

Writing and Photographing Alter/Native Western Australian Individuals

Simone Lazaroo

Abstract: In this essay, I seek to explore the ways in which personal observations and experiences of Indigenous Australians throughout my life as a Singaporean Eurasian migrant in Western Australia, from the mid-1960s to the present, informed and complicated both my sense of belonging and my writing of novels and short stories. As such, this is a mostly anecdotal and autobiographical account. It includes reflections on my encounters with Indigenous Australians as a child and as an adult, the latter during my employment as a teacher and photographer of Aboriginal people, and during my friendship with an Aboriginal family. As a Eurasian Australian writer, I explore afresh aspects of some ‘stories’ I have made and the history that has made me, to raise questions about how to rethink difference and belonging.

Keywords: Aboriginal; cultural identity; Eurasian migrants; Simone Lazaroo’s fiction; literary and photographic images of Indigenous Australians; White Australia Policy;

Introduction

Part I gives background information on my nuclear family’s experiences as migrants in the 1960s trying to ‘belong’ in our new suburban Perth home, and how I remember and wrote about my first encounters with urban Aboriginal people living in that suburb in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. I then look at my encounters with urban and remote regional Aboriginal people in the mid-1980s, including a brief spell living with a suburban family whose mother identified as Aboriginal and my subsequent choice in the mid-1980s to teach Indigenous children in a space designated as a ‘remote Aboriginal community school,’ but designed and controlled by the white educational authorities down in Perth. Part II reflects on how further life experiences underpinned accounts in my fiction—for example, in my second novel *The Australian Fiancé* (2000) of a young Singaporean woman’s time in Broome, after World War Two, as the guest of her white pearler fiancé. I also explore how my work in the mid to late 1980s in the WA Education Department as a photographer and writer of educational magazines for Aboriginal children influenced my fiction. Part III raises questions about attempting, in my fiction writing, an ethical approach toward Indigenous perspectives from a position that is non-Indigenous, but not ‘white’ either.

I. “Being Educated:” Migrating and How I Remembered and Wrote about Aboriginal People Encountered during Childhood and Young Adulthood

I migrated from Singapore to Australia in 1963 with my siblings, my dark-skinned Eurasian father and my fair-skinned Anglo-Saxon Australian mother, when the White Australia Policy was still being administered. I have previously written in some detail about my father’s experiences some years before, in the late 1950s when he was a Singaporean Colombo Plan scholarship student at the University of Western Australia (Lazaroo, “Ways of Remembering to Write Home” 93). He had to complete a Registration of Aliens form each time he re-entered Australia to study. Immigration department officials struggled to answer a particular question on that form: *Whether or not of predominantly European Appearance?* They answered, variously, *No*, or *Predominantly Asian*. And finally, the last time he entered as a student, the immigration officer’s answer reads: *No. Eurasian*. My father knew he would never be European enough in appearance to get a ‘yes’ to that question, but it felt like a small victory that the officer agreed to be more specific about my father’s racial background.

My Anglo-Australian maternal grandfather told me when I was a child that he'd had to 'pull some strings' to enable my father to migrate with us in 1963. The following year, the Australian Government brought in a measure which allowed so called 'mixed-race' people to immigrate if they had close family ties. But in the early 1960s, our situation was unusual for our metropolitan Perth suburb, where there were no other so-called mixed-race marriages between Asians and white Australians. In the mid-1960s, before the official abolition of the White Australia Policy by Gough Whitlam in 1972 and the beginning of his government's multiculturalism policy in 1973, my father tried his best to 'fit in,' to pass as 'mainstream' Australian, despite his skin colour.

At our primary school just down the road from our first Perth home, I watched one of my favourite classmate's families go through parallel but by no means identical processes. His name was Jamie. I wasn't sure back then why I had a crush on him, except that his skin colour was similar to my father's and my Singaporean cousins,' unlike any of my other classmates at the time. Also, his siblings' complexions varied, and he had a sister whose skin was nearly as pale as mine. In retrospect, I surmise that I must've been searching for a sense of belonging beyond the walls of home and my own family. Jamie had an Aboriginal father and a mother of Anglo-Saxon descent. When we began school in the mid-1960s, no-one else in our neighbourhood besides our two families had a dark-skinned father and a pale-skinned mother. Jamie gave me a sense of familiarity, even though I see now that sense of familiarity was mostly erroneous. In the school grounds and suburb where we lived, there were two species of snail, a large brown species and a smaller white species, and Jamie and I were the only first-graders who agreed in the school garden one playtime that all brown ones were father snails and all white ones were mother snails.

Though the White Australia Policy wasn't formally abolished until 1972 by the Whitlam government, the way in which it was administered gradually relaxed a few years before then. During my last few years of primary school, a few other Asian faces had appeared in our neighbourhood. By 1973, the Whitlam government began promoting the policy of multiculturalism, the same year I began secondary school. Unlike my older sister, who bussed with most of her primary school cohort to a new high school, I went to a special art school in a more established middle-class area.

At first, there were just two other Asian faces in my cohort, but not an Aboriginal face in sight. But in my second year there, an old house in the area became a hostel for Aboriginal girls from remote northern communities. I never found out why they were sent down to Perth rather than to their closest regional high schools. They were never in any of my classes. About eight of them sat huddled together in corners of the quadrangle trying to keep warm during winters colder than any weather they would've experienced up north. They were 'just something we see out the corner of our eye,' one of my Anglo-Australian classmates replied when a teacher asked us if we knew them. The Aboriginal girls' numbers gradually grew smaller. All of them had left by the time we began the last two years of secondary school leading up to our university admissions exams.

In the early 1980s, my parents' marriage broke up and I went to university, supporting myself by waitressing extra hours at the local Chinese restaurant I'd begun working at weekend nights since I was 15. I saw not one Aboriginal face at university, even though it was one of Perth's largest universities. However, in my photography class I met a young man whose parents had run a mission for Aboriginal people in WA's remote northern Kimberley region. I'll call him

Jay. Jay told me stories about the Kimberley landscape, ‘God’s own country,’ he called it, and about the second-hand items the Perth church congregations donated to the mission; ranging from used teabags to thick coats way too hot for the climate up there.

Jay introduced me to his friends, who I’ll call Pete & Sue. Like Jay, Pete was the son of missionaries who’d worked with Aboriginal people. Sue was Aboriginal on her mother’s side of the family, Anglo-Australian on her father’s side. She asked me to babysit their youngest son while she researched her family history. When Jay and I eventually broke up, she invited me to dinner. ‘I really want you in my family,’ she said. ‘I’d like you to meet my unmarried brother. You’re the kind of woman he goes for, and you both have green eyes and an olive complexion.’

I liked Sue immensely and thought I’d like to be in her family. It seems that search for a sense of belonging was still with me. I went happily and quite expectantly to meet her brother for dinner at her home. I’m going to return to the outcome of that particular story near the end of this article.

II. On “Being an Educator”

I was financially insecure by the end of my Bachelor of Fine Arts. I had to find a way to make a decent living quickly, and the most obvious was to complete the one year graduate diploma of education to become a teacher. But not in your average suburban school. After completing the diploma, I signed up to teach in a remote Aboriginal community, preferably in the Kimberly region in Western Australia’s far north. Why? I was 22 years old, somewhat naive. I think I must’ve pictured myself as a bit of a trailblazer, determined to stamp out educational inequality and to experience the beautiful landscapes in which some traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people lived, and their culture. But was it also part of a search for somewhere in Australia where I felt at home, with people who were also not “white”?

I bought a second-hand four-wheel drive ute from the government auctions and arranged for it to be transported to Derby before I headed to the Kimberley by jet and then light airplane. I was so inexperienced with driving on anything but bitumen, that I nearly rolled my ute on the potholed gravel track when I first drove it from Derby to the government school at an Aboriginal community about 200 kilometres inland. I wrote some scenes closely based on my first day at that school in my first novel, *The World Waiting to Be Made*:

Arriving at the school for the first time: “Corrr,” exclaimed the manual arts teacher, pointing back in the direction of the youth as soon as we got inside the classroom, “’dja see who we’ll be teaching? The missing evolutionary link, looks like.”
I felt suddenly alone. That was the kind of joke that was supposed to develop bonds between the teller and the listener. Why couldn’t I laugh?
I’d felt marooned by that kind of joke somewhere before. (Lazaroo, *The World Waiting to Be Made* 179-180)

Nearly thirty years have passed since I wrote this passage about a young Eurasian teacher fronting up to her first day at the school at a remote Aboriginal community. I wrote it eight or nine years after I’d worked at that Kimberley school. While this first novel was only partly autobiographical, this particular episode is a direct account of my own experience in the mid-1980s. Both the white teacher’s comment and my response to him were founded in disgust, his for the Aboriginal adolescents in our care, and mine for that teacher who expected his ‘joke’ to

create a kinship with me. During my ten months working in that remote community, it was not with the white teachers that I would seek kinship.

Why did I include this incident in my first novel *The World Waiting to be Made*? I should preface any retrospective attempt to answer this question with the observation that I was in my late 20s when I began writing that book, and didn't think through my reasons very clearly back then. But *The World Waiting to be Made* was a kind of *bildungsroman*, a young woman's journey, and that particular journey included the struggles of a young Eurasian migrant both to be part of mainstream Australia and to critique its views of Aboriginal Australians.

The school I taught in was designated as a remote Aboriginal community school, but designed and controlled by the white educational authorities down in Perth. As I first flew into the area by small airplane, the pilot pointed out that the teachers' houses, with their carefully mown lawns, were several kilometres from the Aboriginal housing, which had no lawns, adjacent to the school. This mapping of identity and belonging through space, and the performing of ownership of culture and space through codes like the presentation of a mown lawn, was a constant experience in my journey through kinds of material belonging.

The headmaster drove us to school in the Education Department's four-wheel drive personnel carrier, over potholed gravel tracks. The neatly mown patches of lawn in the school grounds were fenced off from the Aboriginal housing and red pindan soil and hills beyond. *The World Waiting to be Made* conveys reasonably accurately the advice the headmaster shared with his staff at our first meeting. Gesturing towards the Aboriginal settlement on the other side of the cyclone wire fence, he said, "Now we have some standards to uphold. First, I don't encourage mixing with the Aboriginal community. In my experience, it causes more trouble than it's worth." If the other staff were as taken aback by this statement as I, they didn't show it. I wondered whether the tall cyclone wire fences surrounding the school were to keep unwanted members of the nearby Aboriginal community out, or to keep the school students in. The headmaster proceeded to talk about other ways of upholding standards. I included some of these in that novel: "Now, looking after your lawns. You can see the pride we have in our lawns here and back in town. The work that's gone into them. Which brings us to lawnmowers. Everyone should have their own. It's like this. You don't loan out your wife, and you don't loan out your lawnmower" (Lazaroo, *The World* 179).

These comments from the headmaster reflect not only his urban 'mainstream' Australian attitude to lawns as indicators of civilised community, but his misogyny. When I heard them and similar comments from other teachers at my first staff meeting, they suggested to me bewildering complexities in their cultural background, of which they seemed barely aware. Over the next few months, I learned from talking to my Aboriginal students that their particular community too was culturally more complex than it first appeared to me. It included people from at least two different tribal groups, predominantly Walmajarri people from the desert lying to the east of the community, and some Nyigina people from the coast. Some of my students' parents had grown up on missions and attended church in the closest town. Others were more traditionally oriented, sending their sons out with the elders to the nearby bush for initiation when the time came. Some families both practised traditional Aboriginal customs *and* were Christians. Identity and belonging were also complex for these Indigenous Australians, and not a simple matter of race.

I was the only woman teacher in the high school. My role was to teach the adolescent students English, home economics and art. All the high school teachers did our best to follow the

standard Education Department curriculum, quite conservative. Only the girls did home economics, while the boys did manual arts. I used my role as art teacher as a pretext for taking students on excursions with their elders to look at nearby rock paintings which some students adapted to print on t-shirts, or to watch their elders making implements, though none of this was included in the Education Department curriculum.

Some of my adolescent female students wanted advice on something quite different, something else not included in the Education Department's curriculum. They confided in me what they were doing with their boyfriends and asked me if I had anything to help them not to get pregnant.

Unfortunately, the superintendent of Aboriginal education in Western Australia at the time forbade teaching sex-education in Aboriginal schools. However, I told my female students what I could, whenever the headmaster and other teachers were out of earshot, and asked the clinic nurse to talk to them about contraceptives. But she too had to tread carefully, as she belonged to the same church as the Christian parents in the Aboriginal community. I also had one girl from a more traditionally oriented family, who confided in me that she'd been promised to an older man under traditional Aboriginal law. I had a conversation with a small group of these students that stuck in my mind. It went something like this:

'Hey Miss,' the bravest of them asked me a few weeks after I'd arrived, 'you not married like them other teachers. You gotta flank?'

'Flank?' I asked, surreptitiously patting my upper leg to check myself.

'You know,' said another student. 'You someone's girlfriend?'

'Back in Perth,' I said.

She said more shyly, 'You have sex Miss, yes or no?'

As I'll show soon, that recalled conversation helped underpin the fictional account of a young Singaporean Eurasian woman's time in Broome, after World War Two, as the guest of her white fiancé in my second novel *The Australian Fiancé*. But first I turn to other cross-cultural encounters that underpinned *The Australian Fiancé*.

Most of the Aboriginal people I encountered up in that Kimberley community spoke to non-Aboriginal people what was then termed by some members of the Education Department a 'Creole' or 'pidgin' version of English. Sometimes those Aboriginal people used this to tell me traditional stories they'd received from their older people in their Aboriginal dialect. This sharing of stories engendered a feeling of belonging in me that I had to reflect on when I began writing *The Australian Fiancé*, which was set largely in the Kimberley pearling town of Broome. But I decided not to include in that or any of my subsequent novels the traditional stories Aboriginal people told me, as these belonged to their culture, not mine. My understanding of what constituted 'belonging' had grown more complex with time and experience.

However, there are scenes in *The Australian Fiancé* which I based on narratives shared between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures that were common knowledge in the 1990s, when I wrote that novel. For example, it was common knowledge that Aboriginal women had been mistresses of white settler men in small towns like Broome. This informed a scene where the young unnamed Singaporean Eurasian narrator visits her white Australian fiancé's mother at Elsewhere, the family's home in Broome:

‘It’s very easy for your standards to drop in a town like this.’ She wrinkles her nose. ‘To go native.’ She shows me the magazines full of Margarets and Bettys trying to beat the dust and put the horizon in its place; blonde Margarets and Bettys and brunette; housewifely and temptress Margarets and Bettys. All the ... daughters of the empire varnishing, always varnishing and polishing. Fingernails, floors, teeth, stoves, eyelids, everything so shiny they can see themselves in all the surfaces.

In between magazines, the fiancé’s mother confides to me in a low voice all the tricks she knows for putting the best gloss on things and how to run the servants. I am about to ask her whether the dust shouldn’t be measured against the horizon, given some perspective, when we are interrupted by the woman who comes to beg at the door.

I expect the Australian fiancé’s mother to stay seated, to let the housemaid open the door and offer the woman scraps. But his mother rises in a fury, almost runs to the door. I hear the intruder’s shouting drowned by a blast of water, and run to the back steps to catch my impeccably mannered hostess training the garden hose on her. The drenched woman raises her fist as she retreats:

‘You know it’s all mine too! It’s mine too!’

The woman who begs is dripping, but she stands tall as she walks away. ... The fiancé’s mother ... gestures to the side door with a weak smile. ‘Just a spot of cleaning up I have to do every so often.’

‘What - ?’ But she cuts my question with a gaze that commands me: *Don’t ask.*

I am overwhelmed by my inadequacy in understanding all that’s been shown me that afternoon. God bless their souls, I murmur under my breath again; but I am praying for us all: Margarets and Bettys, women who must beg, and the mistresses of houses, and for those of us who don’t know which we are. (Lazaroo, *The Australian* 133-134, ellipses mine)

Reading this extract about two decades after writing it, I see that the unnamed Eurasian woman narrator’s uncertainty reflected my own uncertainty about my place in relation to two cultures: both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia. My earlier bemusement about the headmaster’s obsession with maintaining lawns in the midst of the Kimberley wilderness is echoed in this extract from *The Australian Fiancé*, where the unnamed young Eurasian woman is bemused by ‘mainstream’ upper middle-class Australian expectations of women’s roles in her fiancé’s parents’ expansive colonial home set in a north Western town on the edge of a wilderness, so different to her own roles in her mother’s small shop house in cramped colonial Singapore. Another passage showing an exchange between the unnamed Eurasian woman and a young domestic bicultural servant with Indonesian and Aboriginal parentage, is informed by some of the discussions I had with bicultural Broome people when I drove into that town each weekend after teaching:

‘I tell her about an Asian island I hardly recognise as I’m describing it, tell her about its small spaces, ... its colonial government and its vanquishing of wilderness.

‘What your people call it, miss, living under that government?’

‘Swallowing the boss.’

She laughs hugely, her laugh that understands. ‘Eating shit, we call it.’ (Lazaroo, *The Australian* 92, ellipses mine).

Whose house, whose wilderness, whose place? Rereading those passages now reminds me of stories my father and his relatives had told me about the colonial houses the British built in

Singapore, that members of his family occupied after the British left. Though there were some differences between the colonial houses in Singapore and those in Broome, they shared some architectural details that reflected British colonial concerns; including relatively imposing entrances, verandahs and front gardens to project a sense of high social status and respectability. These details informed the descriptions of 'Elsewhere,' the Australian fiancé's parents' house in Broome. Such houses of the empire were very often built on disputed territories, whether in Australia or in south-east Asia, to assert the coloniser's 'ownership,' and often used 'native' labour to maintain them and to serve the colonial masters.

While ostensibly inhabiting a position of social superiority as her Australian lover's fiancée and 'lady of the house,' the young Eurasian woman is forced to recognise, by the end of her stay with him, the truth of the begging Aboriginal ex-servant's words, that she too is just the boss's temporary plaything:

The woman who begs comes to the door as I am pausing over packing my belongings. She nods so deeply to me it is almost a bow of recognition. She whispers softly:

'I know how invisible this family make you feel, miss. I bin his father's flank long time ago.' She nods again, squeezes my hand, retreats into the garden of shadows. (Lazaroo, *The Australian* 195).

Of course, the word 'flank' comes from my earlier Aboriginal female students' conversations with me about being 'someone's girlfriend.' Like me at that Kimberley school, the unnamed Eurasian woman in *The Australian Fiancé* isn't certain of the translation, and muses when the domestic servant uses the word: "*Flank*. Her rawly accurate word for girlfriend. Or something else besides" (Lazaroo, *The Australian* 92).

In the late 1980s, some years after I returned to Perth from teaching in the Kimberley, I worked in the head office of the Western Australian Education Department as a photographer and writer of educational magazines for the Aboriginal Education Resources Unit. In my role as a photographer and writer, I visited Aboriginal communities throughout the state. Taking photographs of those Aboriginal people for Aboriginal children's magazines, using the unit's old single-lense reflex camera, I had to learn how much light was needed to illuminate different complexions. Later, I thought about how photographs could be used to objectify people, or conversely to give people a stronger sense of themselves and where they came from. And I thought about the fact that though I'd taught and briefly lived with people of Aboriginal descent, I couldn't articulate what made them distinctive. I couldn't articulate 'who' they were. But I realise that, at least since then, making photographs and other images of Aboriginal people and trying to understand the power relations in this process has informed much of my writing. In *The Australian Fiancé*, the unnamed Eurasian woman takes her ex-fiancé's camera back to Singapore after he jilts her. There she takes photos of people in her neighbourhood, and reflects in words that came to me once while looking at some photos I'd taken of Aboriginal children for magazines produced by the Aboriginal Education Resources Unit. This extract comes from near the end of *The Australian Fiancé*, when the narrator is an old woman:

No two of my subjects are the same. I look at their faces for hours.

I give the images back to their owners.

'You are really something,' I tell them. Unable to say exactly what. (Lazaroo, *The Australian* 204)

In her essay entitled “‘One that Returns’: Home, Hantu, and Spectre in Simone Lazaroo’s *The Australian Fiancé*,” Susan Ash quotes an observation by Nick Peim: the photograph is “both the product and the occasion of unease” (qtd. in Ash 121). Ash observes that a photographic image can document both “the attempt to contain and control as well as the impossibility: something eludes, something nevertheless remains ‘unfixed’” (Ash 121). Ash’s point resonates with my own current sense of unease about taking photos of Aboriginal people, in that while I may have taken photographs with good intentions, the practice inevitably participates in a white culture’s mechanisms of control and containment, posing an ethical conundrum.

A few token Aboriginal people were on the committee for those educational magazines I helped produce for Aboriginal children; however, its editor was not Aboriginal, and primarily empowered to choose its content. She had not taught in Aboriginal communities. She directed me to take positive images of Aboriginal people for magazine articles. At the time, I believed somewhat naively in this process.

I shot the cover photograph for one of those magazines, which were titled *Djawal Idi*, when I was invited by one of the Aboriginal hostel students I tutored in Perth, to visit and take photos of her family on a station in Western Australia’s Pilbara region, managed by her Anglo-Saxon father and Aboriginal mother. Her younger brother asked me to take a photograph of him and the fish he’d just caught in a creek on the station. I complied, and also subsequently ensured the family received copies of this magazine. The photo shows him sitting on a rock holding up several small fish he’d just caught; the pride in his eyes evident, a moment in his childhood memorialised. It seemed a fair exchange at the time, especially given that he was so enthusiastic about being in the magazine. Now, three or four decades later, I am not so confident. I appreciate that it’s impossible to take photos of Aboriginal people or look at photos of them without ethical implications; indeed, making these photos is an ethical minefield. It’s not just a matter of the content and *what* to include, but *how* the images are used. What meanings lie beneath the surface that should trouble or unsettle our thinking?

I recently compared that photo with one of Australian Ken Duncan’s photographs of Aboriginal children, produced for a book for charity World Vision in 1994. The photograph shows two Aboriginal children in earth-stained clothes playing in the cab of a rusty car. It makes me feel uneasy, because it represents Aboriginal children as apparently happy with the little they have, playing with dumped wreckage. It probably wouldn’t qualify as one of the ‘positive’ photographs of Aboriginal children I was sent out to make in the late 1980s. Yet I see now that both my and Duncan’s images of Aboriginal children might be interpreted as examples of a genre or class of photographs. We recognise their content serves specific ideological objectives: that is, they also serve as a ‘happy’ alibi for white Australians helping them to continue believing that the status quo for Indigenous people is not only tolerable but adequate.

Another important ethical question I did not consider at the time I worked as a photographer, is who owns the photo? I am told that Ken Duncan has used his photo of the children playing in the wreckage (which, in the context of the World Vision book, is intended to raise funds for a Christian charity) elsewhere: you can also find it in a book sold commercially, which is published by him. Presumably he receives income from this. After publication on the cover of the Aboriginal school children’s magazine distributed to Western Australian schools, the photographic negative I snapped of my student’s brother, was filed in the Aboriginal Education Resources Unit office; along with all the other photographic negatives of Aboriginal people snapped by me and preceding photographers employed by the unit. It presumably remained there until the unit was disbanded several years after I left that job. It is unlikely I will ever

speak to my student's brother again, as I have lost contact with that family. But if I do, I would like to be able to apologise to him for not giving him that photographic negative of a moment of pride in his life before it was lost, and to tell him it should always have been his.

The ethical playing field thus necessitates keeping an eye not only on what we photograph, but on who owns the photographic images and what we *do* with those images, an issue that was on my mind when I wrote my most recent novel, *Lost River*, which is subtitled *four albums*. The subtitle refers to four photograph albums created by the novel's main character, which I discuss further in part III.

III. An Ethical Approach toward Indigenous Perspectives from a Position that is Non-Indigenous?

In *Lost River*, photographs become a way of remembering and memorialising important moments of life for its main character, an orphaned and adopted Balinese-Australian woman named Ruth, as she succumbs gradually to cancer and puts together four albums of photos for her own daughter, Dewi, during her last months in a south Western Australian rural town. This book partly originated from my earlier experiences as a child migrant and photographer in Aboriginal communities. I struggled in my early drafts of that novel to produce adequate representations of Aboriginal people, this time in writing. Indeed, I was so afraid of failing in this objective, and questioned my own right to do that so often, that I almost abandoned the idea of including Aboriginal characters in that novel altogether. Yet I had the abiding sense that I couldn't evoke the last decades of the 20th century in a rural south Western Australian town without including some representation of south Western Australian Indigenous individuals.

I created the character Katy, a young Aboriginal woman who passes through Ruth's life only occasionally: when she comes down from the city to visit the Lost River region from which most of her forebears were banished during early white settlement. She visits sometimes to pick wildflowers to sell in the city, as did some south Western Australian Aboriginal people I knew. Ruth takes many photos in her final months, but does not take a photograph of this Aboriginal woman Katy. This reflected my feelings at the time that I no longer had a right to take photos of Aboriginal people, because I would not be giving their images back to them, as I'd tried to do in those brief years I worked as a photographer for the Aboriginal education magazines. My understanding of identity, representation, ethics and cultural belonging was and is still imperfect, but it has gradually grown more complex in my writing.

Of course, the written passages about Katy and about Ruth's friend Lizzy in the earlier chapter set on the north Western Australian mission in which Ruth grew up, are also representations of young Indigenous Australian women, although different to photographs in the way they represent them. These written passages suggest parallels between Ruth's relationships with her Aboriginal friends and my own: like me, my fictional main character Ruth shares moments of closeness with them but doesn't really 'know' them thoroughly; and her contact with them is relatively brief: her Aboriginal friends depart to pursue their own lives with Aboriginal relatives elsewhere, leaving Ruth to feel her own aloneness keenly again, as occurred to me in my late twenties when my friends Sue and Pete divorced.

Through Ruth and her friends Lizzy and Katy, I tried to convey contemporary Indigenous and migrant Australians' experiences of life's transitory nature: its fleeting moments; each woman's movement back and forth between culturally different communities; and its movement from life to death, for example. And the brief written descriptions and commentaries

of a photograph at the beginning of each chapter of *Lost River*, suggested both the suitability and inadequacy of photographs to capture and to memorialise transitory moments in individuals' lives.

My written representations of Aboriginal characters in *Lost River* reflect my 'not knowing' thoroughly my Aboriginal friends. Nonetheless, my 'mind's eye' (or memory), rather than my camera, still recalled their images, and I did my best to reinterpret these in writing that respects both their individuality and their privacy.

Of course, there are also parallels between ethical issues associated with photographing Indigenous Australians and with writing representations of them. There is no perfectly 'innocent' position when doing either. There are only individual choices we make as photographers and writers, which change as we and our lives do, and are more or less ethical. I expect that the way in which I write about individuals from other cultures will change as surely as my own sense of identity will keep changing, for cultural identity is always in a state of flux or becoming, to paraphrase Stuart Hall (314). I am now more aware that when I represent in my creative writing Indigenous Australian individuals, I do so from both a position as a Eurasian person, as well as one that is to a degree privileged by my connections with dominant white Australia. In other words, I write from both a position between two cultures, and from within one of those cultures as well.

Despite having a dark-skinned father, I have rarely felt entitled to call myself a woman of colour. This is perhaps partly because I have swallowed the simplistic view of many Australians that my complexion, much paler than my father's and siblings,' means I don't qualify as a woman of colour. Yet, I am Eurasian in ways that go beyond my parentage and my birthplace, Singapore. For example, even after over fifty years in Australia, I have a self-deprecating sense of humour that's similar to my father's and other Singaporean Eurasians I know. Nonetheless, people have often assumed I'm from 'mainstream' Anglo-Saxon Australia, partly due to my complexion and my Anglo-Australian mother. Yet, according to an academic friend who knows me well, I don't 'play' either card. Perhaps this is partly because of my occasional sense of being marooned somewhere between mainstream and minority migrant status or identity, and of sometimes feeling unentitled to write about either. Perhaps this relates to my earlier point about feeling I don't really 'know' Indigenous Australian individuals thoroughly enough to have the authority to recreate them in my writing. But allowing myself to remain feeling marooned and unentitled in this way, can prevent me from writing towards making new, alternative images of Indigenous Australians. So I continue to try and overcome that particular sense of paralysis. I try to write from a position of 'not knowing,' from the complexity of multiple subjectivities and 'belongings.'

I'd like to conclude with a story-in-progress that reflects both that particular sense of feeling marooned, and my attempts to create new identities reflecting people who don't fit neatly into one cultural identity or another. Nearly forty years after the event, here's my attempt to rewrite the story of how I failed to marry my good friend Sue's brother, despite her attempts at matchmaking. You might remember from the beginning of my essay that Sue had an Aboriginal mother and an Anglo-Saxon Australian father. Sue's mother was a member of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal people, and her maternal grandmother was from one of the north Western Australian tribes.

‘I really want you in my family,’ Sue said to me. ‘I’d like you to meet my brother Rob. You’re the kind of woman he goes for,’ she assured me. ‘You both have green eyes and an olive complexion. Come to dinner with him at our place on Friday.’

And so I did. Sue’s brother was nice enough, I thought a few minutes after meeting and talking with him, but way too conservative for me. I was a student studying photography, art and creative writing. He was a *policeman*, for goodness sake. His short back and sides haircut and moustache resembled those worn by the Australian cricket team in those years. By the time the fish and chips were dished out, we’d run out of things to say to each other. I don’t think it was just his conservative appearance and job that put me off.

Nearly forty years later, I’ve come to understand it like this: Having approximately the same skin, eye colour and age were not all we had in common, yet what we shared didn’t bring us together. In fact, at that point in our lives, what we shared gave me a sense of distance from him. Why?

When we looked into each other’s eyes, I sensed that we shared something far more than the same colouring. We shared loss, albeit the loss of very different familial histories and places of belonging. We shared uncertainty, uncertainty about who we were. I wonder if maybe we were each of us adrift on a lifelong search for who we were, though we didn’t know it at the time. It seems maybe this was why I could not continue to look him in the eye, much less contemplate the possibility of marrying him. Instead, I’d looked the other way and helped Sue make cups of tea and inane jokes, all the while not making further eye contact with him.

Yet that exchange of glances with him over the meal that led to no marriage or partnership, remains a flashbulb moment in my mind’s eye, clear as a photograph. In the background I see my good friend Sue’s children watching us, curious and young and hopeful above the crumpled *West Australian* newspaper pages that had wrapped the fish and chips settling in our stomachs. On the table between us lies the cartoon beneath the latest editorial on immigration policy, smeared with grease from the chips, showed tanned beachgoers beneath a caption parroting a political debate that had circulated that week:

Are we becoming a nation of coffee-coloured Australians?

Rob and I both read it on the table at the same moment and laughed uncomfortably at it, but not necessarily because we interpreted the cartoon in the same way as each other. More likely that we were desperate to find something to laugh at. I recall some vague apprehension on my part that the cartoon was about racial issues probably related in some way to each of us, yet these issues seemed so distant they might’ve been about another country.

‘Well,’ I heard Sue’s precocious eight year old daughter say to her in the kitchen, ‘Simone and Uncle Rob both seem a bit nervous tonight.’

Some minutes later, I farewelled my friends and caught a taxi to the photography studio to develop some photos. The taxi driver had a cockney English accent. I sat next to him in the front passenger seat. It was Chinese New Year, and his radio was tuned to a program interviewing a successful Perth Chinese businesswoman.

‘Bloody Asian migrants are taking over the country,’ he said. ‘Sooner do it with a woman with hairy legs than an Asian woman.’

I turned my face the other way and tucked my unshaven legs out of sight. I knew I was both partly Asian and fully unshaven, but the taxi driver hadn’t noticed.

‘You and I are both just migrants here, you know,’ I said to him quietly as I disembarked outside the photography studio.

In the darkroom, I developed my latest snapshots of Sue's family and other Aboriginal people I'd photographed; watching their complexions become too light or too dark in the developing solution, because I'd either under- or over-exposed them at that split second that I tried to capture their true image.

To conclude, it seems to me that whether we write, read or photograph individuals from cultures other than our own, we have to accommodate the kinds of unease that some representations of such individuals produce, to paraphrase Peim (75). But not so unreflexively that we don't keep trying to seek and make alternative representations of them and their relationship to other individuals, for such representations are one of the ways by which we come to see them and ourselves in different lights, and as evolving members of communities always in transition.

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Simone Lazaroo's award-winning novels and many of her short stories have explored individuals' struggles for meaning at the juncture of cultures and in consumerist societies. Her short fiction has been published in Australia and North America; in a bilingual Spanish chapbook entitled *Duty Free* (Lazaroo 2016, Oviedo, Spain: KRK Ediciones); and in anthologies (e.g. in 2002 "The True Body" in *Gas and Air*, London: Bloomsbury; in 2014 "Transit" in *Travel and the Imagination*, England: Ashgate). Her novels have been taught in Australian, North American and Spanish universities and *The Australian Fiancé* is currently optioned for film. She lectures in creative writing at Murdoch University and lives in Fremantle, Western Australia. She is currently writing two novels exploring cross-cultural relationships and loss, one set in contemporary Lisbon and Fremantle and the other in Singapore and Australia between the 1950s and 2018.

Email: s.lazaroo@murdoch.edu.au or s.lazaroo@icloud.com