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The Trouble with Tropes in Creative Writing

Some stories are easier to tell than others. My experience with this sentiment began when I started a Master of Philosophy (in Creative Writing) where I wrote the novella 'Moonlight Love' which would later become the fantasy YA novel *Moonlight and Dust* with Allen & Unwin. The act of writing this fantastical story with a sense of my real-life culture proved to be harder to get across the page than I had originally assumed.

My path into the masters program was one I made without truly understanding what was involved. I'd recently finished a masters by coursework in writing, editing and publishing, and entering into a second masters by research seemed to me like the logical next step.

In my mind, my scholarly research question was secondary to the creative component. What did I care to research? How to write a bestselling young adult fantasy? Sort of…

While beginning on campus in a warm January, I didn't consider the full band of possibilities when it came to my topic, what output and what research I could untangle and investigate. What creative and experimental approaches to writing I could use as tools. At that time, I was just excited to have my writing taken seriously, work with two wonderful supervisors, and have a scholarship that would help pay rent.

The master's thesis needed to be this: roughly 30,000 words of a creative component and 10,000 words of research (or an exegesis). My aim was to write a speculative fiction YA novella reflecting my Torres Strait Islander heritage in some way.

Ultimately, from the process of writing this novella for my studies and then turning it into the novel *Moonlight and Dust*, I learnt what interests me most – writing family and specifically the uniqueness of coming from a First Nations family. Originally, when I began constructing the basic idea of the novella, I looked at *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer and enjoyed wondering how an Island girl, like my character Zillah, might react to the main character from *Twilight*, Edward Cullen, and the truth of a supernatural world. *Twilight* was one of my favourite books as a teenager – foundational in my understanding of YA literature and also love. But in no way did the novel (or many of the others I read at this time) reflect my own life and family.

Before I started on the full draft of the novella, I wrote a short story about my character Zillah breaking up with her boyfriend because he had superpowers. The story was then published

as 'The Break Up' in *Unlimited Futures: Speculative, Visionary Blak+Black Fiction*, edited by Ellen van Neerven and Rafeif Ismail.

Writing 'The Break Up' inspired me to continue with a novella with the same characters. Though the novella has strayed from this short story, it helped me find Zillah's voice and begin the themes I wanted to write about.

Before the Short Story

At the start of my research, before 'The Break Up' was even a concept, I had a solid idea for an urban fantasy narrative that was an analogy for history born in the Torres Strait Islands – it was a contemporary novel with themes that would align with my background, reminiscent of the pearling industry period in the Straits. But I didn't love it. So, very quickly and with the help of my principal advisor, I began to plot and plan a second-world (not on Earth or in our reality) fantasy novella with similar themes. But this, in the end, felt even harder to complete. And it took me a while to figure out why.

Representation of culture became my biggest concern. As *Ghost Bird* author Lisa Fuller says in a KYD article, 'with any marginalised belief system, the reader picks it up and thinks it's real.'

Am I contributing to the misinformation and erasure of my people by fictionalising beliefs … I need to make sure it's culturally safe (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 7 October 2020).

I wanted to provide counter stories to the many fantasy books that either did not represent me or represented people like me in negative ways, yet I wanted to do it correctly. I struggled with how best to do this. N. K. Jemisin notes, in her MasterClass tutorial on world building, a common mistake many writers make is to 'attempt to just rub the serial number off an existing culture because they're afraid to create something new'. In other words, many writers take from cultures around our world and change them only slightly before basing the cultures in their fantasy works on them. Was I doing this in my work even if it was my culture I was inspired by?

Nearly every entry in my writing journal, where I kept track of my thoughts on the creative project, was negative or consumed with worry on this topic. I wrote approximately five beginnings of the novella around ten to fifteen thousand words each. That's a 50–75k novel of beginnings itself! Each beginning was different: a futuristic version of Brisbane, a fantasy world centring around an archipeligo, a school for superhumans set in a flying saucer. But none of them felt right. I wrote in my notes, *These words hold importance to me* (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 13 August 2020).

After chatting with another First Nations person and mentor in the industry, I was able to articulate my problem a little more clearly in my journal: *Education of the reader is needed because Torres Strait Islander culture is not visible* (13 August 2020).

My culture is not as visible as other cultures that have influenced fantasy YA books, therefore readers could very possibly pick up a text that had a mixture of real beliefs and history as well as made up fantastical sections and believe it all to be true. After speaking with my editor friend in the industry, I realised I am part of a larger group of First Nations peoples and the worry I felt was *necessary* as there is such a thing as *collective impact*. My words would have an impact on Torres Strait Islander readers (whether they read the book or not) and this had to be at the very core of my decision making.

It was here that I officially decided not to work on a fantasy story influenced by history and culture from the Torres Strait. I decided I needed to write in a contemporary world with real Torres Strait Islander characters first, and clearly have the magic or fantastical elements separate from Islander culture.

Partway through this thesis and after making adjustments due to the pandemic's impact on my original planned research, I wrote the 'The Break Up' for *Unlimuted Futures* and began to look more closely at the tropes of YA and how they might serve a purpose to me as First Nations speculative fiction writer.

The Chosen One

I wanted to delve more into The Chosen One trope, writing back against it, by showing that, though Zillah, my driven and slightly lonely Torres Strait Islander protagonist, is not chosen or bestowed with powers, she is choosing herself to be the protector of her sister and friends. This was an important trope for me to show that young Torres Strait Islander people don't need powers to make a difference in life and there is not one 'chosen' Torres Strait Islander to act as a saviour.

The agency of my protagonist, Zillah Donald, was at the forefront of my mind as I wrote each draft of the novella (and then later as I reworked the story into a novel). Despite family reservations, it is Zillah's decision to come home to Far North Queensland. And, later, it's Zillah's decision to investigate some strange happenings at her new school.

Being The Chosen One, can also be an unavoidable feeling of tokenism many people of colour experience. While I wanted to highlight that being different, or being The Chosen One, is something First Nations people are constantly aware of, I also didn't want it to be the biggest point of difference for Zillah. In Cairns she has a big community of people like her – such as Torres Strait Islander friends Cassie and Lilli – and community plays a vital role in Zillah's story.

The Absent Parents

One of the most notable tropes of many YA books is the Absent Parents trope. Usually, the protagonist's parents and any guardian figures have died or are unable or unwilling to properly parent the young characters in YA stories. However, in many Torres Strait Islander communities, family extends beyond the western nuclear family. Grandparents are usually very much in the lives of their grandchildren, aunts and uncles are second parents, and cousins are siblings. Though this is not the case for every Torres Strait Islander family, I wanted to make it part of Zillah's life as it is reflective of my own life experience. I wanted to set up family as a foundation and hint at how wide reaching it is for many Torres Strait Islanders. The importance Zillah holds for her sister Nik (who is missing in the novella and then comatose in the published novel) would also extend to every family member as she has been raised to think like this and it is her greatest strength. She is able to call on her family for help in both the novel and novella.

Authority is Untrustworthy

Through all drafts, the trope of Untrustworthy Authority Figures was something I wanted to focus on as it has been part of many First Nations lives since invasion. It has been a point of danger for many First Nations peoples, and prejudice has come from these institutions and built what is so-called Australia. These issues were dealt with directly in dystopian young adult novel *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* by Ambelin Kwaymullina – one of the few speculative fiction YA books written and published in Australia by a First Nations writer.

In 'Moonlight Love,' and then in *Moonlight and Dust*, I wanted the Untrustworthy Authority Figures trope to be a major problem. And this does play out in both versions of the story (I just don't want to mention exactly how, to avoid spoilers). It was also important to me to show that while authority is untrustworthy, Zillah is able to trust her parental figures. Her mother, uncles, and grandparents are still a source of safety and comfort. Distrust is evident within Zillah's relationship with them because of Nik, and it is one of the main reasons Zillah is determined to find Nik – to restore balance within her family and her own emotions.

The End of the World

The World is Ending was a trope I wanted to explore more than I was able to within 'Moonlight Love' and in the published *Moonlight and Dust*. Currently, the climate crisis is threatening the Torres Strait Islands in the real world. However, this proved difficult to write about. I wanted to introduce the dilemma of superhuman powers and the possibility of fixing the climate to Zillah's story. As my journal entry below highlights,

I am interested in futurist Indigenous stories and how this might play out for Torres Strait Islander people when our lands are being destroyed by rising sea levels. I don't want to solve this issue, but rather create awareness and hope around the subject. A call to action in fiction (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 9 October 2020).

My main question was, *how to do this without minimising the problem* (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 13 October 2020).

I found reflecting on my writing through the journal therapeutic, but as Claire G. Coleman discussed in a *Guardian* interview about her debut novel, *Terra Nullius*, the writing was still painful. It made me frustrated as the destruction of lands and waters of my people is something that *can* be fixed with methods we have in the real world. We don't need superpowers to save our island homes.

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One of the last entries in my journal that I wrote was: *I worry I've held back in writing this creative piece. Carefully placing words and storylines because the impact of this story means a lot to me* (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 9 October 2021).

I *still* worry I've done this.

The process of writing, knowing someone will read my work led to a lot of anxiety about what it was I wrote. A lot of pressure. In hindsight, I was concerned that I could have included more cultural knowledge and explored themes on a deeper, personal level. My identity could not be torn from the work, so should I have used this even more to my advantage?

It is important to note that I am still learning my Torres Strait Islander culture. I feel my writing will develop as this learning develops. Toward the middle of the masters program, I wrote, *I wish there were more speculative fiction books by First Nations peoples in Australia to help with inspiration* (Jasmin's writing reflection journal – 29 October 2020). This feeling articulated in my journal was the main drive behind this thesis. Future Torres Strait Islander readers and writers should have access to read stories that somewhat reflect their backgrounds, indenties, or lives, and hopefully feel less alone in this industry. The industry too, in terms of the marketplace, audiences, reviewers, and book culture in general, could only be enriched by a fuller picture of First Nations experiences and perspectives, especially on long-established conventions of YA fantasy.

Moonlight and Dust, the novel, was published in July this year. It's felt like a bit of a rollercoaster. I've read reviewers which question my use of Torres Strait Islander creole, Yumplatok, I've spoken to First Nations booksellers who were so excited that I set the story in

Cairns and mention Darwin. I sat down with my Aka to get language words and the Yumplatok correct, and I agonised over telling her the book included some swear words! Though it oscillated bewteen frustrating and rewarding, the process of writing the book has always been enlightening for me.

But I haven't been on this rollercoaster alone. Many people have been on it with me – friends, editors, publishers, my agent, and my family. Writing a novel can be a solitary task, but *Moonlight and Dust* has never been for me.

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