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Collaboration and closure: Negotiating Indigenous mourning protocols in Australian life writing

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Collaboration and Closure: Negotiating Indigenous mourning protocols in Australian life writing

But dead people persist in the minds of the living. There have been very few human societies in which the dead are thought to vanish completely once they are dead. Sometimes there's a taboo against mentioning them openly, but this doesn't mean they are gone....
(Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, 142)

No, the dead are not gone. The dead continue among us. They remain as a force, a power, with which we, the living, must reckon. The dead persist in narratives, in images, in ceremonies, in names. We live, each day, with the dead around us, even when they are not named, perhaps most powerfully when they are not named. Stephen Muecke, in his recent work *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (2004), comments on this persistence of the dead for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. He returns, at several points in his text, to the philosophical and spiritual significance of relations between the living and the dead, making it clear throughout that these relations touch upon the sacred. The dead, he says, are invested with “a surplus of social significance” (65), a power both cultural and spiritual, a power that underpins both community and nation. Nations may celebrate their origins on dates linked to constitutional inscription but, Muecke argues, “they only become nations through the magical or spiritual agency of death” (65). The foundational role of death and sacrifice in Australian nationhood, particularly at Gallipoli, has long been recognised but Muecke carries the argument forward, gesturing towards a “new Australian modernism” in which death and nationhood would intersect with Indigenous histories (48). This new modernism appears to have begun for Australia in the 1990s, a decade that witnessed an increasing public concern for Indigenous histories and Indigenous deaths, particularly with the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody, followed closely by the *Bringing Them Home* report on the separation of Indigenous children from their families. Although in recent years a conservative backlash has contested this growing narrative of mourning, Muecke argues that, for Australia, “the national dead will become increasingly the Aboriginal dead” (65).

“Sometimes there’s a taboo against mentioning them openly, but this doesn’t mean they are gone” (142), Atwood writes from a Canadian context. For Atwood and the Cambridge audience to whom her lectures were originally delivered, this comment might seem to gesture towards the ethnographic margins of discourse. For Australian readers, however, protocols which prohibit the naming of the Indigenous deceased are a familiar experience. Books, films and television programs in Australia are regularly prefaced with the warning that they may contain the images or voices of Indigenous Australians who are deceased, and that such material may cause distress to some Indigenous readers or viewers. Those involved in cultural production which includes the representations of Indigenous people are for the most part sensitive to the fact that, in numerous Indigenous communities in Australia, bereavement practices put in place a system of closure regarding the image, the voice, the name and often the possessions of those who have recently passed on.

Although mourning practices and the extent of closure relating to the recently deceased vary enormously from one Indigenous culture to another in Australia, and even from one community to another within the same culture, Jennifer Biddle’s outline of the practice of erasure in Walpiri communities in Central Australia gives an idea of how extensive closure can be:

One of the more serious offences, widely reported in the literature and witnessed time and again in my experience, is the speaking aloud of a recently deceased person’s name. Walpiri fervently avoid the presence of the recently deceased. Mortuary ceremonies and bereavement practices are organised by and around certain ritualized avoidances or ‘erasures’. For instance, camp is moved from where the deceased has lived; places frequented by the deceased are avoided; clothing, shoes, blankets, mattresses, furnishings belonging to the deceased are burned; cars of the recently deceased are dumped; photographs, tapes and videos showing the deceased are destroyed, covered or stored; ceremonial songs/dances associated with the person and/or their birthplace are not performed; brands of alcoholic drink that the deceased preferred will not be purchased. All these avoidances ensure that a certain erasure of the deceased’s presence takes place (177-178).

Considerable effort, then, is taken to ‘erase’ the presence of the dead. Following death, a deceased person is referred to as *Kumanjayi* meaning “no name” (179). Similarly,

anyone in the community sharing the same personal name also becomes referred to as *Kumanjayi*. Name closure may also extend to objects that are homophonic with the deceased's name. Biddle recounts that, after the death of one individual, "the word used to refer to the object which starts a car or unlocks a door" became *Kumanjayi*, because the person's name was pronounced almost identically to this English word (180). Yet erasure of presence does not mean erasure from memory. Biddle's account demonstrates that such avoidance practices entail considerable effort. Eric Michaels, who lived and worked in the Walpiri community of Yuendumu and describes similar practices of erasure, notes that this closure, or avoidance, is in fact highly contradictory: "The contradiction of course is that this all assures that a great deal of attention is actually directed toward the absence of this individual who we go to so much effort not to name" (*Unbecoming*, 32). Noel Wallace in conversation with Max Charlesworth makes the same point. He says that in the Pitjantjatjara community where he worked, "a girl whose sister has died becomes *Pinku*, and will probably bear that name for the rest of her life. Then, a person whose parent has died is named *Mintji*. And so, far from being the means of forgetting a deceased person, the new name serves to keep the memory of that person for all time" (91-92).

Again, it is important to acknowledge that in Australia Indigenous mourning protocols are not dismissible as ethnographic detail having little or no bearing on non-Indigenous representational practices. Issues of Indigenous bereavement practices arise regularly when the death of an Indigenous artist, activist, writer, community leader or elder attracts non-Indigenous media coverage. For the non-Indigenous media, mourning protocols can present a challenge. Although the deceased person's public reputation may have been such that coverage of his or her death is deemed newsworthy, respect for Indigenous protocols would mean that the name or image of the deceased can not be used. News editors will decide that the death should be reported, but the reporter is faced with the contradiction that the deceased should not be named.

This apparent paradox, from a non-Indigenous perspective, is one that more than occasionally confronts the Australian media and its reading and viewing public. In April, 2005, Australia's national television broadcaster, the ABC, ran an episode of its *Media Watch* program dealing with the failure of the newspaper *The Australian* to understand

the basic guidelines regarding the reporting of Indigenous deaths. Reporting on the death of a Northern Territory man who had gained prominence when he sued, unsuccessfully, for compensation as member of the Stolen Generations, *The Australian* not only named the man, but also published his photo alongside the article, in clear breach of mourning protocols. *Media Watch* also criticized *The Australian* for its insensitivity and its apparent lack of understanding of the function of the term *Kwementyay*. This word or a similarly functioning term – *Kumantjayi*, *Kunmunara*, depending on the Indigenous culture and the language of the community involved – serves to replace the personal name of the deceased. *The Australian*, after identifying the man by his personal name and thereby breaking Indigenous protocols, then said that this name had been “changed to Kwementyay after his death in accordance with Aboriginal Law,” an explanation which, according to Chips Mackinolty, a Northern Territory media advisor who brought the matter to the attention of *Media Watch*, misunderstood the customary practice. The man’s name has not been changed. It simply cannot be spoken, or written.

Responding to *Media Watch*’s critique of its coverage, *The Australian* stated that, in its view, the report showed no disrespect for the deceased’s family. In any case, it argued, the newspaper’s first duty was to inform its readers of newsworthy events. *Media Watch* pointed out that this matter of non-Indigenous media coverage of Indigenous deaths arises regularly – its first coverage of the issue was thirteen years previous – and that most media in Australia have learned to make efforts to respect Indigenous post-mortem protocols. As the above instance illustrates, however, negotiating between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous codes which mediate relations between the living and the dead is far from straightforward.¹

Difficulties in negotiating protocols stem not only from the fact that Indigenous mourning practices vary from community to community, or even between families, but also from the changes being experienced in customary practice, in reaction to both technology and the increasing likelihood of non-Indigenous interest in or impact upon Indigenous sorry business. Sharon Verghis relates recent transformations of Indigenous mourning protocols to three factors. The first of these is linked to the reputation and status of individuals beyond their own community. Internationally renowned artists such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri left instructions for a retrospective exhibition at the Art

Gallery of South Australia to “carry on no matter what.” Bill Neidjie, a Gagadju elder well-known throughout the Northern Territory, and nationally due to his book *Kakadu Man* (1985), likewise gave instructions to his family that his name and image could be used after his death. The second factor Verghis notes is technology. With satellite connections and internet technologies, restrictions on the reproduction and circulation of names and images become near impossible, especially when non-Indigenous media organisations may lack either the knowledge or the understanding of protocols – as *The Australian* example above illustrates. The third issue raised by Verghis is the possibility that economic factors are contributing to less stringent adherence to Indigenous mourning protocols. Closure of name and image can mean that an Indigenous artist’s work may fall from public attention during the mourning period, resulting in a significant loss of income for his or her family, or community. Verghis cites both Hetti Perkins, curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and Wally Caruana, a senior art consultant for Sotheby’s, as acknowledging that the need to provide for a family after an individual’s death may be impacting upon closure practices.

The point I wish to make is that Indigenous mourning protocols are both complex and dynamic and clearly they have significant implications for the production and circulation of the representations of Indigenous lives across all aspects of Australian cultural production. Australian life writing texts are no exception. Indeed, where life writing becomes death writing, concerns for mourning protocols would be expected. To think through these implications, I would like to consider the negotiations of Indigenous mourning protocols in two examples of Australian life writing. *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary* (1990) by American-born anthropologist Eric Michaels records the final year of his life spent in and out of hospital in Brisbane and offers Michaels’ commentary on the possibility that Indigenous elders of the Walpiri community in which he worked could impose closure upon his writings, including his diary. *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story* (1995) is a collaboratively produced autobiographical text, published after Marika’s death but only following an eight year period of closure negotiated by his collaborator, Jennifer Isaacs, with and amongst members of Marika’s family. Together, these two texts provide opportunity to consider the exchanges that take place between the processes of construction and circulation of life writing and the protocols and ceremonies which

mediate relations between the living and those who have passed on. I also hope to suggest that Indigenous mourning practices could have a significant bearing on the new Australian modernism that Muecke signals.

It is not surprising that reflection upon mourning protocols features in Eric Michaels' autobiographical book, *Unbecoming*. Written as a diary over the months from September 1987 through to August 1988, when Michaels died from AIDS related illness, the text returns repeatedly to matters of obligation and mourning procedures that are inextricably bound to his relationships with the Walpiri community of Yuendumu. The certainty of his own death, the question of who would read his final pages and speculation on what might become of his few possessions – mostly books but also, significantly, his writings – are matters that insert themselves throughout his text. In the diary's second entry, that of 13 September, 1987, Michaels asks,

What am I going to do with the books? The Aboriginal art? The photographs? For somebody intentionally bereft of the material, there does seem to be a lot to deal with. And worse, each of my possessions proves complex and complicated in terms that arise only now when faced with the prospect of dispersal (25).

Michaels' concerns at this stage, he says, are for the "logistics of all that" (25), the details of dispersal, the question : to whom should possessions be left? Within a few pages, however, and with his thoughts returning to "the idea of writing a will," he begins to consider what this means in Walpiri practice. He describes, in terms similar to those of Biddle's account above, the mourning protocols at Yuendumu.

As with most other Australian Aboriginal peoples, the Walpiri community I lived with at Yuendumu maintain elaborate, protracted mourning ceremonies. [...] The camp is burned, people move away. Songs and designs belonging to the deceased exit the collective repertoire, sometimes for generations. Today, photographs, audio and video tapes – all the modern forms of automatic inscription – must be obliterated or sealed away; it is more than a terrible insult to invoke the dead with recordings, it means trouble (31).

The notion of writing a diary of one's dying days, a text that after one's death could be read by family, friends, published in book form with the deceased's name on the cover, displayed on shelves in bookshops or libraries, is more than conceptually strange to people Michaels knew at Yuendumu, he suggests. It is both transgressive and dangerous,

for to evoke the recently deceased through name or image is to risk exposure to the realm of spirit, to the power of the dead, and to conflicts that may be associated with particular deaths.

Michaels' reflections at this point indicate two things. First is his concern for Walpiri responses to his diary. As Michaels, throughout his years at Yuendumu, had been at pains to adhere to Indigenous protocols in all aspects of his research, a potential breach of protocol in this his final text is unsettling. His diary returns to this concern at several points and I will come back to this idea in a moment. Secondly, Michaels himself admits that he has recognised a certain adoption of avoidance practices in his own experiences of mourning. "I discovered that the idea became very sensible to me," he writes. Following the death of his lover, Rick, and after his mother's death as well, he refused to look at their photographs, "except surreptitiously" (32). It is a brief admission, and qualified, but significant I believe.

Michaels' assumption of Indigenous practice is, in fact, not uncommon amongst non-Indigenous writers and researchers who have studied and collaborated with Indigenous people and their communities. Jane Sloan opens an article on the art of Dorothy Napangardi by commenting on the awkwardness of conversations she has had with non-Indigenous friends who work in Indigenous communities; this awkwardness, she realises, is a result of their adherence to mourning protocols:

Respectful of the communities in which they've lived and worked, my friends observe cultural injunctions against uttering the names of the dead. Instead, people are referred to in kinship terms (my brother, my auntie), their name may be spelled out, or represented by an initial, or part of their name may be substituted by a particular word. This has the effect of interrupting or halting the flow of my friends' words; the conversation pauses for a moment, concentrating around a point of absence (178).

One of these friends, Sloan tells her readers, is Jennifer Biddle and as one recalls Biddle's comments on erasure, Sloan's recognition that closure is not disappearance but a process of concentration, a focusing upon an absence, suggests again, that the dead are not gone. Also, the possibility arises that Indigenous mourning practices may have something to teach non-Indigenous Australians, something that may contribute to the way that we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people both, understand this shared nation.

Michaels claims in his diary that he is not unduly concerned by the issue of name closure in relation to his own writing. “As for the matter of postmortem naming, e.g. posthumous publication of my work, I see no problem. I am not, nor have I ever wanted or imagined myself to be, a Walpiri Aboriginal” (32). He writes that he comes “from a culture which honours the dead by invoking their names” (32). Referring to his Jewish and American upbringing, he relates the naming practices connected to “trees in Israel, Washington’s Vietnam War memorial, or any local town square for that matter” (32). In the Australian context, one only need think of the memorials for Australia’s war dead – the memorial gardens, the honour avenues - found in every country town and city, listing those from the local community who fought and died for their country, and reminding us of Muecke’s point that nationhood rests upon such acknowledgement of the dead. And yet, although Michaels writes that he sees no problem, he immediately turns to the possibility of trouble, of conflict, that his passing might cause. He reflects on the “social body” that the deceased becomes after death, an identity that “exists outside the self,” and that “obviously remains, as community property, for some time” after the death of the individual (33). “I suppose, for whatever reasons, it is this being that I am investing so heavily in right now, perhaps in an attempt to honour/repay/justify friendships and family who are likely to mull over my life and death a good deal” (33). Michaels’ social body, he realises, is linked to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and this means that his naming and his writing do raise problems. “The issue may cause some pain at Yuendumu (not meaning to be presumptuous), but I expect some people will indeed feel ‘too sorry’ to speak of me” (33).

The point is that Michaels did take seriously his personal and social obligations to the Walpiri community. Michaels had worked at Yuendumu as a researcher from 1982 to 1986, during which time he published a series of academic articles analysing and reporting on Indigenous and non-Indigenous film and television production practices and their implications for Indigenous culture. Central to this body of analytical work is the significance of information restriction and its impact upon the production and circulation of audio-visual recordings, both with regard to secret/sacred material and with respect to mortuary restrictions. For non-Indigenous practice, particularly in film and video made in Indigenous communities, Michaels emphasised the importance of community review to

ensure that restricted images or knowledge were not violated. It was a protocol that he followed in his own writing practice. Prior to the publication of his academic writing, he submitted manuscripts of articles dealing with Indigenous representational practice at Yuendumu to the Walpiri Media Association (WMA) for their vetting.

Consultation and community approval is an uneasy and often drawn-out process and a section of Michaels' diary recounts not only his commitment to respecting Indigenous protocols, but also his frustrations. "I have to acknowledge that I provoke these crises," he writes, "very much on purpose. By pushing into especially difficult and contradictory areas of modern Walpiri life, I assure these confrontations" (102). Michaels here is commenting on a last minute objection by WMA to the use of an image from Yuendumu for an article about to be published by the Sydney journal *Art & Text*. From his remarks it is clear that consultation is not a simple process of submitting a text and then acceding to the community's demands for changes. In this case, Michaels writes that his obligations as a media expert and advisor compel him to both consult the community and respect their concerns, as well as try to impress upon them the rationale supporting his 'reading' and writing about Walpiri practice. His frustration is evident in his diary as he compares his own commitments to those of other non-Indigenous writers less concerned for protocols. Referring to the WMA insistence that an image be removed, not for issues of secret/sacred restrictions, but over the "wholly secular question of community PR/self-image" he writes: "It seems especially bad tactics to exercise these controls only on people who offer themselves up for consultation, because they [WMA] continue to have no power over the majority of outsiders who never submit a thing for comment or vetting" (102). Part of his frustration is related to his physical distance from the community at the time of writing his diary. He comments: "Before, I was able to broker these issues face to face as I was accorded a persona and speaking rights over my five years of work in association with Yuendumu. But nobody else could do that for me or even be expected to try" (148).

It is at this point in his text that Michaels, significantly, returns to the issue of mourning protocols. As he reflects again on the matter of his will, the dispersal of his possessions, and the fulfilling of obligations, he asks in relation to his writing and his relationship with the Walpiri community: "And what if the old people – this is an

unlikely scenario – decided to extend mortuary restrictions to me and my name: Am I willing to have everything withdrawn from circulation?” (148). His will had included a copyright clause giving powers to Yuendumu which he says, “might for example give them the right to block publication of these diaries” (147-148). As he reviews his understanding of the will, he becomes uncertain. He worries about the possible posthumous publication of his collected essays and whether it was justifiable to pass his obligation to consult and collaborate with Yuendumu on to whoever became the editor or publisher of the essay collection. He worries as well about potential profits. “Where do profits go, should there be any from book sales? I thought they went to WMA. But did I intend for such things as the diaries (which by this time Paul is convinced will outsell Jackie Collins) to profit them?” (149). He asks a colleague to consult with a lawyer to clarify the will and he is informed that as the text was worded Yuendumu, through WMA, would in fact have control of his writings in terms of the right to censor the material, but would derive no fiscal benefit from them. Michaels says then that he immediately has that will voided, and a new one drafted directing profits to his estate (to be redirected then in some proportion to WMA, perhaps?) and which would include a clause “of advisement and consideration of the WMA and the Walpiri people of Yuendumu” (149).

The possibility that Indigenous mortuary restrictions would result in closure being imposed upon Eric Michaels’ name and writings did not eventuate. What is significant for my argument, however, is that Michaels took these concerns seriously, that he understood himself and positioned himself in terms of relatedness to the Walpiri community with whom he had spent five working years. The process of thinking himself towards his own death that Michaels engages in through the text of *Unbecoming* was one that drew upon the framework of Indigenous mourning, that considered what might happen if Indigenous mourning protocols extended to non-Indigenous domains, including the publication of life writing. He also says in his diary that he will regret not being able to know how people at Yuendumu will accommodate their mourning practices to his passing. He speculates, wryly:

I wonder whether [Francis] Jupurrurla – on hearing of my death – will burn my Texas cowboy boots which I will send him next week, or whether, as I hope, he will find and invoke some dispensation, some loophole in the ‘Law’

to permit him to wear them for a while. For years, he eyed them with such obsessive fervour! It's these little researchable questions I'm a bit disappointed not to be able to test out any further (33).

The implications of Indigenous mourning practices for Australian life writing are also central to the text *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story*. Wandjuk Marika was a Yolngu artist, an elder of the Rirratjingu group of the Yolngu people, and a statesperson who worked all his life as a cultural mediator, moving between the Yolngu community of Yirrkala in Arnhem Land and non-Indigenous Australia and acting as conduit in the exchange of knowledge and understanding between societies. As Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board from 1976 to 1979, he was instrumental in gaining recognition for Aboriginal copyright, and in overseas travel he acted as a representative for Aboriginal culture in international forums. In his final years he worked with writer Jennifer Isaacs to record his life narrative. His son Mawalan explains their close relationship in his Foreword:

And I'm thinking about this book, it is really the good book for our future. Jenny Isaacs which I call her Ngandi, that's my mother, she's been adopted to our family, she has been my family for a long time. She's in close touch with my family and she was the first woman who went to Yirrkala back in '69 I think, and met my father and my mother and became friends, and my mother adopted her and they became sisters (5).

Mawalan's opening for the book is important not just in establishing the long-standing relationship between Marika and Isaacs, but also in asserting the respect shown for Indigenous mourning protocols. Because Marika died before the book was completed, the issue of closure meant that publication was jeopardised. Mawalan explains:

My family said don't publish this book for maybe eight years, but soon it will be time. It's our law not to mention the name of the person or man who has passed away. Now the family gave permission and at last it will be coming out next year. This book will be going out north, east, south and west (6).

The text of *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story* is respectful of Indigenous protocols in several ways, as Penny van Toorn, in an article comparing Australian and Canadian Indigenous historiography, has outlined. She comments not only that the publication of Marika's *Life Story* was delayed by eight years due to name and image closure following Marika's

death, but also that other recently deceased family members are referred to in the texts without their names being printed. As well, she points towards the emphasis made in the text, by both Marika and Isaacs, that secret/sacred material has not been divulged, neither through narratives nor photographs. “The traditional Yolngu regulative system is clearly operating here,” van Toorn remarks (50). In design and layout, too, the book is respectful of Yolngu systems, utilising orthography developed by Yolngu Literature Centres, and, as indicated above, introduced by appropriate kin (51).

It is, however, the book’s concern for and negotiation of Indigenous mourning protocols that is especially significant. A key chapter, placed near the end of the book, is titled “Funerals,” and here Marika explains his role as “mortuary man” at Yirrkala. Wandjuk Marika was custodian of important sacred songs and knowledge for the Rirratjingu and was called upon at funerals to perform ceremonies that would ensure proper respect and treatment of the spirit of the deceased. Isaacs, Marika’s collaborator on the book, recounts that Marika would often be summoned from his work in southern, urban Australia to return to Arnhem Land to preside over mourning ceremonies. “His input at funerals was essential,” she writes (150). She goes on to explain that these ceremonies may last for months

and involve the travel of several hundred kin from far places to the funeral ground (depending on the status of the deceased). They require extensive planning, financing and organisation of hospitality. The songs and dances are performed episodically each day close to the immediate bereaved family who are camped in isolation with the body. Great funeral ceremonies are the climax of life and explore all the Yolngu arts – body and coffin painting, feather and string regalia, making of sacred emblems, song cycles and powerful emotive dancing. Wandjuk was needed to fulfil his managerial role as the ‘mortuary man’ (150).

At the close of the chapter, death intrudes into the very process of narrating and recording for the book, as Marika is called back to Yirrkala for another funeral. Marika says:

I don’t know if I finish this life story. They want me to come finish that manikay bungul for the funeral. I don’t know, look like I’m the yindi bungul for the funeral – mortuary. Yes, I’m the mortuary man. I’ll have to go book plane straight to Gove and then go MAF [Mission Aviation Fellowship] book straight to Biranybirany (157).

Ironically, it was not this death that interrupted the production of the book, but Marika's own death in June 1987 that put his *Life Story* at risk. Marika's book is often cited as an example of Australian publishing respecting the restrictions imposed by Indigenous mourning protocols. What is not widely mentioned is that the tapes and transcripts from which the book was later composed were, at the time of Marika's death, jeopardised by these same protocols. Marika, in his text, mentions that closure is imposed not only on the name and image, but also on the possessions of the deceased, with clothing and other items being buried with the deceased (155). Biddle and Michaels both made the point, cited above, that audio and video recordings could be subject to "obliteration" following death. The audio tapes on which Marika had recorded his life story and the transcripts were both then potentially at risk.

As part of a larger project of PhD research, which initiated my thinking about the impact of Indigenous protocols on life writing, I was able to speak to Jennifer Isaacs. She recalled that following Marika's death this possibility of obliteration was taken quite seriously. Isaacs explains:

I actually got asked by the family, before the funeral, by Banduk, I think, ... could everything be buried with him because that's a custom. You take all the possessions, and you put it in the grave with the person. Now, he also had lived in Melbourne and he had numerous possessions down there: paintings, clothing, didgeridoo, all sorts of things. And so, Jenny Home took the position that she locked the door of the room he used to stay in and just everything stayed there – for eight years or something. In my case, I said, "Well, I don't want to give it to you, and the reason is on this tape which I have heard and which other people in the family have heard, it says, 'This is for my children.' So, I'm not going to let any of the family see it, hear it or go near it, and I will lock it up. I will lock the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, so it won't come out. You know, it won't seep out. So that when the time comes we might be able to print it, so you can read what your father wanted you to hear." And the eldest son wrote and supported me fully in that, and so did the rest of the children, who eventually became the copyright owners and are named in the front part.²

At this crucial moment in the course of the book's production, then, family involvement meant negotiating between a strict adherence to protocols, which would have meant the destruction of the recorded material, and an acceptance that, following a period of closure, work on the book could continue. The fact that family members knew that

Wandjuk Marika intended the book as a form of legacy for his children was a prime factor in their decision to allow the book to proceed.

Later, when preparation of the manuscript was underway, Isaacs went to Yirrkala to consult with family over the 'voice' of Marika in his text. Isaacs was experimenting with a poetic layout of the text which she felt would most effectively render the oral nature of the narrative. But voice, like image, remained subject to closure. Isaacs again explains:

I rang up Mawalan and he decided to come down to Sydney and have a look. And he came down and also Rorr'wuy came, and I went up to Yirrkala and spent days sitting in the Hideaway Motel with different family members coming, with relevant protective kin, because it was a dangerous thing to be opening it and reading it before it was released. So Mawalan had assumed his father's responsibilities of that, and he'd been the one to say, "Yes, we're going to go," and I've got sort of various documents that sort of dictate, "We the following agree that this book can come out, and that we will do this now and that then, this will be the situation and these are the copyright holders and these are the people to negotiate for the copyright holders." It was all quite formalised. [...] And we had a meeting outside the school, with as many members of the family as we could rustle up and Mawalan organised all that, really. So, I took into account what was being said, you know. "What's this word? This word doesn't even exist in any of our languages." And there would be a lot of debate and correction. But where occasionally someone would try to dictate a sentence and change his sentence – I think I told you – that my technique then was to only do that if when I read it aloud, the way I had heard the tape, because of course you have to realise that they couldn't hear the tape yet. They did not want to listen to the tape. They didn't want him 'out'. You know. And they were very fearful of me, of my health, my vulnerability. Because the reason you close a name, in the Aboriginal world, you know, is to protect those close to that person from injury or death as a result of contact with the spirit. So they just thought I was really in the front line on that. But I was a tough lady. They thought I could cope.

Closure of name, image, voice and possessions in Indigenous mourning practice is, as Isaacs says here, a means of protecting those who live on. It is not a form of forgetting. It is a recognition that the dead continue, their power continues, amongst the social body. As well, it is an acknowledgement that the dead can be threatening and dangerous and their power must be reckoned with through ceremony. In her first major publication, *Australian Dreaming: 40,000 years of Aboriginal History* (1980), Isaacs begins her chapter on death with just this point:

In any society the death of an individual comes as a threat to the whole fabric of life. Amongst Aboriginals, however, death is seen as inevitable only in the very old. Death of a healthy man or woman must have been caused by the evil magic and sorcery of some enemy of the dead person. Natural causes of death are seldom admitted except in the case of very young babies and very old people whose death causes little disruption to the pattern of society. But when an adolescent or a person in the prime of life dies there is a sense of great loss and the whole camp goes into deep mourning (213).

Eric Michaels, in work published before he wrote *Unbecoming*, made a similar claim:

Because death is almost always believed to be caused directly or indirectly by human agents, death may provoke blame and hostility between families. Ideally, these are resolved in mortuary ceremonies, which may extend intermittently over several years. But some deaths prove more difficult to resolve. In any case, the recall of the dead by name or image may prove to be not merely insulting: it may well provoke such unresolved hostilities and prompt fights and paybacks (*Bad Aboriginal Art*, 9).

It is toward this matter of death, unresolved disputes, and the role of mourning that I would now move, returning these comments to the reflections on nationhood with which this article began.

‘Unfinished business’ is a phrase that has gained currency in Australia to describe the state of affairs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. What stands between peoples in this nation, it can hardly be denied, is the unfinished business of our colonial legacy. Patrick Dodson begins his important lecture, *Beyond the Mourning Gate: Dealing with Unfinished Business* (2000), with a recounting of events that led to the Day of Mourning and Protest conference in 1938, an Indigenous response to the sesquicentennial celebrations taking place around the country to mark the arrival of the First Fleet and the laying of the foundations of the Australian nation. Dodson suggests that some Indigenous leaders in the year 2000 may feel that the 1938 Day of Mourning and Protest may not have more connection with or relevancy to contemporary political and social relations. “For many Aboriginal people, however, story telling, remembering and paying respect to those who led the way in the past, is a part of our traditions,” he says.

It is part of the intergenerational accountability and responsibility for our traditions, customs and values. If we lose our sense of value and meaning in the Aboriginal world, then we become a successful clone of what the assimilation policies and strategies sought to achieve (7).

Written and delivered just prior to the termination of the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Dodson's lecture suggests that Indigenous protocols of mourning are indeed relevant to contemporary Australia. "From a cultural position," he argues,

the only way that the mourning period can be ended is when the proper protocols and practical arrangements have been carried out. When the people who have had a wrong or injustice done to them have been accommodated by the action of those responsible. Then we can come together as friends and mates (15).

Dodson is in no way naïve regarding the political climate prevailing, then and now, in which concerns for symbolic acts are spurned in favour of 'practical' solutions. Recounting the long history of protest and mourning, he acknowledges that for the most part Indigenous efforts have "fallen upon half-hearted or empty responses" (14) from non-Indigenous Australia. "The cross-cultural learning has not happened," he writes (15).

Dodson is writing about institutional and governmental responses to the claims and demands of Indigenous peoples. On another level, however, cross-cultural learning is occurring, or accruing perhaps, in small but significant ways. Amongst these is the increasing number of non-Indigenous people in Australia who are aware of Indigenous mourning protocols, who take these protocols seriously, and who may begin to see that as our histories are intertwined, so must be our grief for what has happened here, for the dead, the Indigenous dead, who continue to haunt our nation. Their deaths, linked undeniably to human agency, to the legacy of colonialism both past and present, await a time when mourning has been fulfilled, when reparations have been made and accounts have been settled. The dead are not gone. Though we may not speak their names, they continue among us.

"What are the protocols to provide the relief to the causes of the mourning and trauma flowing from the intertwined history?" Dodson asks (15). Indigenous mourning protocols, as they are negotiated in life writing texts and in all manner of public discourse in Australia, give one pause to reflect upon those whose absence hurts like a wound in this nation's narrative.

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Notes

¹ See the *Media Watch* website for details of this episode:

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1347813.htm>.

See also the guidelines for Indigenous cultural production and bereavement offered at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/message/proper/death.htm>

² This and following quotes from Isaacs are taken from two interviews with her recorded on August 10 and December 19, 2001. Isaacs mentions Jenny Home, the third of Wandjuk Marika's wives. Their relationship and the reaction of Marika's first two wives are discussed by Marika in the chapter "Marriage" (91-97) and in the chapter "Teaching My Children" (158-169). Jenny Home and her daughter Mayatili live in Melbourne, where Marika family members are frequent visitors. For a transcript of a recent documentary covering Mayatili Marika's involvement in the Yirrkala community, see:
www.abc.net.au/dynasties/txt/s982601.htm.