

**NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION: EVELYN ARALUEN**

***Co-editor, *Overland Literary Magazine****

***Lecturer, *Deakin University****

As an Aboriginal woman and writer, I'm so proud of the strength of First Nations storytelling in this country. Each and every day, across 700 distinct language groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creatives continue the oldest continuing traditions on this earth. Our negotiations of new storytelling technologies by no means diminish our cultural integrity. Rather, the diverse forms and modes First Nations creatives take up to tell our old and new stories speak to the very things which make our traditions so strong in the first place: our resiliency and responsiveness. In 2022, there are ostensibly more opportunities to support First Nations creative practices in all their diversity and integrity than ever before. However, in my submission for the National Cultural Policy, I wish to discuss and emphasise the necessity of better understanding the broad and diverse needs of First Nations communities with formalised consultation protocols which centre Elders, Traditional Owners and peak bodies in decision making and project development.

In 2019, Australian literature lost one of its most treasured leaders and caretakers. Aunty Kerry Reed-Gilbert's achievements were many; authoring and editing many ground-breaking publications throughout her life. Her mentoring and activism for First Nations storytelling was an incomparable act of generosity and care for future generations. Those close to Aunty Kerry have attested to her incredible strength of character and the rich talent she brought to storytelling across multiple forms. Aunty Kerry worked with First Nations storytellers from all manner of experience and capacity, and put the need to advocate for her community before her own writing ambitions. She helped develop and consult many schemes for emerging writers which she was never able to benefit from in the pursuit of her own writing career, due to ageist requirements which fail to recognise the specific needs of our older emerging writers. Aunty Kerry deserved tremendously more than the arts community ever gave her.

In our culture, knowledge is given, not taken. I don't mean to generalise or speak superficially, but we wouldn't be the most sustainable and continuous culture in the world were it not for these values. While I recognise the value of support schemes which specifically target young and emerging creatives, having won a young Indigenous writing prize myself, I am also painfully aware of how many older emerging First Nations storytellers are out there in our communities, safeguarding knowledge and leading from a cultural standpoint that was earned through struggle, sacrifice and patience. Our arts sector leaves these Elders behind with an overemphasis on trendy youth categories and a culture which celebrates youthful debuts, pushing young Indigenous creatives to speak before they're ready, and locking them into an endless cycle of burnout and performativity. Additionally, the overemphasis on eastern Australian metropolitan creatives drowns out the enormous breadth of skills and wisdom across our many nations. That is not our way.

The needs are already being articulated by communities, and have been so for decades. Archival papers from the Association of the Study of Australian Literature, proceedings from the First Nations Australian Writers Network gatherings, research projects such as Anita Heiss' *Dhuuluu-Yala*, and scholarly writings from First Nations academics such as Jeanine Leane provide explicit evidence of longstanding exclusions and barriers in the publishing sector for First Nations storytellers, as well as clear methods for resistance and renewal. And yet as a participant on First Nations Literary Strategy Roundtables through the Australia Council, we have seen these struggles reaffirmed: the lack of connection, genuine inclusion and dignity afforded to *all* manner of First Nations storytellers is bottlenecking this industry.

I would like to see a Cultural Policy which recognises that while politics shift, we as sovereign First Nations people do not. We remain the custodians of our lands, waters and stories, and need to be given adequate resources and dignity to do so. This is not a top-down solution: peak bodies such as the First Nations Australian Writers Network, the Australia Council and the Australian Society of Authors need to be adequately resourced so they can support independent community writing groups, local festivals, culturally sensitive publishing protocols, and fellowships designed to support the specific needs of First Nations writers and other arts practitioners. First Nations storytelling shouldn't be forced to adapt complex and geographically situated traditions to narrow, constricting and exclusionary grant requirements for institutional profit. We should be given the opportunity to express our suitability for support schemes through cultural and community mandate, and to have the need for cultural guidance instilled in funding and development mechanisms. These cannot be one-size-fits-all rules for every Indigenous community: we must consult regionally through grassroots networks.

The new National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to not simply celebrate First Nations creativity with gesture and performativity, but to truly solidify protocols for material and cultural support so our new and old storytelling traditions can continue to care for this land.