

1-1-2012

Writing white, writing black, and events at Canoe Rivulet

Catherine McKinnon
University of Wollongong, mckinnon@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKinnon, Catherine: Writing white, writing black, and events at Canoe Rivulet 2012, 1-17.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/405>

Wollongong University

Catherine McKinnon

Writing white, writing black, and events at Canoe Rivulet

Abstract

How a community imagines the past contributes to the shaping of its present culture; influences that community's vision for the future. Yet much about the past can be difficult to access, as it can be lost or hidden. Therefore, when retelling first contact stories, especially when the documentary information is limited to a colonial perspective, how might a writer approach fictionalizing historical Indigenous figures? 'Will Martin' (2011), a tale written as part of my practice-led PhD, is a fictional retelling of the eighteenth century sailing trip, taken along the New South Wales coast, by explorers Matthew Flinders, George Bass, and Bass's servant, William Martin. This paper traces my attempts to discover how to approach fictionalizing the historical Indigenous figures that Flinders met. Examining how some non-Indigenous writers have appropriated Indigenous culture and investigating what some writers have said about non-Indigenous writers creating Indigenous characters, provided me with some guidelines. Interviews with Indigenous elders, and other members of the Illawarra community, helped me imagine the gaps in knowledge. In the fictional retelling, using unreliable narration to suggest there may be multiple stories around a single historical event, some of which we may never get to hear, became a useful narrative strategy.

Keywords: Matthew Flinders, historical retellings, unreliable narration

Introduction

When writing the creative component of a practice-led PhD – a novel of five narrated tales that cross time – I asked myself: What does it mean to be Australian? Attempting to find the answer, or, at least, think more deeply about the question, led to questions about how to write first contact stories and how, as a non-Indigenous Australian, I might approach writing characters based on historical Indigenous Australians. One of the tales from the creative work, published in *Transnational Literature* as 'Will Martin' ([McKinnon 2011b](#)), is based on the eighteenth century sailing trip, taken along the south coast of New South Wales, by explorers Matthew Flinders, George Bass, and Bass's servant, William Martin, in a small boat named *Tom Thumb*.

Flinders wrote two accounts of the journey. The longer journal version, *Narrative of Tom Thumb's Cruise to Canoe Rivulet* ([1985](#)) was passed down through the family, eventually donated to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and later, edited by

Keith Bowden and published in Australia by the South Eastern Historical Association. (Hereafter this version is referred to as *Canoe Rivulet*). Historian WG McDonald argues that the journal 'must have been written up after the discovery of coal in 1797 ... possibly from earlier notes' (1966: 15). The second account appears in the introduction to *A Voyage to Terra Australis* ([1814] 1966) – the narrative Flinders wrote after his *Investigator* explorations. In this article I use the earlier journal version. Besides having more detail, Flinders wrote it when he was a year or two older than the fictional character I created.

Canoe Rivulet represents Flinders' lived experience but it also represents certain colonial beliefs and attitudes. Flinders describes how the explorers struggled to find fresh drinking water, had difficulty landing their boat, and on the fourth day, traded goods with two Koori men. The Kooris guided them to a stream (Canoe Rivulet) near Lake Illawarra, where they met with locals. Flinders reports that the Kooris began acting suspiciously (1985: 10). Believing his life was in danger he, therefore, used 'deceit' (10) as a retreat strategy. But did the Kooris intend to kill the Europeans? Can we ever know? What other alternatives could be imagined?

This paper discusses my attempts to discover how to approach fictionalizing the historical Indigenous figures that appear in *Canoe Rivulet*. I begin by describing how some non-Indigenous writers have misused Indigenous stories, and then explore the advice given, by Indigenous and other writers, for how non-Indigenous Australian authors should approach stories involving Indigenous culture. When I was researching historical Indigenous figures who had lived in the Illawarra, I found that compared with their colonial contemporaries, there was scant documentary evidence available. To fill this gap and discover what cultural protocols might need to be observed when telling first contact stories, I interviewed Wadi Wadi elders and other Indigenous members of the Illawarra community. In this paper I also analyse how 'deception', both European and Indigenous, was described in the Flinders narrative and briefly report how some historians have since retold that story. I conclude by providing some concise examples of the different strategies used in my fictional retelling to create uncertainty and narrator unreliability as a pathway to imagining the past.

Writing white, writing black

Early on in the research phase of the five tales that make up my creative work (now called 'Storyland' (unpub.) previously titled 'I Am Tree') I had decided that the fictional characters needed to reflect the changing cultural mix in the Illawarra. I shied away, however, from creating an Indigenous narrator, or a narrator from a familial background that did not directly connect with my own. Although using a third-person approach to creating character did not mean I was less or more likely to appropriate Indigenous culture, it 'felt' like the more culturally sensitive option. When I thought more carefully about this position, however, I saw the flaws. If I didn't write an Indigenous narrator was I really writing about what it meant to be Australian? If I couldn't write an Indigenous narrator did that mean I couldn't write a Greek narrator? Or a Turkish one? It seems absurd to suggest that a writer should never write outside his or her own experience. People write from different ethnic positions all the time. What about *Mr Pip* (2008) by Lloyd Jones? Jones writes in the first-person, from the point of view of Matilda, a thirteen-year-old village girl from Bougainville. Is this narrative colonial appropriation? And how should I view Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2009), a re-imagining of Alexis de Tocqueville's travels and experiences in America? Carey writes in the first-person, alternately, from the perspective of Parrot, an

Englishman, and Olivier, a French aristocrat. Women write male characters, men write female characters. Writers write from the point of view of a murderer, having never murdered. So can a writer write from the point of view of any character? Surely nothing should be limited. Why was I so cautious about writing an Indigenous narrator?

My fear? I would get it wrong and perhaps offend the Koori community. Why did I think I would get it wrong? Because, according to the story I told myself, my understanding of the deeper psychological make-up necessary for writing a first-person narrator would be deficient when it came to writing a historical Indigenous narrator. I could never, my inner voice suggested, understand *The Dreaming* the way an Indigenous person could, whereas a European tradition, leading back to Greek myths and Christian religious imagery, would surely be in my bones. A contemporary Indigenous narrator I could perhaps write but only if I created some aspect of my own heritage within that narrator's psyche – i.e. an Irish Indigenous Australian. It was murky thinking. Reflecting further, I realised that my fear also stemmed from the particular situation in Australia, where, on many occasions, non-Indigenous writers had appropriated Indigenous culture and identity.

Maggie Nolan discusses one infamous authorship hoax in, 'In His Own Sweet Time: Carmen's Coming Out' (2004). Nolan describes how the hoax unravelled some years after Magabala Books had published *My Own Sweet Time* (1994), an autobiography (allegedly) written by Wanda Koolmatrice. In 1995 *My Own Sweet Time* (1994) won the Nita May Dobbie Award given for 'a first novel by a woman writer' (Nolan 2004: 134) and the following year was selected for the New South Wales high school English curriculum. Gillian Whitlock included an extract in *Autographs: an anthology of Australian autobiographical writing* (134). Yet in 1997, three years after publication, the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that Leon Carmen, a Sydney-based white male, had written the book. According to Nolan, 'Carmen and his friend and agent, John Bayley, designed the hoax to prove that it was easier to get published in Australia as a black woman than as a white male' (135). The motivation for this hoax, however, was inconsistent with the true position of Indigenous women writers in Australia and reflects the scant respect given by some white Australian authors to the place of story in Indigenous culture.

Such disrespect was not limited to Australian writers. Cath Ellis takes up the issue of cultural appropriation in 'Helping Yourself: Marlo Morgan and the Fabrication of Indigenous Wisdom' (2004). Ellis outlines the publication history of Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under: A Woman's Journey in Dreamtime Australia* (1994), a story about a white woman, Marlo, who 'is kidnapped by the "Real People Tribe" in an unspecified region of the Australian mainland and is forced to go "walkabout" with them' (Ellis 2004: 151). The narrative has a new-age pseudo mythic structure: challenges are put forward, lessons learnt, values altered. In the story the "'Real People Tribe'" (151) fear their ancient knowledge will be lost and choose Marlo to carry their knowledge to the global community (151). Morgan's book was originally self-published as a personal story. Later, HarperCollins purchased the rights for around 'US\$1.7million' (152) and the book had a 'US\$250,000 marketing campaign that included a fifteen-city lecture tour for the author' (152). HarperCollins, however, changed the genre from autobiography to fiction (153). Ellis reveals that the author, Marlo Morgan, an American healthcare worker, had visited Australia, but only for a few months. During her stay she did not venture 'outback', nor was she lost or kidnapped, but worked voluntarily in a Brisbane pharmacy (149).

As part of my PhD research I interviewed Illawarra poet, Barbara Nicholson. When I mentioned Marlo Morgan's book her eyes rolled. When Nicholson was teaching at the University of New South Wales many of her students had read *Mutant Message*: 'One of

the big things we have with American students who come over ... to our universities [...] they have all read that and think it is wonderful' ([Nicholson Interview 2010: 25](#)). Cath Ellis agrees, 'This is disturbing precisely because the book, which is routinely taken by non-Australian readers to be an accurate, non-fictional account of Australian Indigenous culture, is in fact a complete fabrication' (2004: 149).

Many white Australian writers, sensitive to the issue of Indigenous appropriation, reflect upon their approach to writing Indigenous characters. In *The Lieutenant* (2008), Kate Grenville imagines a friendship between a white man, Lieutenant Rookes, and an Aboriginal woman, Tagaran. Grenville's characters are based on two historical figures, Lieutenant William Dawes, an astronomer, mathematician and linguist, and Patyegarang, a young Gadigal woman. Dawes' notebooks record the conversations he had with Patyegarang. Grenville, who used these documented conversations as the only dialogue between Tagaran and Rookes, declares:

In moving from the historical record into a work of the imagination, I set myself two broad guidelines. The first was not to invent any dialogue between the Gadigal people and the lieutenant. I would use only what was recorded in the notebooks. The second was – as far as my knowledge went – not to invent out of nowhere. ([Grenville n.d.](#))

Her reluctance to create any Indigenous dialogue reveals a disinclination to write adopting an imaginary voice based on a historical Indigenous person. Historian, Inga Clendinnen, in *The History Question* (2006) cites an interview Grenville did with Ramona Koval where the author states she was unwilling, when writing *The Secret River* (2005), to enter the minds of Indigenous Australians: "I do believe that you have to draw on what you know to write well, and I don't pretend to understand or be able to empathise particularly with a tribal Aboriginal person from 200 years ago; that's beyond me" ([Clendinnen 2006: 19](#)). Yet, as Clendinnen points out, Grenville had no such concerns when developing European characters from that time (19).

The public debate about cultural appropriation of Indigenous identity and culture, and the ongoing dialogue between historical novelists and historians concerning the thorny issues pertaining to fictionalising history, caused me to be mindful about the way I imagined the past. We cannot, Clendinnen suggests, know the minds of people who lived in the past by equating our experience with theirs: 'We cannot post ourselves back in time. People really did think differently then – or at least we must proceed on that assumption' (2006: 20). For Clendinnen novelists can invent because their 'only binding contract is with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or to reform, but to delight' (31). Novelists can fantasize about the future, she suggests, but historians must describe the past. Both forms of writing have, according to Clendinnen, different primary purposes: the primary purpose of a novel is aesthetic, of a history, moral (34). This difference occurs because the reader knows the novelist's creation is a fiction. Yet, as *Mutant Message* and *My Own Sweet Time* illustrate, there are ethical considerations for fiction writers and writers sensitive to cultural appropriation issues are not completely free to fabricate.

While researching for 'Will Martin' I realised that in order to fictionalize *Canoe Rivulet*, and explore further the incident that occurred between the Europeans and the Kooris in a way that didn't impose what journalist, Rosemary Neill, has called 'a self-imposed imaginative separatism' ([2009: 7](#)), I needed to find some guidelines for writing a first contact story. Author and academic, Anita Heiss, in 'Writing about Indigenous Australia – some issues to consider and protocols to follow: a discussion paper' (2002), details what some Indigenous writers have said about the issue. Most call for non-Indigenous

writers to undertake thorough research, for there to be consultation with the Indigenous community, an awareness of protocols, a thoughtfulness in portraying Indigenous people speaking English, and a plea to stay away from negative portrayals and stereotypes such as black trackers and domestic servants ([Heiss 2002: 197-205](#)). This is important, Melissa Lucashenko asserts, because, ‘When non-Indigenous people come in and write about us they are writing in ignorance. Ignorance of us and our lives, and ignorance of Aboriginal Law’ (199). Heiss quotes Jackie Huggins from her article, ‘Respect v Political Correctness’, in *Australian Author* (1994) where Huggins claims that, ‘the best books written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals are by those who have some relationship or friendship with Aboriginal people’ (2002: 202). Jennifer Martiniello, an Indigenous poet and academic, argues: ‘For many issues there is also a white story, not just a black story – after all we didn’t create the last 200 years of crap all by ourselves’ (Heiss 2002: 200). Barbara Nicholson agrees: ‘Contact history is shared history. I think you should be allowed to write about that. But I sort of think we need to observe the proper protocols’ (Nicholson Interview 2010: 28). Margaret McDonnell (2004) picks out respect as being one of the important recommendations she discovered when researching how non-Indigenous editors might work with Indigenous writers:

Respect includes respect for knowledge as well as personal respect or respect for age, respect for the power and authority of elders, for an individual's or a community's attachment to land, and for the spiritual qualities that are part of that attachment. It also includes respect for the writer's search for or sense of identity. ([McDonnell 2004: 84](#))

Respect, Nicholson suggests, ‘applies to Aboriginal people doing the writing too’ (11). A sentiment Alexis Wright confirms when she states: ‘In writing my novel, *Plains of Promise*, and again in writing my new novel *Carpentaria*, I have asked for help from my own people to protect their interests in my writing’ ([Wright 2002: 3](#)). Most of the non-Indigenous Australian writers Heiss interviews make comments in line with children’s writer, Nadia Wheatley, who advises writers to adopt ‘the methodology of research appropriate to all good writing, as well as common respect and politeness’ (201).

Fictionalizing real events, contemporary or historical, can be controversial. Of central concern is how the writer has employed (or will employ) the documentary material. Has the writer respected the particular cultural or historical events pertinent to the story? This is true even when cultural difference is not a factor. In Indigenous culture, life stories belong to individuals and their descendents. Story has a function. Illawarra community member, Jade Kennedy, argues that a story will orientate an Indigenous Australian (contemporary or historical) about things connected with life, such as where to fish, and what to watch out for in a particular fishing area. Stories are, he explains, ‘Information sharing. Knowledge sharing’ ([Interview 2009: 15](#)). He suggests that Indigenous Australians (present and past) experience stories in a particular way:

Aboriginal people don’t just retell stories, Aboriginal people relive their stories through the retelling. They are oral people. ... You can speak a story and they can visualize that story completely and they’ll be there with you in that story, the story is not being retold, the story is always being relived. (Interview 2009: 14)

Fictionalizing first contact stories, I discovered, requires a comprehensive research approach that acknowledges and respects contemporary Indigenous cultural protocols, recognises past misuse of Indigenous stories by white Australian authors, and is sensitive to the unique place of story within Indigenous culture. Interviewing Indigenous elders

was an important – vital – component of my attempt to fill in the gaps prevalent in the historical documentary material and hypothesise about the meeting between the Europeans and the Kooris. These interviews helped me find new paths into the Flinders narrative and it is to this specific area of inquiry that I now turn.

The Koori men

Research for ‘Will Martin’ involved historical research into the lives of the Europeans and the Kooris, yet, instead of knuckling down to the Indigenous research, I became obsessed with getting the colonial details right. I kept putting the Indigenous research off. Anthropological books on Indigenous culture sat at the bottom of a pile dominated by colonial history books. One day I glanced down at the stack and realized I was doing something very typical to non-Indigenous Australians. Even within my own research activities I put everything Indigenous into a pile mentally labelled – *deal with later*.

Understanding what keeps a community together, comprehending the unstated understandings that exist between members of that community, and teasing out how we imagine ourselves within our own community, is complex. How we imagine our own community is key to how we imagine other communities. Benedict Anderson argues that, ‘In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined ([Anderson 1991: 6](#)).

The Indigenous people living in the Illawarra at the time of Bass, Flinders and Martin’s visit were salt-water people. They had had very little contact with the colonists. The Europeans were what historian, Michael Cathcart, calls ‘wet-country people’ ([Cathcart 2009: 8](#)). When reaching back into the past to understand both communities there are many unknowns. There is, however, an obvious disparity between the documentary information available on historical Indigenous communities in the Illawarra, compared to their colonial counterparts. Michael Organ argues in *A Documentary History of the Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines: 1770-1850* (1990), that ‘By the 1850s the original local inhabitants/tribes of central and northern Illawarra were either destroyed, decimated, or dispersed along the coastline to the north and south, and even the west inland’ ([Organ 1990: xxviii](#)). In addition, ‘No native Illawarra Aborigine recorded first-hand on paper his/her reminiscences of their people’s history or aspects of their traditional culture during the period between first contact and 1900’ (xxxix). The Illawarra Aboriginal tribes were so decimated, that ‘at the end of the 1830s’ (xxxviii) there were less than one hundred of the original inhabitants living in central Illawarra.

In most of the current documentation – history books, council papers, tourist information – about the Kooris living around Lake Illawarra in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the people are referred to as Wadi Wadi (or Wodi Wodi), yet even the name Wadi Wadi is questionable. Organ cites the Wadi Wadi as the people living on the ‘coast from Wollongong to the Shoalhaven’ (xlii) but states:

the adoption of the term ‘Wodi Wodi’ in reference to the Aborigines of central Illawarra is based on the testimony of Lizzy Malone, daughter of a woman of the Shoalhaven tribe, who stated (Ridley, 1875) that Wodi Wodi was the name of the language spoken by the Aboriginal people of Illawarra, from Wollongong to Shoalhaven. At some stage between 1875 and 1983 the term ‘Wodi Wodi’ has been adopted/extended by white researchers to refer to the Aboriginal people of the Illawarra, along with their language. (Organ

1990: xlii)

Commenting on the correct appellation for the men Flinders, Bass and Martin met at Canoe Rivulet, Roy (Dootch) Kennedy, Indigenous elder and activist, states:

The reference back then was the Five Islands Tribe, they referred to them as the Five Islands Tribe, and if they are referring to them as the Five Islands Tribe, it would be the story of the Elouera People that come from Mount Keira ... the Five Islands are the daughters of Oola-boola-woo, the West Wind, that is how they came to be there, [away from the mainland] and Mount Keira or Geera is the only daughter [left on land], according to the story. ([Interview 2010: 2](#))

Much of the information about the people living around Lake Illawarra in the eighteenth century was written in the nineteenth century, when many members of tribal groups had died from introduced diseases or the groups themselves had been dispersed. Discovering particular information about historical Indigenous figures was not simply a matter of following the same research methods I had used for investigating the lives of Bass, Flinders and Martin.

Barbara Nicholson suggests that although the historical information may be fragmented, we can attempt to understand aspects of early Indigenous culture by referring to universal cultural concepts and applying what is learned to the situation being explored ([Interview 2010: 7](#)). I used this strategy as a guide when imagining the exchanges that might have occurred between the two Koori guides, (Dilba and his unnamed friend), the local men and the Europeans. Flinders states that one of the guides was from Botany Bay, the other, Broken Bay. If Dilba was from Botany Bay, he could have been a member of the Kameygal, or Tagary, or Bediagal, or Gweagal clan group, and his first language could have been Darug or Dharawal ([Kohen 1993: 20-21](#)). If he was from Broken Bay, he may have been part of the Kuringgai Tribe, perhaps part of the Carigal clan, and his first language could have been one of several dialects, possibly Kari (22). The movement of Dilba and his unnamed friend down the coast would have included some specific cultural protocols. Nicholson, commenting on protocols, states:

In The Dreaming Laws, and this is pretty universal across Australia, and if we apply that universality to this situation, you are going onto someone else's country, you sit... In fact you sit on a place where your physical presence is able to be seen by the resident, you sit and you do not even look at them, you look away... So those two people would have known that universal rule. That is a law from The Dreaming. The laws of The Dreaming are pretty much universal across Australia but the particulars – ceremony, rituals and language – may vary. ([Interview 2010: 7-8](#))

Nicholson contends that even if Dilba and his unnamed friend had been in the Illawarra for some time, when they travelled along the coast with Flinders, Bass, and Martin, such protocols would have been observed:

unless they have got like a passport... Something that says, yes, you have freedom to go. Maybe a sacred stone... So much of that is fragmented now, but so much is still extant in other areas, that [there is] the cultural borrowing from the known, to bring it back and reinvigorate. ([Interview 2010: 8-9](#))

The Indigenous men and the Europeans had different attitudes to land. In Indigenous culture the land is the people, they belong to the land and not the other way around

([Nicholson 2011](#)). Entering the land of another tribe required certain customs to be respected. European colonists found it hard to comprehend the ways that land was integral to, and interwoven with, Aboriginal culture:

The true tribal country is that in which the great mythical beings travelled or performed exploits, instituted rituals, created the most important local features, before perhaps disappearing into the ground or the sky or assuming a different shape. Through his links with these beings, an Aboriginal is deeply attached spiritually to his own land. Elkin (1954: 28) puts this very aptly, summing up a relationship which emerges particularly clearly in regard to their religion. He points out that there were, as far as we know, no wars deliberately designed to take over a stretch of country, or to conquer an enemy. ([Berndt & Berndt 1999: 37](#))

In 1796 European explorers and Indigenous Australians had completely different concepts of land and land ownership. Jade Kennedy argues that when contemplating eighteenth century Indigenous Australians, ‘you have got to remember that this is their country, their backyard, their everything and anything’ (Interview 2009: 10). He states that the colonists ‘couldn’t understand the botanical and ecological reasoning behind things, where Aboriginal people have learnt to understand all that’ (10). In discussing attitudes to land, for both historical and contemporary Indigenous Australians, Kennedy asserts that:

Ownership is a very interesting thing because Aboriginal people believe in custodianship not ownership. But it is their land, their land to protect, their land to maintain, their land to look after, hey, as opposed to ‘it is mine’, it is not about ‘mine.’ It’s about ‘ours’. (Interview 2009: 10)

Eighteenth century Indigenous people had custodianship of their land. If Dilba and his friend were visitors to the area, then, at some time, they would have had to introduce themselves to the locals. Nicholson proposes several reasons for their Illawarra visit:

See if they have come from Botany, that would have been ceremonial, there is no question... Two men travelling, they have come for a specific reason, it might have been bridal exchange ... a marriage ritual... Ceremony. Sacred Business... Or they could have been emissaries to deliver messages, or bring people back... Or they could have been exiled from their own ... whichever Tagary group they belong to. ...If they had broken Law they may have been exiled and were attempting to find their way to another mob. (Interview 2010: 6)

Roy (Dootch) Kennedy, states that if Dilba ‘was from Botany Bay and he was in the Illawarra he was obviously visiting family ... [and that] ... shows his connectedness to this area’ (Interview 2010: 2).

While I could not establish exactly why Dilba and his friend were in the Illawarra, my research suggested I shouldn’t assume that the Europeans comprehended the more detailed aspects of Indigenous customs and relationships. If some special greeting occurred between Dilba, his friend, and the local Koori men they met at Canoe Rivulet, then Flinders missed recording it. Therefore, how was I to represent their arrival, and other events like it, in the fictional narrative? Flinders thought the Kooris were deceiving him. But how did the Kooris view the Europeans? To tease out these questions I analysed the way Flinders reported both his own deception and his suspicions of the Kooris.

Flinders' account: deception before Canoe Rivulet and at Canoe Rivulet

In *Canoe Rivulet* Flinders reports that he met and traded with Dilba and an unnamed Indigenous man on Sunday, 27 March 1796, north of Saddle Point (1985: 6). It was by now the fourth day of their *Tom Thumb* sail. The two Kooris were fishing in the bay. Flinders, Bass and Martin had spent their second night sleeping at sea. No doubt they were tired. They'd been without water since the journey began, surviving on the juice of melons. They woke, Flinders suggests, delighted to feel the warmth of the sun. The two Kooris called to them in the 'Port-Jackson dialect' (6) offering 'fresh water and fish' (6). The explorers rowed over.

Narrators have, according to rhetorical theorist, James Phelan, 'three main functions – reporting, interpreting and evaluating' (2007a: 12). In a conference paper, "‘Is a true story always true?’: an approach to fictionalizing Matthew Flinders' *Narrative of Tom Thumb's cruize to Canoe Rivulet*' (McKinnon 2011c), significantly developed here, I've written that in *Canoe Rivulet* Flinders reports, but only occasionally interprets and evaluates. Relating his trade with the two Kooris, Flinders' description is concise: 'there were only two natives, who had no other arms than fish gigs' (6). He states they are from 'Broken and Botany Bays' (6) and then describes using 'pretence' as a retreat strategy:

Other natives soon came up and increased the number beyond what was safe to risk ourselves amongst; we therefore put off without landing under pretence of returning to the northward, but with the intention to land in a shallow cove off the pitch of Saddle Point. (1985: 6-8)

The explorers rowed south, hauled the boat to land and prepared a fire to cook the fish. Dilba and his friend reappeared. Flinders cut their hair and beards and the five sailed together to what Flinders named Canoe Rivulet. This first barbering event must have been cordial as it resulted in the two men acting as guides. Flinders, however, delays reporting it until the Canoe Rivulet section of the narrative where a second barbering event, involving the larger Koori group, occurs. He states that the group arrived at Canoe Rivulet and 'rowed about a mile up in little more water than the boat drew, against a very strong tide' (8). The two Koori guides, who had already jumped from the boat, were met by and began to walk with 'eight or ten strange natives' (8). The explorers decided to go ashore, dry their gunpowder and find water. On shore they became suspicious of the intentions of their guides:

On asking the two natives for water, they told us we must go up to the lake for it, pointing to a large piece of water from which the rivulet seemed to take its rise; but on being told that we could not now go, and again desired to get us water, they found some within a few yards. This circumstance made us suspect, that they had a wish, if not an intention, of detaining us: and on reflection, their previous conversation in the boat evidently tended to the same purpose. (1985: 9)

Referring to the first barbering event, Flinders then relates the second using phrases such as 'the wild stare of their eyes' (9), 'their rough, savage countenance' (9) and employing the word 'violent' (10), increasing the reader's sense that the Kooris were dangerous. By delayed disclosure, Flinders keeps any interpretation of the Kooris behaviour to a minimum until he introduces his suspicion of them. Following this he reports how he used deception a second time as a way of retreat:

Having completed everything, as far as circumstances would admit of, we got our things into the boat, and prepared to go out again. But to get away peaceably we were obliged to use deceit; for they kept continually pointing to the lagoon, and desiring, or indeed almost insisting, that we should go up into it; and the two Port-Jackson natives seemed more violent than any others. We appeared to coincide with them, but deferred it till tomorrow; and pointed to a green bank near the entrance of the river, where we would sleep; then putting on a resolute face, we shoved off the boat. (10)

The explorers rowed toward the green bank but were followed by the Koori men who were 'shouting and singing' (10). After some confusion at the green bank they pushed off and rowed to the mouth of the stream, but the surf was too strong to get their vessel out to sea. They anchored, waiting for the tide to turn. A few men – including Dilba – followed them downstream and stood on the point to the south of the boat. Flinders states: 'This fellow was constantly importuning us to return and go up to the lagoon. He was as constantly answered that "when the sun went down, if the wind and surf did not abate, we would"'(12). When the sun went down, Flinders reports:

A party of five or six natives were coming towards us from the other side. At that juncture, we had gotten the guns in order; and having a little powder in one of them, I fired it off; on which the party stopped short, and soon walked away; those on the point too were all retired, but Dilba, and he soon followed. (1985: 12)

Flinders does not clarify whether the other Koori men had understood his dialogue with Dilba. He does not contemplate whether the locals – perhaps taking him at his word – might have decided to help the explorers back to the stream, as they had earlier helped them along the stream. Instead, his narrative suggests these men meant to do him harm. In a footnote to this part of the narrative, as though to back up his claim of suspicious intentions, Flinders adds, 'Dilba was the principal person concerned in spearing the chief mate and carpenter of the ship, Sydney Cove, [*sic*] about twelve months afterwards, for which he was sought after to be shot by Mr. Bass and others' (12). Flinders is reporting an event that occurred a year after his journey south. The survivors of the *Sydney Cove* had attempted to walk from Cape Howe to Sydney. According to Organ, 'many of the crew died from exhaustion and starvation along the way' (1990: 11). Aborigines, however, reportedly killed two of the men. In *Canoe Rivulet* Flinders first describes Dilba and his unnamed friend as 'friends' (1985: 6) but later implies they are men with evil intent. This intent is supposedly proved by Dilba's possible actions a year later.

Writing about the *Sydney Cove* events, Bass' friend, Reverend Thomas Fyshe Palmer, presents a different view of the killings:

In all the intercourse of whites with the uncorrupted natives of this country, they have found them, most kind, humane and generous. When the mate and the super-cargo were wrecked, no civilized Europeans could exceed them in kindness. ...The mate, represented to be an amiable man, walked till he could walk no longer. Unfortunately, the carpenter staid [*sic*] to keep him company, and the rest proceeded and arrived safe. The carpenter, churlish and avaricious, and without sense or foresight, seized their fish and would give nothing in return, and offended them so much, that the first mate, whom they were fond of, fell a victim of his folly, and they both perished. (Organ 1990: 16)

I was cautious of taking Flinders' account of the murders as being accurate. According

to Palmer, Aborigines had informed Bass that Dilba murdered the first mate and carpenter (Organ 1990: 16). Hearsay, however, is not proof. Nor did the *Sydney Cove* tragedy prove that Dilba and his friend had evil intentions towards Flinders, Bass and Martin. Even if the later charges were true, one atrocious action cannot confirm another.

Some historians have recounted Flinders' version of events. Miriam Estensen in *The Life of Matthew Flinders* (2003) captures the mood of the Flinders narrative: 'Now escape seemed imperative. The Aborigines were insisting forcefully that they continue up to the lagoon. Their two guides were the most vehement, and their earlier promises of women and food now seemed sinister' ([Estensen 2003: 58](#)). When Keith Bowden wrote the introduction to *Matthew Flinders' Narrative of Tom Thumb's Cruise to Canoe Rivulet* he took on a little of Flinders' interpretation of events: 'Picture the dilemma of the young explorers when they were trying to escape from the aborigines at Canoe Rivulet, the estuary of Lake Illawarra, when four aborigines jumped into their boat, making a total of seven persons in that cockle-shell!' (1985: x). Tim Flannery also retells Flinders' suspicions in his introduction to *Terra Australis*: 'The explorers were now in the company of Aborigines (one of whom was later accused of killing a castaway) who were trying to lure them into a narrow part of an estuary' ([Flinders 2000: xi](#)).

The general tone of the Flinders' story, and the sense that his narration is reliable, is embodied by Flannery's use of the word 'lure', which conveys a sense of suspected mischief, by Bowden's use of 'escape' and by Estensen's use of the word 'sinister'. In all cases the result is to leave the reader with the sense that the Flinders' interpretation of this situation is the only interpretation. It's clear from these examples that small details in a narration can easily be absorbed as factual by later retellings. These small details, however, can add up to a larger cultural picture and while it could be argued that they do not misrepresent, but only represent one viewpoint of a story, that is precisely the point. This viewpoint has been considered reliable and therefore has had the effect of closing down many readers – including historians – thoughts about other interpretations.

Deception: assessing the Koori perspective

Why might the Kooris have wanted to take the Europeans up to the lagoon? There are several possible options worth considering. On the way to Canoe Rivulet the Kooris told the Europeans that there were white men and women living at Lake Illawarra. Flinders reports he was 'amused' (1985: 8), indicating he did not believe what he was told. It's possible, however, that the two Koori guides did know some white men and women residing near the lagoon. Their motive thus could have been malicious or friendly. Certainly, by 1796, some convicts had escaped and did live with Indigenous people. For example, Collins reports in *An Account of the English Colony* that in February 1796, 'two white men (Wilson and Knight) had been frequently seen with the natives in their excursions' ([Collins \[1798\] 1971: 458](#)) and, in Collins' opinion, incited them to 'acts of hostility' (459). Jade Kennedy suggests that the locals may have decided to take the explorers to the lagoon to give them fresh water. The water in the stream would have been mixed with seawater and was no doubt brackish (Interview 2009: 12). Barbara Nicholson argues:

There are a number of possibilities. There may have been a ceremony. ...Or it may have been that the route that Bass and Flinders wanted to take was crossing a women's site ... there may have been some initiation ceremony going on. There may have been some other secret business happening. (Interview 2010: 7)

Or, possibly, the Kooris had decided to take Flinders, Bass, and Martin up to the lagoon to murder them. If this final suggestion is correct, it's then worth asking: Why did Dilba and the others not kill the explorers at the stream? The idea of getting them up to the lagoon suggests a strategy yet Flinders states in his narrative that he thinks the Indigenous men had no strategy. Would it have been easier to kill the Europeans at the lagoon? Among such a large group of Kooris surely there were many that were expert at throwing spears. How frightened were the Kooris of the muskets? Were they incapable of realising that they could overcome the Europeans and muskets if they chose? How does one explain their singing and shouting as they helped the boat along, if they were so frightened of the muskets and had the intention to kill?

Roy (Dootch) Kennedy maintains that if the Kooris had an intention to kill and the Europeans 'were outnumbered, they would have been slaughtered on the spot' (Interview 2010: 2). When hypothesizing about what might have caused Dilba to call out again and again, imploring the explorers to go up to the lake, Kennedy suggests there might have been some important elders Dilba wanted the Europeans to meet:

On Lake Illawarra in 1986, the Wollongong Council and the Shellharbour Council commissioned a survey and we discovered twenty-six major campsites at the lake. So in amongst those campsites there would have been ceremonial areas and major camps and probably he was trying to bring them back to the main camp. Speak to people higher ... he wanted them to meet people of substantial rank, talk to them. (Interview 2010: 2-3)

Jade Kennedy thought it a mystery that Dilba stood on the point calling out to Flinders (Interview 2009: 13) but warned that in detailing what was going on between the local Indigenous men and Dilba, it shouldn't necessarily be assumed they were a cohesive group ([Kennedy 2010](#)).

Writing the Canoe Rivulet scenes

The unanswered questions surrounding the events at Canoe Rivulet led me to decide, when writing the fictional 'Will Martin' narrative, that it would be useful to replicate that uncertainty within the text. Creating an unreliable narrator – thereby causing the reader to imagine two stories, the one the narrator is telling, and another they imagine – became a key textual strategy, encouraging the reader to question the narrator's version of events. Yet while Will is unreliable in many of his assessments he also, at times, reliably reports his confusion. Flinders did not record any greetings between Dilba and the locals. In my fictional retelling Will Martin does:

Dilba and his friend have their backs to us. I cannot spy their countenance. The Indians from the bush stand and stare, first at us, then at Dilba and his friend. No one speaks. They have a spirit way of talking. It must be that. I count the Indians. Nearly twenty have gathered. Then, at some unknown sign, they all begin to shout and stroll along the bank. (McKinnon 2011b: 22)

I also attempted to develop complex motivations for Will's behaviour throughout the Canoe Rivulet sequence by creating a scenario where one of the Koori elders led Will to a small freshwater pool. This event occurs while the other characters are embroiled in discussion. Will, initially scared of the old man, soon realises the old man is helping him:

A few steps into the trees, I stumble, and when I look up the old man is pointing to a puddle, almost a pond, but not grown enough for that name. Relief. It is water he is showing me. He has no thought for anything else. The teeth, I now see, are kangaroo teeth, like I have seen Indians wear around Port Jackson. (2011b: 23)

Later, however, Will neglects to report to Bass and Flinders the old man's help: 'Now is the time to say the old man showed me the water. But I do not. Because the Indian talk rises too loud and my fears return' (2011b: 24). Instead, Will lets the suspicion Flinders has formed about the Indigenous men increase. These two lines work along what Phelan would describe as the 'narrator-narratee track' (2005: 12), with the narrator attempting to explain his actions to the narratee. They also work along Phelan's 'narrator-authorial audience track' (12), with the implied author suggesting that there are many complex reasons for human behaviour and our own action or inaction may contribute to creating fearful situations.

In *Canoe Rivulet* Flinders describes using pretence as part of a retreat strategy. It's clear he felt his life was in danger. In 'Will Martin' I was eager to engage the reader with the Europeans' fear of the Kooris, yet, I also wanted the reader to question the events that occur:

'Why is he so violent in his request?' the Lieutenant whispers to Mr Bass.

'We must put them off, George, in a friendly way, and make our escape without them suspecting.'

'Tomorrow, we will visit the lagoon,' Mr Bass calls to Dilba, pretending jolliness.

The Lieutenant points downstream to a green bank. He puts his folded hands to the side of his face, feigning sleep.

'We must rest. We go to that green bank further down there.'

Dilba turns and speaks to the Indians. I cannot pick out any words. But they turn and stare at Mr Bass.

'The red waistcoat,' Mr Bass says. 'No doubt they've heard about our soldiers and are frightened.'

'I'll distract them while you get *Thumb* into the water,' the Lieutenant orders, then he steps towards the Indians, repeating our need for sleep. Mr Bass and I slide *Thumb* away from the shore. But Dilba shakes his head, shouts, and points at the green bank. What is his objection? It is a bank like any other bank. (2011b: 26)

Will reliably reports his uncertainty. The green bank becomes a site of the unknown. The question – *What is his objection?* – works along the narrator-authorial audience track. The reader is encouraged to ask the same question as Will.

In the fictional story, as in the Flinders' narrative, Dilba constantly demands that the Europeans go up to the lagoon? Later, when the explorers are out at sea, Will reflects on the events that have just occurred: 'What was up at the lagoon? Mr Bass says death. But why must we go to the lagoon for death?' (28). In this passage the implied author is again encouraging the authorial audience to reflect on the events that have just occurred.

In attempting to recreate this historical period, and the events at *Canoe Rivulet*, communicating that there were many unanswered questions became an important strategy. Unreliable narrators always sit along what Phelan calls a spectrum of reliability (2007b: 224). The scope of this paper cannot include a more detailed analysis of unreliability but by setting up the narrator of the story as unreliable it was also useful to

get him to reliably report to call attention to possible miscommunications between the Europeans and the Kooris and to encourage the reader to query the European's interpretation of events.

Conclusion

Fictionalising the past is a precarious endeavour. Clendinnen argues, 'the real past is surrounded by prickle-bushes of what I have to call epistemological difficulties' (2006: 21). This paper limits its scope to discussing the research process involved in developing my approach to fictionalizing the historical Indigenous figures reported about in *Canoe Rivulet*. I've summarized what some writers have said about how a non-Indigenous Australian writer might approach writing Indigenous Australian characters, and have provided examples of how writers have appropriated Indigenous Australian culture and identity. In *Canoe Rivulet* Flinders encourages his authorial audience to view the Kooris as having malicious intentions and in this article I briefly describe how some historians have replicated, in small ways, his version of events. While the Flinders narrative might represent his lived experience, it also represents certain beliefs and attitudes of the period. When researching ways to approach my fictional retelling I discovered that the information available on the original inhabitants of the Illawarra was not as prevalent, or as easily accessible, as the documented accounts of colonial life and I've articulated here how my own research methods revealed a disinclination to address this lack of documentary evidence. There are many ethical issues surrounding the fictional imagining of historical events involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous figures. It's perhaps useful for writers to consider a variety of research methods when writing first contact stories. Oral Indigenous stories and interviews with contemporary Indigenous elders can provide historical fiction writers with different perspectives on documented historical events, especially when the Indigenous point-of-view is absent. Utilizing universal cultural concepts and applying what is learned to the situation being explored might also be of use. Seeking permission or advice about how to fictionalize the Indigenous aspects of a first contact story, and the protocols that might surround it, is important if respect is to be maintained for Indigenous culture.

When writing 'Will Martin' I attempted to explore some of the beliefs – about racial superiority, about exploration, about male relationships, about colonial attitudes to Indigenous people – that were prevalent in colonial Australia. When researching I was reminded of how miscommunication is with us every day, as part of our private lives, as part of the public sphere. Therefore, creating an unreliable narrator to retell the Flinders narrative, and letting that character also reliably report his uncertainty about the events that are unravelling, seemed a useful narrative strategy. Such a strategy might raise questions in some readers' minds about the kind of cultural misunderstandings that could have occurred during first contact meetings; it might also suggest that there are multiple stories around a single historical event, some of which we may never get to hear.

Works cited

Anderson, B 1991 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London [return to text](#)

Berndt, RM & CH Berndt 1999 *The World of the First Australians: Aboriginal Traditional Life: Past and Present*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra [return to text](#)

Carey, P 2009 *Parrot and Olivier in America*, Hamish Hamilton, Camberwell, Vic.
[return to text](#)

Cathcart, M 2009 *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent*, Text Publishing, Melbourne [return to text](#)

Clendinnen, I 2006 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?', *Quarterly Essay* 23, Black Inc, Melbourne [return to text](#)

Collins, D 1971 [1798] *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales: with remarks on the Disposition, Customs, Manners, &c. of the Native Inhabitants of that Country*, vol. 1, Cadell & Davies, London / facsimile edn, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide [return to text](#)

Ellis, C 2004 'Helping Yourself: Marlo Morgan and the Fabrication of Indigenous Wisdom', *Australian Literary Studies* 21, 4: 149-165 [return to text](#)

Estensen, M 2003 *The Life of Matthew Flinders*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney [return to text](#)

Flinders, M 1966 [1814] *A Voyage to Terra Australis: Undertaken for the purpose of completing the discovery of that vast country, and prosecuted in the years 1801, 1802, and 1803, in His Majesty's ship the Investigator, and subsequently in the armed vessel Porpoise and Cumberland schooner, with an account of the shipwreck of the Porpoise, arrival of the Cumberland at Mauritius, and imprisonment of the commander during six years and a half in that island*, Nicol, London / facsimile edn, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide [return to text](#)

Flinders, M 1985 *Matthew Flinders' Narrative of Tom Thumb's Cruise to Canoe Rivulet*, (ed) Keith Bowden, South Eastern Historical Association, Brighton, Vic. [return to text](#)

Flinders, M 2000 *Terra Australis: Matthew Flinders' Great Adventures in the Circumnavigation of Australia*, (ed) Tim Flannery, Text Publishing, Melbourne [return to text](#)

Grenville, K 2005 *The Secret River*, Text Publishing, Melbourne [return to text](#)

Grenville, K 2008 *The Lieutenant*, Text Publishing, Melbourne [return to text](#)

Grenville, K n.d. 'The Lieutenant: Readers' Notes', *Kate Grenville – Australian Author – Official Web Site*: http://www.users.bigpond.com/kgrenville/the_lieutenant/interview_1... [accessed 14 October 2008] [return to text](#)

Heiss, A 2002 'Writing about indigenous Australia – some issues to consider and protocols to follow: a discussion paper', *Southerly* 62, 2: 197-207 [return to text](#)

Jones, L 2008 *Mister Pip*, Dial Press, New York [return to text](#)

Kennedy, J 2010 Personal communication, 20 December [return to text](#)

Kohen, J 1993 *The Darug and Their Neighbours: The traditional Aboriginal owners of the Sydney Region*, Darug Link in association with Blacktown and District Historical Society, Blacktown [return to text](#)

Koolmatrie, W [aka L Carmen] 1994 *My Own Sweet Time*, Magabala Books, Broome [return to text](#)

Morgan, M 1994 *Mutant Message Down Under: A Woman's Journey in Dreamtime Australia*, Harper Collins, New York [return to text](#)

McDonald, WG 1966 *Earliest Illawarra: By Its Explorers and Pioneers*, Illawarra Historical Society, Illawarra [return to text](#)

McDonnell, M 2004 'Protocols, Political Correctness and Discomfort Zones: Indigenous life writing and non-Indigenous editing' *Hecate* 30, 1: 83-95 [return to text](#)

McKinnon, C 2011a 'Unreliable Narration: The Exploration of a Technique to Destabilize Reliable Narration in Prose, and, I Am Tree: a novel', unpublished doctoral thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide

McKinnon, C 2011b 'Will Martin', *Transnational Literature* 4, 1: 1-37, <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html> [return to text](#)

McKinnon, C 2011c "'Is a true story always true?": an approach to fictionalizing Matthew Flinders' *Narrative of Tom Thumb's cruize to Canoe Rivulet*', *The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds Papers - the refereed proceedings of the 16th conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 2011*: <http://aawp.org.au/files/McKinnon.pdf> [return to text](#)

Neill, R 2009 'Inconvenient Truths', *The Weekend Australian*, 27-28 June, Review Section: 67 [return to text](#)

Nicholson, B 2011 Personal communication, 18 January [return to text](#)

Nolan, M 2004 'In His Own Sweet Time: Carmen's Coming Out', *Australian Literary Studies* 21, 4: 134-149 [return to text](#)

Organ, M (ed) 1990 *A Documentary History of the Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines: 1770-1850*, Aboriginal Education Unit Wollongong University, Wollongong, NSW [return to text](#)

Phelan, J 2005 *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY [return to text](#)

Phelan, J 2007a *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, OH [return to text](#)

Phelan, J 2007b 'Estranging unreliability, bonding unreliability, and the ethics of Lolita', *Narrative* 15, 2: 222-238 [return to text](#)

Wright, A 2002 'Politics of Writing', *Southerly* 62, 2 (Summer): 10-16 [return to text](#)

Interviews

Kennedy, Roy (Dootch): July 2010 [return to text](#)

Kennedy, Jade: September 2009 [return to text](#)

Nicholson, Barbara: April 2010 [return to text](#)

Catherine McKinnon, a theatre director, playwright and novelist, lectures at the University of Wollongong. A founding member of Red Shed Theatre, she worked there for nine years as co-artistic co-ordinator, director, and writer. Her plays for Red Shed are Immaculate Deceptions, A Rose By Any Other Name, Road to Mindanao, and Eye of Another. In 2008 Penguin published her novel, The Nearly Happy Family. Her play Tilt was selected for the 2010 National Playwriting Festival and the 2011 High-Tide Genesis Research Development Laboratory, London. She is currently completing her novel, 'Storyland', and 'The Hurt Trilogy' plays set in the Illawarra.

[Return to Contents Page](#)

[Return to Home Page](#)

TEXT

Vol 16 No 2 October 2012

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth, Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo

text@textjournal.com.au