

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A narrative of self-determination

Ms Alexis Wright, of the Writing and Society Research Centre, has been awarded a prestigious Discovery Indigenous Award to investigate the changing fortunes of Aboriginal storytelling in shaping Australia's indigenous policy landscape. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council. It will be conducted in collaboration with Aboriginal leader and thinker Tracker Tilmouth, from the Northern Territory, and Professor Ivor Indyk of the Writing and Society Research Centre, and aims to reassert the indigenous voice.

"The ability for people to tell their own stories and represent their own histories is crucial to their emotional wellbeing," Ms Wright says. "In the years of the Howard government [1996-2007] ... a negative discourse about Aboriginal people created an atmosphere which made it difficult for them to tell their own stories ... As the campaign of denigrating the Aboriginal rights agenda succeeded on the public level, Aboriginal people who held a different view fell silent."

The period was also marked by dwindling resources and dysfunction in Aboriginal leadership at a national level, culminating in the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2005. Only in more recent times have Aboriginal communities begun to assert the right to tell their own stories about, for example, the austerity of the Northern Territory Intervention.

The aim of this project is to weave the extraordinary life of Tracker Tilmouth into an essay-style memoir, creating a model for understanding the power of effective Aboriginal storytelling and why its failures (and successes) are significant. Tracker is a member of the Stolen Generation – he was taken from Central Australia and raised on a mission at Croker Island – who has become an influential leader but is also a humorous and skilled storyteller.



The book that will come from the project, and the three-year research program that informs it, will highlight how Tracker has used those storytelling abilities to convey ideas of Aboriginal commitment, independence and self-determination.

This project has the capacity to contribute to economic, environmental and social benefits in Aboriginal Australia. It will help governments to understand the importance of Aboriginal narrative knowledge when working with Aboriginal and national interests, particularly in environmental and sustainable land development, and working in ways that Aboriginal people can engage with ideas through story.

Project Title: Australian Indigenous storytelling: a critical study of the way Aboriginal stories are being told in Australia today

Funding has been set at: \$605,000

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March 2014