

Re-presenting Aboriginal Counter-stories: Reflecting on the Tensions as a Non- Indigenous Researcher

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Overview

- Ongoing history of dispossession: Australia as post-colonising (Moreton-Robinson, 2003).
 - Woundedness on both sides of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationship (Maddison, 2011).
 - Role/responsibility of White Australians in coming to terms with this history.
- Community Arts and Cultural Development and Social Change.
 - Possibilities for working together, in accompaniment, as allies, in solidarity → *Risks, tensions as a white person/researcher.*
 - *Self in Community* (Harrell & Bond, 2006).

Researching Community Arts and Cultural Development

CAN



Community Arts Network of WA

- CACD with Noongar people in the Wheatbelt

Rekindling Stories on Country

- Intergenerational dialogue and cultural transmission
- Creating a platform for Noongar stories to be shared with a broader audience

<http://www.canwa.com.au/project/rekindling-stories-country/>



The Bush Babies Project

www.canwa.com.au/project/bush-babies/

“A community art project that tells the stories of Noongar Elders from across WA who were born in the bush and the midwives who delivered them” (CAN, 2017).

Narrogin, WA: 192km southeast of Perth

CAN in partnership with ART ON THE MOVE presents

THE **Bush Babies**

ELDERS PORTRAIT EXHIBITION

Honouring our
Elders born in
the bush

'Nana Purple' by Graham Smith



The research project

- **Initial focus:** the role of Aboriginal storytelling through the arts within and beyond Aboriginal communities (i.e., intergenerational and intercultural dialogue).
 - Exploring the meaning of the Bush Babies project for different people.

Fieldwork	E.g., Participation in project activities (e.g., intergenerational storytelling workshops), community events, informal conversations, visits to missions/old reserves etc.
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Interviews	Aboriginal Elders, artists, facilitators, and non-Indigenous artists, facilitators, teacher
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Surveys	Bush Babies Elders Portrait Exhibition/Launch
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Archival	E.g., Media reports, speech notes, Digital Bush Baby Stories
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Research process

- Central role of CAN, Noongar staff: Cultural safety
 - Vouching, cultural consultants ...(Walker, Shultz & Sonn, 2014).
- *building the relationship in environments where the person feels comfortable; being aware of community protocols regarding with whom to consult; working alongside people; not going straight down to business or being outcome and process driven; providing choices about with who they might want to work (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal); giving information and working from a position of humility and dealing with people with dignity.* (Bennett, Zubrzycki and Bacon, 2011, p. 29)

A shift in focus

- Conversational Interviews with Elders (x4, x2)
 - My questions became secondary; they wanted to tell me about their lives (*past and present*)
 - also shared as part of intergenerational storytelling (i.e., digital stories).

Boy declared neglected

PERTH, Monday. — In Perth Children's Court today a 14-year-old part-native boy from Pingelly was declared a neglected child.

He was committed to the care of the Child Welfare Department for 12 months.

JP seeks right

to cane

Aborigines

- → An explicit focus on the **Elders stories**.
- Research as an extension of the platform for *Rekindling Stories on Country*.

Further support for shift in focus

Some Responses from Noongar adults:

- *“Putting the Elders back in their rightful place”*
- *“Giving the RESPECT back to Our Elders”*
- *“Knowing who we are and where we come from”*
- *“it comes down to recognition of our Noongar People and also to recognise how the past used to be for our Aboriginal people, living outside of towns on mission's and reserves along way out bush because they weren't allowed in town or society back then...Our people will be heard more because of CAN WA's fantastic work within the community”*

Initial discomfort with this shift

- **Preoccupation with focusing on non-Indigenous responses/transformation:** Concern with taking over space.
- **White ontological expansiveness** (Sullivan, 2006)
 - the tendency for white people *“to act and think as if all spaces- whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise-are or should be available to them to move in and out of as they wish”* (p. 10).
 - *“Lack of comfort and feeling of illegitimacy are entirely appropriate responses to the recognition that space is not racially neutral or empty and that white people do not have legitimate claim to all space”* (p. 165).
 - **“Don’t talk about what you don’t know: On (not) conducting research with/in Indigenous contexts”** (Aveling, 2013).

Possibilities for working as allies against whiteness/racism?

- Distinction between “being white” and “being whitely”
 - “deeply ingrained ways of being in the world that includes behaviours, habits, and dispositions” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 160).
 - “White people can and need to find ways of transacting with the world as white that undermine white racism” (Sullivan, p. 161).
 - Unlearning Whiteness...

Learning from Aboriginal (Counter)Stories

- “Unlearning whiteness does not mean pretending to have no racial privileges or thinking of oneself as having renounced all racial privileges...acknowledging and using ones privilege as a white person to combat racism...The question is not, will they continue to have some privileges, but what will they do with those privileges?” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 161).
- Being an anti-racist white...a project that always requires another step and **does not end** in a white person’s having ‘arrived’...‘an idyllic anti-racist’....
- But, this should not lead to hopelessness: requires **vigilance** (Applebaum, 2016, p, 19).

Re-presenting the Elders stories: Disrupting wilful ignorance

- ❖ Circuits of dispossession (and privilege)
- ❖ Intra-psychic and relational wounds
- ❖ Resistance and survival (of people and culture)

References

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