keneally. I also like Katherine Susannah Pritchard's *Coonardoo* and *Brumby Innes* as they provide a good description of the attitudes held by non-Indigenous people about Aboriginal Australia. To know of these attitudes is important when considering where barriers exist between people and how to overcome them. Even though Pritchard's representations are sometimes questionable, she was challenging commonly held notions about Aboriginal Australian and white Australian treatment of Aboriginal people. She must be commended for this.

It was unfortunate last year to hear Thomas Keneally say that he regrets writing *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. I think his regret stems primarily from public expression by Aboriginal people and communities that has built over the last ten or so years for people researching and writing about Aboriginal Australia to engage with them when doing so. There are some Aboriginal people that say outright that non-Aboriginal people shouldn't write about Aboriginal Australia, especially Dreaming stories or stories with strong cultural elements. I think that the majority of Aboriginal people understand that it is very difficult to censor writers though and therefore prefer that non-Indigenous people engage with them to ensure that the representation has integrity.

TPA: What in your opinion identifies contemporary Australian Indigenous literature?

JT: There are so many boundaries being pushed by Aboriginal writers at the moment so innovation is definitely one of the key characteristics of contemporary Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literatures. Brenton Ezra McKenna from Broome who writes graphic novels, for sure, has lately impressed readers. Since 1988 much of the work coming from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia was autobiographical. Today there is more fiction than ever being produced. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are employing genres such as speculative, chick lit, horror and graphic novels to convey Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and imaginings. Despite the variety of styles being used by authors between the works, there is a strong link to country, community, culture and family that is conveyed. I feel new work differs to past works as there is greater desire to celebrate, challenge, investigate aspects of Aboriginal life rather than continuing to paint ourselves as victims.

Some early Aboriginal literature—such as works by Oodgeroo Noonuccal,¹ much of whose work I love—reinforces the pervading

¹ Kath Walker.

attitudes of white Australians or presents inferiority to white people. There are some contemporary commentators that continue to do this but those Indigenous authors that are respected by their peers deconstruct and provide opposition to ideologies that impede the aspirations of Aboriginal Australia. It is very difficult to criticize Oodgeroo though because much of her writing is so beautiful and powerful. Perhaps her prominent attitudes were a political poetic employed to engage and re-educate audiences.

In the last decade writers like Tara June Winch and Kim Scott have emerged. Their writing is so beautifully poetic. Tara is known as a novelist but has been undertaking a mentorship with renowned playwright Wole Soyinka. *Swallow the Air* was an incredible success, and I feel that given her ability, dedication to craft and the experience she is gaining, her future works, like Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, will set new standards.

In terms of innovation, Anita Heiss' chick lit is interesting; it is exposing itself to a big readership. Anita would have to currently be Australia's best selling Aboriginal writer. She has edited important Aboriginal anthologies and produced an engaging critique of Aboriginal literature in recent years. She is so effective because she is one of the key advocates of Aboriginal writing in the country and has a great rapport with writers. I know that Ani-

ta is burning to write more literary works and critique but I think her work is so important because she is doing what most Aboriginal writers set out to do, which is to communicate knowledge about Aboriginal Australia to a large audience so that our future may be brighter.

TPA: What does it mean to be an Indigenous writer, and what kind of responsibility does such a role bring? What are the pros and cons of a model author and/or narrator or a character to voice his or her authority?

JT: Being a Nukunu writer is a great responsibility as I am often mesmerized by the fact that the act of storytelling is one that assists Nukunu people to forge, maintain and progress an amazing culture that produces profound interaction and love between people and care of the environment. In *Nukunu warrala*,² *Yura Muda* is the term for what is commonly referred to as the Dreaming. *Yura* means "man of the earth" and *Muda* means "country." *Yura Muda* means the connection between people and land and land and people and our traditional stories reinforce this connection. Through my writing I attempt to articulate, reinforce and inspire others to activate these connections. I do this in a number of works; my new novel *Calypso Summers*, for ex-

² In English—the Nukunu language.

ample, set in the 1980s, follows the journey of a young Nukunu man who generates a good economic base for his family through his knowledge of Nukunu culture and principle. I show how connection to country and the learning of cultural knowledge enriches his life—also by tapping into the mindset of young Nukunu and other Aboriginal readers so that they can see themselves reflected in the character. Once young people can engage with characters and hopefully like them, I can then begin to challenge their views or present them with alternatives.

In the case of “The Healing Tree,” I wanted to create sympathy for Alf so that the young readers, particularly Aboriginal people, could come to understand his experiences and hopefully not repeat them. This short story of course educates non-Aboriginal readers about Aboriginal Australia but it is written firstly for Aboriginal people. Due to the profound effect of colonisation, many Aboriginal youth don’t have the opportunity to engage with role models or learn about history or culture. Art and film fill this void.

Due to the responsibility of my role, my writing is a very collective enterprise. I ensure that many Nukunu people have the opportunity to advise upon and amend representations so that my writing in turn possesses the authority of the group rather than myself. “The

Healing Tree” was built upon actual experiences of an Aboriginal man outside of my group. In order to tell the story I spoke with him about my intent and asked his permission to write the story and to set it within the Nukunu context. I think it is through this process that representations move toward closer representations of “truth” of Aboriginal experience rather than merely being a construct based on personal being, experience and observation of Aboriginal life.

It would be false of me to say that I don’t enjoy the attention that communicating Nukunu culture brings but it is more satisfying to know that my representations are imbued with the principles of the collective and provide a legacy for future generations of Nukunu people and other Australians, both black and white, to engage with country and culture in the most meaningful way.

TPA: Your short story “The Healing Tree”³—from which I borrowed a phrase for our conversation’s title—shows uncommon gentleness, consideration, subtlety perhaps? Is this story an effect of traumas in your family, or is the narrator of the story a communal Indigenous voice?

JT: Firstly, thank you for your

³ Thomas, Jared. “The Healing Tree.” *Meanjin: Best New Writing in Australia* 65.1 (2006): 13–18.

very generous commentary on the work. Perhaps the qualities that you have picked up in the writing derive from a non-judgemental stance that I strive to adopt in relation to most human experience. The story's main focus is that of the effects of alcoholism as alcohol has been used as a device to dispossess people of their connection to land and culture. While Aboriginal people today are less likely to drink alcohol in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians, the effects of drinking have touched almost all Aboriginal families, so therefore while the story is told within the Nukunu context, I would like to think that it speaks to many Aboriginal Australians.

Members of my family acknowledge the need to heal from what has happened to us as individuals or as a group. You see, it is important to protect our safety by taking time out and resting and giving back to self. Aborigines often still experience racism and sometimes this can really put you in a bad mental space. I personally still get very angry from time to time by the terrible things that continue to occur to Aboriginal people across Australia, such as the current Northern Territory intervention.

I believe that spending time on country and reconnecting with country and culture is vital in our healing. It is also important that we as Aboriginal people take steps to heal ourselves rather than wait for

racism to disappear and the Government to miraculously introduce a raft of programs that fix everything.

TPA: The story starts from the voice of the uncle, the elder who is brought to the scene by Alf's memory of his rebellious youth, and ends up with the wish of an old, sick Alf, for his tormented heart to be cured by *yir-tas*, the magic healing trees his father once taught him about. Does this envelope-like structure of the story mean that the most powerful voice of the story is the traditional voice?

JT: Simply the answer is yes. I believe that before the advent of capitalism and its historic key driving forces, colonisation and slavery, cultures everywhere had through trial and error over the ages refined ways of living that best utilized resources and accommodated human life and environmental sustainability. I hope to constantly remind people that the forsaking of life models that benefited entire communities and nations today only benefit very few and the only way to maintain human and environmental sustainability is to revert to the traditional or at least underpin the contemporary with traditional values. Alf's journey brings him to the realization of the value of his culture and the traditional.

The challenge for me as a writer with future works is to show how culture can coexist in a contemporary world and create better out-

comes for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

TPA: What are lingual realities of Aboriginal literature? Does the use of Aboriginal English or Indigenous languages add to the authority and/or authenticity of narration and/or heroes?

JT: I understand how language adds to the authority and authenticity of narration and I guess that my use of the Nukunu language does lend to an authority and authenticity. However, I use *Nukunu warrala* wherever it is appropriate, not to heighten the authority of my writing but to ensure that the Nukunu readers can see their culture reflected in my writing. There are few Nukunu language speakers and my incorporation of *Nukunu warrala* is intended to prolong and revitalize this language. I particularly like using Nukunu words for specific landmarks as it assists in reinforcing connection to our country. The way that Aboriginal English differs to mainstream is probably most evident when watching Aboriginal Theatre. When writing for an Aboriginal theatre company there is more scope than when writing a novel and having to deal with agents and editors to infuse the work with the language, speech patterns and idiosyncrasies of particular cultural groups. Vivienne Clemen’s *Bitin’ Back* is a wonderful read because the dialogue is so rich and

reveals so much about peoples’ values. It is interesting to note that the novel was an adaptation of her play which maybe reinforces my theory.

In my novel for children that will be released by Oxford University Press in 2011, Nukunu ways of thinking are explicit through language. Thirteen-year-old Dallas Davis is asked to assist a scientist in the protection of the *Eucalyptus albens*, an almost extinct eucalypt in Nukunu Country. When the scientist sees a bird fly from a tree, he asks what the Nukunu words are for “tree” and “bird.” He learns that the bird and tree have an individual name but the general term for bird and tree is *ita*.⁴ The scientist is confused. Dallas finds this strange and says that they are named the same thing because they can’t live without each other. It is a simple concept but these uses of language really do inform of Aboriginal worldview, in this case the way that Aboriginal people value symbiotic relationships.

TPA: Let’s ponder a bit more on powers that interplay within the story’s structure, narration and characters. It seems that Alf, a main character, has got the least authorial powers to be listened to, thus—to speak; is it because he can’t be trusted, can’t set an example for boys? Alf’s voice is weak, deceptive

⁴ A variation of the word *yirta* used in “The Healing Tree.”

and at times bitter, while his unhappy story is told validly. How much didactic, politics and (hi-)story is there in this story?

JT: Alf is powerful in that his voice represents the voice of the dispossessed and silenced. The power of his voice lies not in what is present but what is absent. Alf's experiences are common to many Aboriginal people, particularly men who are completely disenfranchised. They have spent their childhood in institutions separated from families and culture and are shunned from society as adults. Itinerant, they seek work or acceptance in places only to be continually rejected. The really sad thing about Alf is that his life began with a really strong cultural base. His father was nurturing as was the land he lived in but the realities of western society for Aboriginal people meant that he was marginalized.

In Aboriginal cultures the right to speak is activated by possession of knowledge, experience, and participation in certain cultural events, age and connection to certain parts of country. Alf is detached from all that is good about his cultural heritage and once he realizes this, it is too late to change his life.

Today, many of the barriers that were in place for Aboriginal people to participate in their culture no longer exist. It is my hope that young people again begin to feel proud about speaking about

culture and knowledge authoritatively. It really is heartening when you hear a young person speaking about their culture and land with passion.

TPA: "The Healing Tree" has one of the most beautiful, poetic, soft, loving images of the Australian landscape I've ever read. The picture reveals itself when Alf comes back home, which, shockingly, is a mission! (I'll come back to this Indigenous reality later.) Through Alf's eyes one sees a particular road, hills, ranges . . . This is a land depicted with the eye of a visual artist. I know that you are a man of many gifts—an academic, novelist, play writer, poet, teacher. Do you paint or make films perhaps? I wouldn't be surprised if you did, as many Indigenous writers work simultaneously in different art disciplines. David Page composes, writes, dances, directs, sings; I was amazed with his *Page 8*, brilliantly combining oral traditional storytelling and contemporary genres of drama, musical and pop show; Sally Morgan is an academic and a painter; Sam Watson—an academic teacher, activist, writer, filmmaker; and—on top of it—most Indigenous people speak a few languages. Can you comment on the Indigenous concept of creation, philosophy and beliefs behind talent and on the oral tradition genres in contemporary Indigenous artistic rendering?

JT: My girlfriend reckons I write schmaltzy pop songs or some such thing and she’s probably on the money. Traditionally Nukunu children would have the opportunity to partake in all aspects of social life and once a talent was discovered, this would be fostered. I experiment in a lot of artistic mediums and have a healthy appreciation for all. I have made some documentaries relating to life and culture of Nukunu people and have been involved in various capacities in the making of big Australian feature films. I paint a little but do this more for personal enjoyment rather than for public exhibition.

My daughter Tilly Tjala is showing great promise as a singer, actress, activist and storyteller—and I must encourage all of these things.

The semiotician Marshal McLuhan is renowned for the phrase “the medium is the message” and I think that Aboriginal artists such as Gordon Hookey and Richard Frankland have truly adopted this philosophy. Richard is an amazing singer/songwriter, author and filmmaker and Gordon is the master of combining text and image.

My parents both dabble in painting landscapes and one can’t help but be inspired and motivated by the wealth of artistic talent amongst Aboriginal Australia. Most of my professional life has consisted of facilitating the work of Aboriginal artists of all forms.

TPA: Who is the Indigenous writer/artist? Is s/he a bard? What is her/his assigned place within the Indigenous society? Is s/he a special person, what status does s/he have? Also, how is an image of an artist constructed by Indigenous art and literature?

JT: “Our future is our culture and our culture rests in the hands of our storytellers.” This is a profound statement shared with me by women of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands that I feel sums up perfectly the reverence Aboriginal people have for our storytellers. Aboriginal paintings, for example, do not exist in isolation from Dreaming or cultural stories. Importance is attributed to paintings in respect to the importance of the story or the degree of knowledge possessed by the person painting/telling the story.

There are many Aboriginal people that possess great storytelling ability but I am so often overwhelmed by the power of stories told me every day by Aboriginal people about everyday life or cultural experience. It is for this reason that many Aboriginal people with writing ability begin their writing careers by documenting the stories of family members. Our lives are so rich with story. All artistic statements stem from story. So in Aboriginal culture storytellers are considered the most important of artists and perhaps the

most esteemed people in the community.

TPA: Let's go back for a moment to the images of landscaping which—from my readings—are particularly vivid in A. Wright's *Carpentaria*, K. Scott's *True Country* or Herb Wharton's *Unbranded*. Land is often a predominant feature in many Indigenous literary works. It represents Indigenous mythology and philosophy. How does the literary concept of Land represent Indigenous culture, philosophy, beliefs and spirituality? How do you incorporate this concept in your work? Is it important to you, in what way?

JT: I know that I see Nukunu land differently than non-Nukunu and it is important to me to articulate the way that I see and think about country. My traditional country is more than plants, animals and geological formations; it is full of story, my lifeblood, ancestry and nourishment. It is the umbilical cord to the inner workings of self. There is a story for everything that exists on country and these stories highlight the way people interact with and see the world.

The film *Ten Canoes* for example focuses on stories relating to parts of the landscape that in turn underpin an all-encompassing worldview. Nukunu people call each little story relating to land, plants, animals and objects *Dangora*. Each story needs to be considered in relation to each other and

it is through these stories that understandings and discourses evolve.

There's a small section in my new novel *Calypso Summers* where the central character Calypso is travelling with his girlfriend and they see two *guldas*, sleepy lizards. Calypso's cousin informs that *guldas* always walk together in the direction of water and they mate together for life. This brief discussion about the lizards reveals Nukunu philosophies about love and how knowledge relating to animals enables people to live with their landscape.

Alexis Wright's literary power not only lies in communicating the way that Aboriginal people view country but western objects.

TPA: Evidently, Land is represented in a variety of artefacts that also constitute politics. Alexis Wright said: "I believe that Aboriginal government can work in Australia . . . I feel that the quest for Aboriginal government is relevant and important for the future stability of our people . . . and that I can use whatever skills I have as a writer to portray in literature how this dream could be lived."⁵ What is your understanding of this opinion and in what way would you support it?

⁵ Wright, Alexis. "Weapon of Poetry." *Overland* 193 (2008): 19. Also available at <http://web.overland.org.au/?page_id=576>.

JT: It is very important to me that successful Aboriginal governance is achieved. Pre-colonial Aboriginal government must have been very effective as we all share the Dreaming and it is known that many groups came together for ceremony and to trade and share resources. The principles of our governance are known to many but there are pressures that impact on the effectiveness of people to work together. I love reading books like Kevin Gilbert’s *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It* that examine Aboriginal governance and how Aboriginal people are subject to government policy.

I feel that it is critical for Aboriginal writers to further project a positive vision of how Aboriginal Australia can look like. Hope is critical to all people and where problems appear insurmountable, it is important for people to know that they can succeed. Thus, self-determination is very important to Aboriginal people. The concept of it means that we have access to good housing, health and education but are free to maintain and reinvigate culture and language.

My next novel will be about how life could be if Aboriginal people, in this case the Nukunu, live the life we wish, devoid of opposition from government and western notions of appropriate education, spirituality and aspiration being imposed upon us.

TPA: Aboriginal literature sometimes “paints” land with the shapes

of a woman. Divine Serpent, as I understand it, is a manifestation of Indigenous cosmologies but also has a strong feminine element in it. What kind of mythical, metaphorical and/or symbolic connections between such images of land and ancestral snakes can be made?

JT: In Nukunu cosmology, there is both male and female serpent ancestors. The serpents are even believed to change gender for particular purposes. It is Nukunu belief that the Flinders Ranges and other geography such as creeks and islands along the coast were created by these ancestors. Wongihara is a significant site on Nukunu Country and it is the place where the snake ancestor gave law to Nukunu people. *Wongihara* literally means “where the snake spoke” and the Nukunu are often referred to as “the snake people.”

Stories about the deeds, trials and tribulations and creations of the rainbow serpent are very common amongst Aboriginal groups. I can’t speak for other authors but when I write about the landscape in connection with serpents, it is because it is Nukunu belief that serpents formed the landscape and it certainly looks as if it was created by giant serpents. There is country in the Flinders Ranges that actually looks feminine and masculine in accord with the gender of the serpent that travelled through the landscape.

TPA: There are no women in your story. Why?

JT: There are strong women in other of my stories and Nukunu culture is based upon a matrilineal social organization so it is something that I have upmost respect for. “The Healing Tree” is a story pitched at young men. I have wonderful aunties that I would like to write about and some of the documentaries that I have made capture these characters.

TPA: You have mentioned Anita Heiss’ chick novel. Her heroine, Alice, is unusually strong. A free, knowledgeable woman. To what extent is such a heroine possible in real Indigenous life? What is her cultural archetype? Who is the boss in Indigenous cultures’ relationships? Angel Day and Normal Phantom, a couple from *Carpentaria*, live in separate worlds, well, men’s and women’s worlds. “Only when she had gone, was he able to understand that the woman had always been a hornet’s nest, waiting to be disturbed.” How close to the cultural roles of a man and a woman in the real world is Phantom’s reflection?

JT: With colonization, the gender roles of men were severely disrupted in comparison to those of women. The roles of men included conducting rituals, educating and nurturing children, and of course hunting. The basis for this activity is land as

all ritual and education related to it. Women performed similar roles to men but of course they had children and gathered for the family. I think it is easier for women to enjoy some of these traditional roles within a contemporary context whereas men have been disenfranchised to a different degree. In my family women have always been strong, tradition and family strong. This strength is the bonding element that has kept families together.

TPA: Some people say that Indigenous cultures of Australia have survived and are sustaining due to Indigenous women’s extreme abilities to adapt to tragic/harsh conditions, their procreation power and the status within their respective communities. It seems that the authority of Angel Day comes from such powers, and—in regard to her fate—from the element that unites the real with unreal, the real and abnormal, and in consequence—the normal and paranormal. The line between different states of our individual and collective human reality (physical, metaphysical, cosmic) is also expressed by the concept of Dreaming/Dreamtime that realizes itself in everyday life. How does this ontologically and epistemologically complicated, complex female character comply with the Indigenous present and traditional worlds? Where is the demarcating line between the real and fictional in Aboriginal literature?

JT: I think I may have responded to this in my last comment . . . Anyway, *Angel Day* is extremely strong; she tries to survive in her very hostile environment. The real and fictional in Aboriginal literature? I think I will have to give it further thought. I think the real is always enclosed in fiction. Importantly, I don't think of the Dreaming so much as the metaphysical but rather the pragmatic. If we disconnect the belief that mythical ancestors created certain landscapes or performed certain activities during creation time, the stories that exist from these “myths” still provide a wonderful blueprint for human interaction. The Dreaming does provide a wonderful lens through which to negotiate the world and I believe that some Aboriginal people believe in the Dreaming wholeheartedly and others believe in the power of the stories deriving from it.

TPA: While reading Indigenous literary works I am most often on the verge of politics. Politics and ideas reside within the actual context of civilizations, and at the same time they co-create cultural reality. As a result of Indigenous subjugation, Indigenous Peoples lost their status, and—to some degree—their cultural identity. But any acculturation process is always bilateral, thus it also affects the conqueror. On the verge of both cultures a new civilization group has been created; on one hand this group pursues its original roots,

on the other—it leans on its acculturation; henceforth a new culture, such as Indigenous contemporary literature has been created. How important is this kind of cultural flow, osmosis, infiltration of those two worlds in your life and literary work, and in Indigenous literature?

JT: The notion of “being caught between two worlds” is commonly bandied around in reference to Aboriginal Australia. I would like to see a reversion to traditional principles applied in the contemporary but the reality is that many Aboriginal people through circumstance embrace elements of western culture. I want to see non-Indigenous people acculturate Aboriginal worldviews and ways of living. For this to occur, it requires a movement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people becoming politicized and contesting the context of our “civilization.”

TPA: What do you think about the Australian literocritical postcolonial discourse? In what way does it benefit Indigenous authors and literature? Who is empowered by this discourse, and to what extent do Indigenous authors use it in their creative works? What, in your opinion, are the advantages and disadvantages of postcolonial literary interpretation strategies to Indigenous literary works?

JT: This is a very difficult question to answer because I have to con-

sider it from the position of teacher and student, writer and peer. First I have to declare that many Aboriginal people are very dubious about the term “post-colonialism.” There are so many things happening in Australia that highlight that colonisation is still a force in motion and Aboriginal people are in no better position to speak than we were twenty years ago. Now, Australia is still the only country in the Commonwealth not to have a treaty with its Indigenous people and the advancements and institutions gained by Aboriginal people from the late 1960s were seriously eroded during the years of the Howard government. The Rudd government continues to diminish Aboriginal self-determination, with support for the Northern Territory intervention being the best example of this. Briefly, the intervention was implemented to stop so-called endemic sexual abuse of children and alcoholism reported by media. The Racial Discrimination Act was suspended and the army was sent in to support the government taking administrative control of seventy-three communities. Consecutively, doctors began examinations and a handful of sexual abuse victims were revealed. More disturbing was that 80% of the children examined had severe health problems such as trachoma and otitis. This hasn’t been heavily reported in mainstream media and the question “how did Australians let the health of chil-

dren become so poor?” was never asked. Government spending on the intervention is \$1.5 billion, yet substance abuse is up 77% and 13% more infants have been hospitalized for malnutrition.

Subsequently, communities are being told they will not receive housing until they sign forty year leases over their land. The issuing of mining leases has significantly increased during this period. For people in these communities, the exercise of colonial power is in full effect and it is due to this type of mistreatment of Aboriginal people and communities that the term “post-colonial” is abstract to Aboriginal Australia.

Now, postcolonialism is a forced concept and not a reality. It certainly isn’t one invented by Aboriginal writers in relation to their work. Some see it as referring only to works being written in a time where colonialism has passed and there are more opportunities for minorities and the marginalized to speak. If we look at postcolonial literature as that whereby Aboriginal writers are trying to articulate identity and reclaim our past, again, the postcolonial theory becomes problematic as it has the potential to give rise to essentialist notions of Aboriginality; essentialism is what many Aboriginal writers challenge. You see, Aboriginal writers are largely responding to colonisation and being oppressed, mistreated and misrepresented and exposing silence and invisibility.

I think that Aboriginal creative writers are more concerned with introducing people to our epistemologies rather than considering western theory. Conversely, postcolonial literary interpretation strategies can be useful in developing an understanding of works of art but I am often bemused when learning how others have deconstructed my work. They either make the work seem really more sophisticated than it is or they miss the point of it altogether.

I'm interested in poststructuralist theory but would, for the most part, like to think it's only a subconscious consideration when writing creatively. My experience is that many Indigenous people, not only Aboriginal Australians, are interested in the way that language exposes our ideological values.

TPA: There is a lot of debating on the issue of appropriation in local Australian literocritical discourse. Obviously Indigenous writers use Western literary techniques and devices, extending and innovating them, developing new narratives and poetics, incorporating Indigenous languages, accommodating Standard English to convey Indigenous culture-bound specifics and meanings. How do you see this problematic? Also, the editing and publishing discourses seem to be associated with the usage of language and narrative, but is there a political censorship in Australia in regard to Indigenous literature? In Poland

writers of the socialist/communist era had to use specific codes and literary devices for their messages to be decoded by readers.

JT: Without a doubt, Aboriginal writers and people generally colonize and use English words in unique ways. There are many words that exist within the Aboriginal vernacular such as *maial* meaning “native” or used to imply a backwardness, and *gammon* meaning “humbug” or “deception” that are today only used by Aboriginal people. These are old English words that many Aboriginal people believe to be Aboriginal words. “Deadly” is such a commonly used word, which is used to mean very good, impressive or excellent. My friend and fellow playwright Cathy Craigie believes Aboriginal Australia adopted this application of the word from the Irish.

In regard to censorship of Indigenous language and culture, my experience is that when working with mainstream agents and editors, Aboriginal writers can have a battle on their hands to convey meaning. Some things just don't make sense to non-Aboriginal readers unless you live within the culture. For example, in the novel that I am writing, my agent finds it odd that the main Aboriginal character Calypso has never had a relationship with an Aboriginal girl. However, it is common for many Aboriginal families to be cautious of their children having sexual relationships with other Ab-

original people. Traditionally, marriages were based on a strict social organization and, with the effects of the Stolen Generations, it becomes much more difficult to ascertain who is and isn't related to you.

I'm interested in writing another play in collaboration with an Aboriginal theatre company. This time I want to ensure that the message is targeted at an Aboriginal audience rather than striving to educate non-Aboriginal people about our issues and interests. I imagine this will provide me with a sense of liberation that I haven't experienced through my writing to date.

TPA: Given Indigenous writers' opinions on Indigenous literature as mirroring the truths of Indigenous communities' reality,⁶ in what way should one read Indigenous literature, through what paradigm or prism? What does this "reality" mean in a literary work?

JT: Aboriginal people are so diverse and, like in all communities, there is always a range of opinions in relation to certain topics amongst people. I certainly don't agree with the viewpoints of all Aboriginal people. In terms of looking at reality and truth in literature, this is a very difficult task. In addressing any type of question, I'd encourage people

to check facts, bias and agenda and see if there is some type of consensus among people on certain issues rather than assuming that a text is a construct of a particular individual's "reality."

There are those non-Aboriginal historians and commentators that assert that colonization of Australia was devoid of massacres and that the Stolen Generations didn't exist and a debate on this issue is termed the "history wars."

It is so important that Aboriginal people and their writers and artists speak back to this view and that those stories known amongst the mob about early and more recent acts of injustice are shared.

TPA: Can you tell what is the picture of the Indigenous person in Aboriginal literature? How do you portray the indigene, in your literary and academic work? How does the literary Indigenous change the stereotype of the native that we know from Australian literature and art?

JT: My characters usually possess characteristics of a range of people that I know. Again, Aboriginal people are so diverse today and many participate in a range of subcultures. For instance, there are Aboriginal surfers, punks and business women. There is no one homogenous group. The thing that we all have in common is the experience and effects of colonization. And then I'd

⁶ Explicit in Alexis Wright's, Anita Heiss', Denis Walker's and Jack Davis' public addresses, just to name a few.

say that the second most prevalent commonality between Aboriginal people is that many of us share a belief in the Dreaming from which a respect for the environment and people flows.

TPA: Indigenous cultural roots were cut drastically. How does written literature and art attempt to find and pass on something else, traces of the oldest world? From where/what is writers' and artists' knowledge obtained? Can one recreate roots? Obviously, there are cave drawings, songs, (hi-)stories, but are they enough to reconstruct what was lost?

JT: There are many Australians that love to remind Aboriginal Australians of how much we have lost because it legitimizes further taking of land and resources, etc. It eases people's guilt. My experience is that even amongst the Aboriginal groups' earliest dispossessed, there still exists a very rich cultural knowledge evident through the proliferation of traditional stories written in language and rich visual arts practice. In all Australian capital cities, Aboriginal people of the area possess traditional stories and practise dance and art. So despite the huge changes that have happened to the landscape, story and knowledge has survived.

The last thirty years has seen a revitalization of Aboriginal culture because people are no longer

subject to policy and legislation that prevents them from engaging with family and therefore culture. A new cultural pride is emerging and many non-Indigenous people are supportive of this development realizing that Aboriginal culture is the one truly unique thing about Australia.

In terms of recreating roots, I think this is possible. For example, one can learn to speak another language at any time in their lives if a speaker of the particular language exists to teach the student. However, it takes much time to become acculturated. Both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous recordings of Aboriginal culture and language can be a very useful tool in the revitalization of cultures.

TPA: Can we concentrate on myth for a little while? There are so many things I would like to ask you about, and so small the space we can share with others on the pages of a periodical! Naturally, a reader can only read a literary myth, as known for example from Wright's or Watson's novels. This is so because myth always touches these areas of cultures that are best represented by the concept of sacred/secret. Both authors widely call upon myth as a constructing element of the presented worlds of their novels. I understand that Indigenous myth is living; it is believed in, lived by Indigenous people today. Don't you think that this can cause a bit of confusion to the outside culture reader? How would they recognize that

the myth is real, that it is not fiction but the way of living? The same question would apply to, for example, Dreaming or Walkabout . . .

JT: I always find this question a bit perplexing because it is so easy for me to understand the role of myth in other cultures and their literature and to respect it as a framework from which people live their lives. Dreaming or *Yura Muda* in the Nukunu context forms the framework for how Nukunu people live. Whether or not giant mythological characters formed the Australian landscape is irrelevant, what is important is recognizing that the values inherent in the stories provide a very important framework for looking at and engaging with the world.

The term “walkabout” is commonly used in an insulting manner by Australians. Many Australians use the term to describe someone who acts in a reckless or aimless fashion. However, Walkabout is similar to a pilgrimage whereby Aboriginal people would learn and reinforce spiritual values by visiting and paying homage to sacred sites. The act was given negative connotations to support slavery. Walkabout was a spiritual duty but it was ridiculed because it was seen as an activity that diminished servitude to white station owners or “employers” and therefore slowed Australia’s “growth.”

TPA: At the beginning of our conversation I said I’d come back to the

gloomy/shocking element of the presented reality of “The Healing Tree,” the one that does not stop striking me, namely, a mission being called home. Given the history of Indigenous people in Australia, I understand it, as I can comprehend orphanages being called home. But it still shocks me that such places may ever be called home! Anyway, what else is being pictured as home in Indigenous literary and art works?

JT: Home to me is the country from which thousands of generations of my ancestors were born and lived. The country nurtured and provided everything that one needs.

There are many “returning home” narratives being written by Aboriginal people such as Terri Janke, Larissa Behrendt, Fabienne Bayet-Charlton. Even the film version of Jimmy Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae* directed by Rachel Perkins can be viewed as a “returning home” narrative.

There are also many representations of home not being places but rather family and people and I certainly feel like I am home when I am with family, whether we are on country or not.

TPA: Some say that the true homeland of people is language. Isn’t this true that the true motherland for Indigenous persons are their Land, Dreamtime and Walkabout?

JT: This is a problematic concept because many Aboriginal people do

not speak their native language, at least not fluently. However, not being able to speak language does not diminish one's Aboriginal identity. I feel very proud that I can name country in my traditional language and it does make me feel more connected to place. It's a good feeling to be able to name country in the same way that my ancestors did thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans to Australia.

TPA: Many Indigenous writers/artists, as you, are lucky to entertain crosscultural family, social, professional, creative relations. Can you tell how Indigenous visual images, knowledge, movement/dance, sound/music/silence converse in your work and life? I refer to a concept of oneness of an act and acting, a person with a being. Does “to see” mean “to hear, paint, and speak”? Or perhaps “to hear” means “to speak, paint and see”? In other words, where is there for you a separating line between a drawing and a word, acting and being/existing in art and literature? And in (Aboriginal) literature and life?

JT: I've had moments to really consider who I am and how I live, knowing that I could change these things if I desired. I feel blessed that my passion for Aboriginal culture and how I approach life has never wavered. My engagement isn't habitual; it's innate. I am a writer but I can't separate other forms of Abo-

original art and culture from the way I see, understand and experience. I believe that Nukunu culture provides a good basis also to venture out into the world and interact with people of other cultures because it teaches reciprocity, that worldviews differ between groups, this is acceptable and something that one can benefit from.

I have faith in my dreams that Nukunu and other Aboriginal people will again live our lives to the fullest.

TPA: Thank you, it has been a fascinating trajectory. We could certainly say “a very intense but short relationship,” but for sure a crosscultural one! *It taste good iny?*

JT: Hope that my insights have been inspiring to you to further read and engage with Aboriginal Australia and I hope to one day visit Poland and experience first hand Poland's rich artistic and literary tradition. For now, *nhakadja, widzenia i dziękuję*.