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Storying: A Reflection on Entanglements with Indigenous Australian Methodology

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Abstract
This article explores a First Nations PhD student's personal narrative of navigating the entanglement of obligations, relationships, and methodology, while undertaking research with their own community within the Australian settler state. The experience of First Nations PhD student in our journey toward epistemological resonance confined by our unique geopolitical contexts is not adequately represented in any one discourse. Not only are First Nations PhD students dispersed throughout disciplines with unique specific circumstances, we are relative newcomers to the academy. On my journey I privilege my scholarly Matriarchs, Ngugi and Waka Waka scholar Professor Tracey Bunda and Goenpal scholar Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, while also honouring my own Elders and Matriarchs. I am undertaking fieldwork with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, a long running Aboriginal theatre company located in Boorloo (Perth, Western Australia). Phillips and Bunda's Storying (2018) underpins my pedagogical approach in the classroom, which highlights students' understandings of, and critical engagement with, culture, identity and belonging, in a high school drama classroom. I also experiment with Storying as a method of writing, further illustrating the entanglement of the work and the work's outcomes. Moreton-Robinson provides the broader critical perspectives needed to acknowledge the role the settler state has to play in the attempted erasure of Indigenous Australian knowledges. As a result, this article stories the lived experience of a First Nations Education student in the context of studying at the University of Cambridge, while also undertaking fieldwork on their Whadjuk Noongar homelands of Boorloo.

Resumen
El articulo actual explora, desde una narrativa personal de un estudiante de doctorado de First Nations sobre cómo navegar por el conflicto de las obligaciones, relaciones y metodologías, mientras realiza una investigación con su propia comunidad dentro de una nación colonizada australiana. La experiencia del estudiante de doctorado de 'First Nations', en nuestro recorrido hacia la resonancia epistemológica limitada por nuestros contextos geopolíticos únicos, no está adecuadamente representada en ningún discurso. No solamente los estudiantes de doctorados de First Nations están dispersos por varias disciplinas con circunstancias especificas, sino también somos relativamente nuevos en la academia. En mi recorrido, he tenido el privilegio de trabajar con académicos matriarcas, Ngugi, Waka Waka, Profesora Tracey Bunda y Goenpal, Profesora Aileen Moreton-Robinson, mientras tanto honorando a mis Superiores y Matriarcas. Estoy realizando un trabajo de campo con la compañía teatral Yirra Yaakin, una compañía de teatro aborigen de larga trayectoria ubicado en Boorloo (Perth, Australia Occidental). *Storying* de Philips y Bunda (2018), sostiene mi enfoque pedagógico en la sala de clase, que destaca la comprensión y la participación crítica de los alumnos con la cultura, identidad y pertenencia en una clase de teatro en una escuela secundaria. También, he probado *Storying* como un método de escritura, para ilustrar mejor el enredo del trabajo y los resultados del trabajo. Moreton-Robinson proporciona las perspectivas criticas más ampliamente, que son necesarias para reconocer el rol que la nación colonizada tiene en el intento de suprimir el conocimiento de los Indígenas australianos. Como resultado, este articulo cuenta las historias vividas por un estudiante de doctorado de First Nations en el contexto de estudiar en la Universidad de Cambridge, mientras que realiza un trabajo de campo en su tierra natal Whadjuk Noongran en Boorloo.

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metodología indígena, metodología indígena australiana, Storying, estudio de teatro

الملخص:

تستكشف هذه المقالة السرد الشخصي لطالبة دكتوراه من الأمم الأولى (السكان الأصليين) حول كيفية التعامل مع تعقيدات الالتزامات والعلاقات وكذلك طرق البحث أثناء إجراء البحث في مجتمعها داخل الدولة الاستيطانية الأسترالية. إن سعينا لنحو معرفة أفضل لتجربة طالب الدكتوراه من الأمم الأولى (السكان الأصليين) محدود بنطاقنا الجيوسياسي وعليه فإن التجربة برمتها لا يمكن فهمها من خلال خطاب واحد. لا يقتصر الأمر على تشتت طلاب الدكتوراه من الأمم الأولى في مختلف التخصصات ذات الظروف الخاصة الفريدة، بل إننا نسبيًا قادمون جدد إلى الأكاديمية. في رحلتي البحثية، أعترف بفضل أساتذتي الذين كانوا أمهاتي في المعرفة: البروفيسور تريسي بوندا، البروفيسور تريسي بوندا والباحثة في Goenpal البروفيسور أيلين موريتون روبنسون، لا يسعني إلا أن أكرم أيضا كبارنا وأمهاتنا. أقوم ببحث ميداني بالتعاون مع شركة Yirra Yaakin Theatre، وهي شركة مسرح مكونة من السكان الأصليين تعمل منذ فترة طويلة في بورلو (بيرث، أستراليا الغربية). تعتمد طرق تدريسي أو داخل الصفوف على كتاب Phillips and Bunda Storying (2018) والذي يسلط الضوء على فهم الطلاب للثقافة والهوية والانتماء والتفاعل النقدي مع هذه المفاهيم داخل صفوف الدراما في إحدى المدارس الثانوية. أيضا انطلق من (Storying)أو ما يعرف بالقصص المصورة كطريقة للكتابة، مما يوضح التشابك بين العمل الأدبي و نتائجه. إن أعمال Moreton-Robinson تعطينا الكثير من وجهات النظر النقدية الموسعة والتي نحتاجها للاعتراف بالدور الذي يجب على الدولة الاستيطانية أن تلعبه في محاولة محو المعارف الأسترالية الأصلية. ونتيجة لذلك، يروي هذا المقال التجربة الحية لأحد الطلاب من الأمم الأولى (السكان الأصليين لاستراليا) في سياق دراساتها للعلوم التربوية في جامعة كامبريدج، بينما تقوم أيضًا ببحث ميداني في وطنها الأم في Whadjuk Noongar في Boorloo.

الكلمات المفتاحية:
منهجيات السكان الأصليين، منهجيات السكان الأصليين الأستراليين، القصص، الدراما التطبيقية.

Introduction

This reflexive piece traces how personal narratives, relationships and obligations can become entangled in the pursuit of epistemological resonance for those emerging scholars who historically have been the researched, and not the researcher. Goenpal scholar Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson states clearly that "Aborigines have often been represented as objects – as the 'known'. Rarely are they represented as subjects, as 'knowers'" (2004, p.75). I am sharing my own study journey as an example of this, as I am experiencing a PhD process which is fundamentally relational and obligational. I am the first First Nations Australian woman to undertake a PhD at Cambridge. I am Badimia Yamatji and Whadjuk Noongar from Western Australia and I am eternally grateful to my ancestors for bringing me here to write this piece. I do not assume to write on behalf of my community, as I can only ever present my own understandings, however expressing gratitude through acknowledgement is a vital part of my relational obligations to my Badimia Yamatji and Whadjuk Noongar kin. I also express my gratitude to my University of Cambridge supervisor, Dr Morag Morrison-Helme, whose unwavering support of my work has helped me be brave in a place that discourages rule breaking.

The most recent zenith of my journey finds me immersed in a recently published work by Ngugi and Waka Waka scholar Professor Tracey Bunda and Dr Louise Gwenneth Phillips, a non-Indigenous academic, *Research Through, With and As Storying*, or Storying. Phillips and Bunda emphasize that "storying honours the legacy of our ancestors engaging in theorising and research from the emergence of languages" (2018, p.9). It is this theoretical underpinning of story as an age-old practice of knowledge creation and transferral that draws me to Storying, as a First Nations woman, and emerging scholar returning home to work for my communities. Phillips and Bunda also stretch preconceptions of what constitutes legitimate research by

envisaging storying "as inquiry, as theorising, as sharing/presenting research" (2018, p.5). Using *Research Through, With and As Storying* as exemplar, this article is an experiment in the practical application of Storying as a tool for publication, in which relationships, obligations and personal narratives can be honoured alongside academic work. This article is relevant for those emerging scholars moving from being 'known' to being 'knowers', who perhaps are seeking an epistemological resonance which reflects notions of honour, legacy and community, with which to fuel their work.

Background

I remember, in my Honours year, the thesis driven year post-Bachelor but pre-Graduate, I delivered an essay on relationality to my classmates. I recounted how, before I enrolled in university, I was looking at various undergraduate programs in Melbourne, a city I had only just moved to. I couldn't decide what to study, or where, when I stumbled across a familiar name listed as the Indigenous student support officer on a university website. I rang my Mum, who confirmed that, yes, that was my relation, my Aunty. It was her name, a clear indication of being in the right place at the right time, which was the catalyst for my study trajectory. I then described how one day, much more recently, while writing about Ilbijerri Theatre's 'Corranderrk: We Will Show the Country', I meandered into the university's Indigenous studies space and was met by one of the actors of the play. He also worked at the university as a teacher and was taking his morning tea break in our communal lounge. Seeing him unexpectedly across both spaces reinforced how connected I was to the Aboriginal community of that place across multiple aspects. I ended the essay by explaining how both of these experiences relationally affirmed the choices I was making and that there is little disconnect between myself, my relations, and my work. I was met with blank faces and dull eyes, my fellow classmates unable to identify with what I was sharing. In that moment I realised my lived reality in academia did not reflect the experiences of the majority of my university peers.

I began my studies at Cambridge in 2016 where my experiences at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007), were compounded by geographical distance, the overwhelming noise of never-ending reading lists and fixed epistemological assumptions as to how research should look. A very recent shift into the social sciences rendered me almost immobile intellectually, bricked in by an overwhelming number of methodologies and methods. There is power in who you cite, suggested my advisor. Your theories are emerging, allow them to do so, affirmed my supervisor. But I am not powerful, nor am I capable of theory creation, I rebuke. I ponder and percolate and two truths emerge, that make greater sense to me. If there is honour in who I cite, who do I want to honour in my work? If I am resistant to the fixity of theory, how do I channel the fluidity in me that reflects how I make sense of the world? I do this in two ways; by re-connecting with the relationships and obligations I have as an individual with strong roots and stronger kin, and by mapping my own study trajectory within a University which has a singular focus on, and definition of, academic rigour. When I returned to my Whadjuk homelands for fieldwork in 2019 I was buoyed by the many First Nations people around me, both blood and not-blood kin. I returned to books written by First Nations women like me and re-located what

I had already read and prematurely dismissed, shedding my *a priori* epistemological assumptions.

Moorditj Wirla

Moorditj Wirla (moorditj is Noongar for strong, wirla is Wongi for heart) is a secondary school education program written by Zac James, a Wongi Yamatji writer/performer and Yirra Yaakin Theatre company's creative director. I met Zac in January 2019, when my PhD was in its second year and looked markedly different. Like many arts organisations Yirra Yaakin's education program had only recently been awarded funding for Moorditj Wirla, and 2019 was the first time the program was to be delivered in schools. Zac, and by extension Yirra Yaakin, generously extended a metaphorical hand to me and suggested I become a co-facilitator for the program, using my own experiences as a self-professed drama nerd, difficult student and Yamatji/Noongar to build my pedagogical practice. Zac and I spoke at length for five weeks and created a respectful and critically engaged working environment and planned for training and program delivery later on in the year. I had zero confidence in my ability to teach young people and in my ability to separate myself from a co-facilitator delivering the program to a researcher collecting data generated by the program. However, my obligations, alongside my vital relationship with Yirra Yaakin, outweighed my insecurities and I am honoured to be part of a program that also informs the empirical elements of my PhD thesis on my own Whadjuk homelands.

Moorditj Wirla is a workshop based program where students write the scripts for, and perform, their own dramatic works pertaining to belonging and identity over the course of ten weeks. The program is theoretically informed by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1995, 2000) and Dr Martin Brokenleg's (Rosebud Sioux) Circle of Courage theory (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003) and delivered by First Nations co-facilitators. We storied from the start of each class, in a large circle, giving our day a rating between zero and ten. Winyarn (pitiful in Noongar) indicates a zero day, whereas moorditj (strong in Noongar) was a solid ten. We storied out discussions, tableaus and short performances. After the program finished we storied out a reflective session, sharing thoughts both positive and negative about what Moorditj Wirla was trying to achieve and what actually made an impact. It is now six months after the first program was run and only recently have I reached epistemic clarity, coinciding with a long distance aeroplane epiphany. The methodology I identify with most and Moorditj Wirla are cut from the same cloth – a praxis of applied Storying in a drama setting. This particular applied Storying performance practice is an emergent First Nations Australian pedagogy created and facilitated by First Nations Australians on Whadjuk Noongar boodja (Noongar for homelands).

Storying

By using a methodology like Storying I am honouring the work not only of Professor Bunda but of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women scholars that came before me. I also honour the Badimia Yamatji women writers that came before me; my Mother is a published writer, my Nan shared stories with her seven children and many grandchildren, and my Grandmother self-published her own book of poetry in her eighties. Storying has been handed down to me through the last three generations, stretching back to at least 1908. Telling stories is not *in* my blood, it **is** my blood. Maternal, placental, fundamental and tangible. Storying makes it clear that I no longer need to fight to write in a style that does not reflect my voice. I met Professor Bunda a few times at my undergraduate university, with one particular engagement shining high and bright in my memory. I was contemplating post-graduate study, but feared I could not find a supervisor who stretches across the same disciplines that I do. Besides which, how could I hope to do justice to those whose works I was studying? How do I do right by community, while also doing right by the academy, whilst also doing right by me? She answered my insecurities with honesty. 'Well,' Professor Bunda replied, 'you're not an asshole, are ya?'.

Phillips and Bunda consider Storying as having five fundamental principles:

(1) Storying nourishes thought, body and soul;
(2) Storying claims voice in the silenced margins;
(3) Storying is embodied relational meaning making;
(4) Storying intersects the past and present as living oral archives
(5) Storying enacts collective ownership and authorship. (2018, p. 43)

Each of these five principles are directly employed by the Moorditj Wirla program, combining Zac's focus on nourishment and resilience, my focus on amplifying student voice, resulting in an embodied relational drama program that asks students to critically engage with their own backgrounds to illuminate how identity and belonging are influenced by the past in the present, and create a collaborative performance that all participants author and own. Storying as a practical method takes place through the "foregrounding of bodies … and relationality to provoke deep, whole-of-being understanding of phenomena that can speak to audiences across sectors of society", requiring my presence in place in classrooms. This placement also provides the opportunity to engage in what Phillips and Bunda describe as "stories from the margin", which "bear witness to a more complete story of the nation, where its fullness offers the possibility of educative effect, and where a willingness to learn from Aboriginal others is a talking walk to epistemological change" (2018, p. 107).

Broader significances

Moorditj Wirla acknowledges the wholeness of the participants of the program and brings in elements of relationality and obligation to flesh out their experiences and narratives, which for young people are vibrant and complex. The term 'participants' also includes the teachers and

co-facilitators of the program. Storying rejects the limitations of education spaces and instead imbues educational experiences with personal and community narratives, in turn creating a situation that encourages learning of all those involved. Collaboration and active listening/speaking is another pivotal aspect of Moorditj Wirla, where relationships between students, teachers, and co-facilitators can either help or hinder the overall success of the program. There aren't a lot of places to hide in a drama classroom. In current teaching practices the creation of a teaching identity as separate to their personal identity is considered a vital part of a teacher's practice, the exploration of which is outside the scope of this paper. I do however want to acknowledge the work of teachers in their individual pursuit of a teaching identity and practice that best suits their, and their classrooms', needs. I also want to highlight that perhaps drama teachers are uniquely suited to giving of themselves, due to the flexible and responsive nature of the drama classroom. A willingness to share self is necessary to build collective ownership and authorship (the fifth of the five principles of Storying). The teachers who worked with us to deliver Moorditj Wirla gave of themselves freely and often, invoking an often unspoken rule of drama: you must allow yourself to be a part of, and also swept up, in the story.

Story-based pedagogical practices and their many varied iterations are not new, or unusual. There is a raft of works on dialogic learning (Mercer et al., 2019), storywork (Archibald et al., 2019) and yarning approaches (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Education has shifted from the idea of one-way learning, with the teacher knowing and the student unknowing, toward a flow of knowledges between student and teacher, and between students themselves. I understand Storying as pushing the limits of story-based learning to assert students as teachers, asking teachers and co-facilitators in class to relinquish control and become part of the classroom melée. Storying implies an active listening and an active telling, relying on relations and relationalities to pave the way for multi-directional teaching and learning. Underpinning the application of Storying I am grounded in critical Indigenous theory, which is a "knowledge/power domain whereby scholars operationalize Indigenous knowledges to develop theories, build academic infrastructure, and inform our cultural and ethical practices" (Moreton-Robinson, 2016, p.5). Storying is an ethical practice, first and foremost. Storying as a process builds relationships and requires collaboration and sharing of knowledge and/or experiences, while also acknowledging how power dynamics and disparities manifest throughout the process.

Phillips and Bunda theorise a re-emergence of storying in an Australian specific settler state context as a mechanism for reuniting storying with Indigenous Australian peoples and communities while also de-neutralising whiteness in a country whose First Nations continue to partake in original practices, traditions and languages in ever-evolving forms. The authors remind us that "Colonial ideological effects continue to permeate white institutions, albeit in new forms" (2018, p.23). Australia as a settler state remains steeped in what Santos describes as abyssal thinking, where "invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms" (2007, p.1), which in this context can be understood as dividing knowledge into true knowledge (introduced colonial knowledges) and false

knowledge (original First Nations knowledges) (2007, p.8). Mignolo describes a similar concept as 'colonial difference', referring to the "changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-systems and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on modernity, postmodernity and Western civilization" (2002, pp.10-11). Closer to home Moreton-Robinson suggests whiteness as the crux of this dissonance, "Whiteness as an epistemological *a priori* provides for a way of knowing and being that is predicated on superiority, which becomes normalised and forms part of one's taken-for-granted knowledge" (2004, p.76). These concepts describe how Indigenous knowledges push up against other forms of knowledge, while also describing how Australian curriculums are decided upon, as part of the continuing settler colonial project.

Storying pushes back against these epistemological assumptions, as does Moorditj Wirla. By de-neutralising whiteness through storying out how young people make sense of identity and belonging, we inadvertently provoked critical conversations about what students understand Australian culture to be and how culture manifests in Australia. It took multiple classes to unravel student preconceptions about who does not have culture (white Australians) and who does have culture (everyone else, particularly First Nations Australians and people of colour). This was outside of my assumptions and predicted outcomes, however as a reflexive and critical facilitator I embrace that "what is alive is messy, and growing, and flexible" (Hampton, 1995, p.49) and to explore those preconceptions until students were ready to move on. Storying applied in schools pushes back against a curriculum that perpetuates narratives of Australian nationhood and white cultural hegemony by imbuing classrooms with students' lived experiences. Moreton-Robinson gives further localised understandings that in Australia "the power relations inherent in the relationship between representation, whiteness and knowledge production are embedded in our identities" (2004, p.87), highlighting the silence of Australian curricula in recognising First Nations' knowledges and therefore rendering those knowledges without value.

Reflections

The entanglements I have described thus far are not niche, even though my specific context may be unique. My PhD does not exist as separate to me, just as I do not exist as separate to my family and community. After three years I have refined an approach which fulfils relational obligations, allowing me to do so on homelands, while also meeting the five principles of Storying listed above. This scholarly practice builds on my lived experience and is fleshed out by my own work, the work of so many other First Nations scholars, and the Moorditj Wirla program participants. This connection extends to the relationality in which my existence is moulded as a Badimia Yamatji and Whadjuk Noongar cannot be erased by the 9000 miles between my homelands and Cambridge, England. The obligations I have to my ancestors and kin in my own practice as a Yamatji/Noongar scholar must be met, otherwise I do not have a scholarly practice. I am developing the dexterity required to pull all these seemingly disparate strands together as I weave a detailed story, the shape of which is still emerging. However,

without the yarn of ancestors, scholars, creatives, co-facilitators, students and teachers giving weight and meaning to my understandings, I am left with only a single strand and a lone voice.

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