

Select Page



Caravan to Yale – A Tjindarella Story

by Southerly | Apr 7, 2017 | Blog | 0 comments

by Natalie Harkin



I am above the clouds, floating on my contemplations and looking for patterns and remnant bush in cleared and carved-up landscapes. I've just parted ways with my friend and fellow poet at the Adelaide airport – she to Sydney and me to Canberra, each for work. We talked briefly about this blog, as I've been thinking a lot about the way her work has been represented in the mainstream media when news of her literary Prize went viral.

The March 2017 announcement for the Windham-Campbell Prize, administered by Yale University in the US, was truly sensational. It is possibly the world's richest literary prize awarded annually to eight recipients who are oblivious to their top-secret nomination. You can imagine the reactions as this news swept through our local Aboriginal and arts communities in SA that one recipient was our very own sister and warrior-woman poet, Ali Cobby Eckermann. More broadly, the announcement was sensationalised with the rags-to-riches media trope, trending 'out of work' and 'living in a caravan', in what quickly became the '*Caravan to Yale*' story. While the 'unemployed and living in a caravan' line was taken from an interview with Ali, what the media does with such a line, and the seeds it plants in the minds of the reader, is something else again.

I love that Ali's caravan has become a bit of a media celebrity, particularly knowing its journey to finding her and its potential to mobilise Indigenous literature and writing workshops to Aboriginal communities. Ali's hard work toward achieving her mobile writers retreat dream doesn't feature in the mainstream story, despite headlines like: *Caravan to Yale – The Stolen Child who became a Star Poet; Out of work and Living in a Caravan; Australian Writer who Lives in a Caravan; Unemployed Poet living in a Caravan; The Australian Writer who Lives in a Caravan in Adelaide; Unemployed Indigenous Poet; Woman Living in a Caravan; Aboriginal Poet Living in Penury; Unemployed, Living in a Caravan and Now a Winner.*

The stories beyond the media headlines were celebratory, but the emphasis I thought rather skewed. I am in no way diminishing the potential life-changing impact of such a Prize, but the media's representation got me thinking about what defines 'work', and what is deemed valued and legitimate. What about the place of personal choice, or coercion, in how we live and work in paid and unpaid roles across all sectors? What about the critical unpaid caring roles played within families and communities? What about the increase in precarious labour that impacts mostly on women and marginalized communities, and the neoliberal contexts to such work? What about diverse perspectives on the value of money and material wealth, and the cultural value of sharing within one's family and community? What about the emotional labour involved to bearing witness over and over again, to violent histories of deep colonialism?

For me, the important news is that Ali is the first Indigenous woman and first poet to win this incredible Prize. She is a Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha woman who walks the stories she tells, and we Nungas and South Australians, and our national community of Indigenous writers, are intensely proud. This Prize did not come from a Cornflakes box. Ali is one of the hardest working people I know. As a prolific writer and well-travelled storyteller working from the ground up, her poetry has been translated and celebrated across the globe for many, many years. She started the *Koolunga Aboriginal Writers Retreat* and currently convenes our local *First Nations Nunga Writers Group* in South Australia. She is a mother, daughter, nanna, aunty, and good friend to many. She wears her activist heart on her sleeve and takes every opportunity and platform to speak up against injustice, and this is her embodied lived ethic. Like so many Aboriginal writers and artists, she is engaged in some of the most important and difficult work imaginable that requires a level of resilience, dedication, patience and persistence that most people would find overwhelming, and opt to choose a path less heavy.

The media's skewed 'rags to riches' emphasis also got me thinking about the work of Malak Malak poet and playwright, Eva Johnson. In 1985, Eva wrote, co-directed and performed her play *Tjindarella* – a subversive analogy to Disney's popularised *Cinderella*, with the Aboriginal Women's Theatre in Adelaide. It is the story of an Aboriginal woman scrubbing floors and living on a Mission who dreams of a better life. Her Fairy Godmother is the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the glass slipper represents issues like land rights and justice. *Tjindarella* exposes the intersections of racism and sexism underpinning Australia's colonial history, particularly its policy implications including forced child removal and indentured domestic labour that is largely unrecognized in the narrative that is *Advance Australia Fair*. Johnson's insight is a critical counter-narrative, but more than this, it is a Malak Malak woman standing up and telling her story, her way; an embodied will to survive, through words, and with a very different outcome to the better-known rags-to-riches 'happily ever after' fairytale.

For many of us, the compulsion to write is a way to stay safe within words in order to survive racism, sexism and homophobia. It is also a way to process the grief, trauma and exhaustion that comes with educating people every day, be it the taxi-driver, the shop attendant, the school teacher, the uni lecturer, the doctor or the next door neighbour. It is a means to clarify, interpret and reinvent, and importantly, it is a means to speak back, resist, create change and be heard. Such transformative 'word-work' is all too often invisible, misrepresented and misunderstood.

So here I sit, in QF682 seat 23A, contemplating such work in the intermediary-space that is somewhere in the troposphere between take-off and landing. As I bear witness to scarred landscapes below the clouds, I know that Ali Cobby Eckermann and Eva Johnson, and all my literary heroes and intellectual crushes, also bear witness to truths that can only ever be carried a bit lightly through the telling and sharing – through writing that is healing, hard, and necessary work.



Follow

Get the latest posts delivered to your mailbox: