
Listen' Up: Re-imagining Ourselves through Stories of and from Country
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Abstract

This story not for myself ... all over Australia story.
No matter Aboriginal, White-European, secret before,
Didn't like im before White-European...

This time White-European must come to Aboriginal,
Listen Aboriginal and understand it.
Understand that culture, secret, what dreaming.

— Senior Lawman Neidjie, Story about Feeling (78)

Introduction

In Senior Lawman Neidjie’s beautiful little book, with big knowledge, Story about Feeling (1989), he shares with us, his readers, the importance of feeling our connectedness with the land around us. We have heard his words and this is our effort to articulate our respect and responsibility in return.

We are a small group of undergraduate students and a lecturer at the University of Newcastle (a mixed “mob” with non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal heritages) participating in an English course designed around listening to the knowledge stories of Country, in the context of Country as the energy and agency of the lands around us and not just a physical setting, as shared by those who know it best. We are a diverse group of people. We have different, individual, purposes for taking this course, but with a common willingness to listen which has been strengthened through our exposure to Aboriginal literature. This paper is the result of our shared experience of practice-led research. We have written this paper as a collective group and therefore we use “we” to represent and encompass our distinct voices in this shared learning journey.

We write this paper within the walls, physically and psychologically, of western academia, built on the lands of the Darkinjung peoples. Our hope is to rethink the limits of epiphenomenal boundaries in western disciplinary thinking, to engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing predominately through the pedagogical and personal act of listening. We aspire to re-imagine our understanding of, and complicity with, public memory while simultaneously shifting our engagement with the land on which we stand, learn, and live. We ask ourselves: can we re-imagine the institutionalised space of our classroom through a dialogic pedagogy? To attempt to do this we have employed intersubjective dialogues, where our role is mostly that of listeners (readers) of stories of Country shared by Aboriginal voices and knowledges such as Neidjie’s. This paper is an articulation of our learning journey to re-imagine the tertiary classroom. re-imagine the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian knowledges, perspectives and peoples, re-imagine our collective consciousness on Aboriginal lands and, ultimately, to re-imagine ourselves.

Re-imagining the Tertiary English Literature Classroom

Our intersubjective dialogues have been built around stories of the stories (reading a book) from Aboriginal Elders who share the surface knowledge of stories from their Countries. These have been the voices of Neidjie, Max Dulmunmun Harrison in My People’s Dreaming (2013), and Laklak Burarrwanga et al. in Welcome to My Country (2013).

Using a talking circle format, a traditional method of communication based upon equality and respect, within the confines of the four-walled institute of Western education, our learning journey moved through linear time, meeting once a week for 13 weeks. Throughout this time we employed Joshua Gular’s notion of an intersubjective dialogue in the classroom to re-imagine our tertiary journey. Gular emphasises the actions of “listening and respect, direction, character building and authority” (para 1). He argues that a dialogic classroom builds an educative community that engages both learners and teachers “where all parties are open to learning” (para 3). To re-imagine the tertiary classroom via talking circles, the lecturer drew from dialogic instruction which privileges content as:

- the major emphasis of the instructional conversation.
- Dialogic instruction includes a sharing of power. The actions of a dialogic instructor can be understood on a continuum with an autocratic instructional style at one end and an overly permissive style on the other.
- In the middle of the continuum are dialogic-enabling behaviors, which make possible a radical pedagogy. (para 1)

Re-imaging the lecturer’s facilitating role has not been without its drawbacks and issues. In particular, she had to examine her own subjectivity and role as teacher while also adhering to the expectations of her job as an academic employee in the University. Assessing students, their developing awareness of Aboriginal ways of knowing, was not without worry. Advocating a paradigm shift from dominantly ways of teaching and learning, while also adhering to expected tertiary discourses and procedures (such as developing marking rubrics and providing expectations regarding the format of an essay, referencing information, word limits, writing in standard Australian English and being assessed according to marks out of 100 that are categorised as Fail, Passes, Credits, Distinctions, or High Distinctions) required constant self-reflexivity and attempts at pedagogical transparency, for instance, for two sessions for assessing assignments were designed around the course objectives and then shared with the students to gauge understanding of, and support for, the criteria.

Ultimately it was acknowledged that the lecturer’s position within the hierarchy of western learning carried with it an imbalance of power, that is, as much as she desired to create a shared and equal learning space, she decided and awarded final grades. In an effort to continually and consciously work through this, the work of Gayatri Spivak on self-reflexivity was employed: she, the lecturer, has “attempted to foreground the precariousness of [her] position throughout” although she knows “such gestures can never suffice” (271). Spivak’s work on the tendency of dominant discourses and institutions to ignore or deny the validity of non-western knowledges continues to be influential.

We acknowledge the limits of our ability to engage in such a radical dialogical pedagogy: there are limits to the creativity and innovativeness that can be produced within a dominant Eurocentric academic framework. Sharing knowledge and stories cannot be a one-way process; all parties have to willingly engage in order to create meaningful exchange.

This then, requires that the classroom, and this paper, reflect a space of heterogeneous voices (or “ears” required for listening) that are self-sufficiently open to hearing the stories of knowledge from the traditional custodians. Listening becomes a mode of thought where we are also aware of the impediments in our ability to hear: to hear across cultures, across histories, across generations, and across time and space. The intersubjective dialogues taking place, between us and the stories and also between each other in the classroom, allow us to deepen our understanding of the literature of Country by listening to each other’s voices. Even if they offer different opinions from our own they still contribute to our broader conception of what Country is and can mean to people. By extension, this causes us to re-evaluate the lands upon which we stand, entering a dialogue with place to reinterpret/negotiate our position within the “story” of Country. This learning and listening was re-emphasised with the words of Miriam-Rose Ungunmer-Baumann’s explanation of "Dading": an inner, deep, contemplative listening and awareness (para 4). To be able to hear these stories has required a radical shift in the way we are listening.

To create a space for an intersubjective dialogue to occur between the knowledge stories of Aboriginal peoples who know their Country, and us as individual and distinct listeners, Marcia Langton’s third category of an intersubjective dialogue was used. This type of dialogue involves an exchange between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians where both are positioned as subjects rather than, as historically has been the case, non-Aboriginal peoples speaking about Aboriginality positioned as “object” and “other” (81). Langton states that:

‘Aboriginality’ arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book. Moreover, the creation of ‘Aboriginality’ is not a fixed thing. It is created from out histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white in dialogue. (31)
Langton states that historically the ways Aboriginality has been represented by the ethnographic gaze has meant that "Aboriginality" and what it means is a result of colonisation: Aboriginal peoples did not refer to themselves or think of themselves in such ways before colonisation. Therefore, we respectfully tried to listen to the knowledge stories shared by Aboriginal people through Aboriginal ways of knowing Country.

Listening to Stories of Country

We use the word "stories" to represent the knowledge of a place that traditional custodians of their land know and willingly share through the public publication of literature. Stories, in our understanding, are not "made-up" fictional narratives but knowledge documents of and from specific places that are physically manifested in the book itself and metaphorically manifested as well. Stories are connected to the people. We use the phrase "surface (public) knowledge" to distinguish between knowledges that anyone can have and hear to access in comparison with more private, deeper layered, secret/sacred knowledge that is not within our rights to possess or even within our ability to understand. We are, however, cognisant that this knowledge is there and respect those who know it. Finally, we employ the word Country, which, as noted above means the energy and agency of the lands around us. As Burarrwanga et al. share:

Country has many layers of meaning. It incorporates people, animals, plants, water, and land. But Country is more than just people and things, it is also what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to laws, customs, movement, song, knowledges, relationships, histories, presents future and spirits. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel and take action. Country for us is alive with story, Law, power and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So you see, knowledge about Country is living, it is because it’s about how and where you fit in the world and how you relate to each other and to place. (129)

Many colonists denied, and many people continue to deny today, the complexity of Aboriginal cultures and ways of knowing: "native traditions" are recorded across a range of temporal and geographical scales (Helsel and Dore 2010). In Australia, where Aboriginal voices are white noise to the ears of many non-Indigenous people, [...] white privilege and the resulting white noise can be minimised and greater clarity given to Aboriginal voices by privileging Indigenous knowledge and ways of working when addressing Indigenous issues.

To minimise the interference of white noise, non-Indigenous people would do well to adopt a position that recognises, acknowledges and utilises some of the strengths that can be learned from Aboriginal culture and Indigenous authors (2). To negotiate through this "white noise", to hear the stories of Country beneath it and distinguish them from the declensions of both our minds and unidisciplinary discussions, we work and study in (Langton and Baumann 2013) and co-decode both our minds and understanding of the "colonial hegemony" (3) and we have had to acknowledge and position our subjectivity as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and try to situate ourselves as "allied listeners" (Carnes 184). Through allied listening in intersubjective dialogues, we are re-learning (re-imaging) history, reviewing dominant ideas about the world and ways of existing in it and re-situating our own positions of Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality.

Re-reading the Signs

Welcome to My Country by Burarrwanga et al. emphasises that knowledge is embedded in Country, in everything on, in, above, and moving through country. While everything from the tree, waterhole, hill, and animal has a story (stories), so do the winds, clouds, tides, and seasons. These stories are layered, they overlap, they intersect and they remain. A physical representation such as a tree or rock, is a manifestation of a metaphysical moment, event, ancestor. The book encourages us (the readers) to listen to the knowledge that is willingly being shared, thus initiating a layer of intersubjectivity between Yolngu ways of knowing and the intended reader, the book itself is a result of an intersubjective relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and embedded in both of these intersubjective layers is the relationship between us and this land.

The book itself offers a way of engaging with the ethological environment that combines western processes (standard Australian written English for instance) with Aboriginal ways of knowing, in this instance, Yolngu ways. It is an immediate way of placing oneself in time and space, for instance it was August when we first read the book so it was the dry season and time for hunting. Reading the environment in such a way means that we need to be aware of what is happening around us, allowing us to see the "rules" of a place and “feel” it (Nieidjie). We now attempt to listen more closely to our own environments, extending our understanding of place and reconsidering our engagement with Darkjinju land.

Nieidjie, Harrison, and Burarrwanga et al. share knowledge that helps us to re-imagine our way of reading the signs around us--the physical clues (when certain plants flower it might signal the time to catch certain fish or animals; when certain winds blow it might signal the time to perform certain duties) that the land provides but there is also another layer of meaning--explanations for certain animal behaviours, for certain sites, for certain rights. Beneath these layers are other layers that may or may not be spoken of, some of them are hinted at in the text and others, it is explained, are not allowed to be spoken or of shared at this point in time. "We use different language for different layers: surface, middle and hidden. Hidden languages are not known to everyone and are used for specific occasions" (Burarrwanga et al. 132). The hidden layer of knowledge (burarrwanga) is not a certain few are different from our dominant discourses for us to understand even if they could be shared with us. Laklak Burarrwanga happily shares the surface layer through, and like Nieidjie, refers to the reader as "you". So this was where we began our intersubjective dialogue with Aboriginality, non-Aboriginality and Country.

In Harrison's My People's Dreaming he explains how Aboriginal ways of knowing are built on watching, listening, and seeing. "If we don't follow these principles then we don't learn anything" (29). Engaging with Aboriginal knowledges such as Harrison's three principles, Nieidjie's encouragement to listen, and Burarrwanga et al.'s welcoming into wet (sharing and responsibility) has impacted on our own ideas and practices regarding how we learn. We have had to shelve our usual method of decontextualizing or analysing a text and instead focus on simply hearing and feeling the stories. If we (as a collective, and individually) perceive "gaps" in the stories or in our understanding, that is, the sense that there is more information embedded in Country than what we are receiving, rather than attempting to find out more, we have respected the act of the surface story being shared, realising that perhaps deeper knowledge is not meant for us (as outsiders, as non-Aboriginal peoples or even as men or as women). This is at odds with how we are generally expected to function as tertiary students (that is, as independent researchers/analytical scholars).

We have identified this as a space in which we can listen to Aboriginal ways of knowing to develop our understanding of Aboriginal epistemologies, within a university setting that is governed by western ideologies. Nieidjie reminds us that a story might be, "forty-two thousand [years]" old but in sharing a dialogue with each other, we keep it alive (101). Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina argue that in contrast, "the British valued the wheel, but they did not value its connection to the tree" (197), that is, western ways of knowing and being often favour the end result, disregarding the process, the story and the cycle where the learning occurs.

Re-imagining Our Roles and Responsibility in Discourses of Reconciliation

Such a space we see as an alternative concept of spatial politics: "one that is rooted not solely in politics of the nation, but instead reflects the diverse spaces that constitute the postcolonial experience" (Upstone 1). We have almost envisioned this as fragmented and compartmentalised palimpsest layers of different spaces (colonial, western, national, historical, political, topographical, social, educational) constructed on aboriginal lands and knowledges. In this re-imagined learning space we are trying to negotiate through the white noise listening to the voices of Aboriginal peoples. The transformative power of these voices—voices that invite us, welcome us, into their knowledge of Country—provide powerful messages for the possibility of change, "It is they who not only present the horrors of current circumstances but, gesturing towards the future, also offer the possibility of a way to move forward" (Upstone 184). In Harrison's My People's Dreaming we are reminded that Ngurrak Flaten both welcomes the reader into his Country while acknowledging that Australia's shared history of colonialism is painful to confront, but only by confronting it, can we begin to heal and move forward.

While notions of social reconciliation revolve around rebuilding social relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, "ecological reconciliation involves restoring ecological connectivity, sustaining ecosystem services, bolstering human health and well-being, and ensuring that human values are not always prioritise human desire" (Rose 7). Deborah Bird Rose identifies four reasons why ecologica reconciliation must occur simultaneously with social reconciliation. First, "without an imaginable world for the future, there is no point even to imagine a future for ourselves" (Rose 2). Second, for us to genuinely embrace reconciliation we must work to respond to lament environmental restoration and the protection of sacred sites. Third, we must recognise that "society and environment are inextricably connected" (Rose 2) and that this is especially so for Aboriginal Australians. Finally, Aboriginal ways of knowing could provide answers to postcolonial environmental degradation. By employing Gullan's notion of the dialogic classroom as a method of critical pedagogy designed to promote social justice, we recognise our own responsibilities when it comes to issues such as ecology due to these stories being shared with us about and from Country via the literature we read.
We write this paper in the hope of articulating our experience of re-imagining and enacting an embodied cognisance (understood as response and responsibility) tuned towards these ways of knowing. We have re-imagined the classroom as a new space of learning where Aboriginal ways of knowing are respected alongside dominant educational discourses. That is, our reimagined classroom includes:

...the substance of [...] a transactional public memory [...] informed by the reflexive attentiveness to the retelling or representation of a complex of emotionally evocative narratives and images which define not necessarily agreement but points of connection between people in regard to a past that they both might acknowledge the touch of. (Simon 63)

Through an intersubjective dialogic classroom we have attempted to reimagine our relationships with the creators of these texts and the ways of knowing they represent. In doing so, we move beyond dominant paradigms of the land around us, re-assessing our roles and responsibilities in ways that are both practical and manageable in our own lives (within and outside of the classroom). Making conscious our awareness of Aboriginal ways of knowing, we create a collective consciousness in our little circle within the dominant western space of academic discourse to, wilfully and hopefully, contribute to transformative social and educational change outside of it. Because we have heard and listened to the stories of Country:

We know White-European got different story. But our story, everything dream, Dreaming, secret, 'business'... You can't lose im. This story you got to hang on for you, Children, new children, no-matter new generation
And how much new generation. You got to hang on this old story because the earth, This ground, earth where you brought up, This earth e grow, you growing little by little, Tree growing with you too, grass...
I speaking story And this story you got to hang on, no matter who you, No-matter what country you. You got to understand...this world for us. We came for this world. (Neidjie 166)

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References