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# MARTU STORYTELLERS: ABORIGINAL NARRATIVES WITHIN the ACADEMY

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## Abstract

The Martu people originate from the Pilbara region in Western Australia. Despite policies of removal, incarceration in prison and the need to leave community for health services, Martu maintain identity and connection to country. Their narratives have been used to inform a wider Australian audience about the history and culture of Aboriginal people. But the stories have also received criticism and been the subject of a Westernised anthropological view. With the emergence of storytelling as method in the academy, a new space is being created for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to find a more robust foothold within the Social Sciences to story our world. This paper is written by three Martu people who position storytelling as transmission and preservation of cultural knowledge and to privilege a voice to speak back to Western academics. Storytelling also brings an opportunity to engage with an Aboriginal worldview, to use narrative as an inquiry into ontology and one's connection to people and place. This brings benefits to all Australians seeking stories of country, connection and identity.

## Introduction

Martu are the Aboriginal people of the Western Desert. Their connection to country includes the Eastern Pilbara, North Eastern Goldfields and South Eastern Kimberley regions in Western Australia. Their neighbours to the east are the Pintubi. Martu wangka includes over 12 distinct language groups. Martu means "one of us", or "person". Today, Martu live principally at Jigalong, Punmu, Panngurr, Wiluna and Kunawarrintji. Martu people number over 2500. This paper uses narrative with multiple voices by way of storytelling, transmit knowledge of their culture and ontology. Spaces within academia have been opened by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to use narrative as inquiry, a method that can be used by students and researchers as a better understanding of self. It also speaks to an anti-colonial approach to privilege Aboriginal voice as a re-affirmation of our position as capable of telling our own story (Dudgeon, 2008; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Rigney, 1999).

## Craig: To be Martu is to have a story to tell

Since first white contact in the 1920's Martu people have been removed from country for purposes of missionary teaching, nuclear and rocket testing, Government assimilation policies, pastoral enterprise development, mining and most recently due to appalling low levels of housing, infrastructure and health conditions in local areas. This, however, is a not a new phenomenon. The Western Desert is a harsh environment. Day-to-day survival required activity in small family groups. People had an intimate knowledge of country and an ability to exchange these necessary "survival guides". This was done by "storytelling" with songlines being converted to practical words.

During Law time Martu groups convene together in much larger groups. We identify at this time as Kukutja (meat eaters). Time with kin from distant locations is treasured. Outside of ceremonies, many stories, recent and past, are exchanged.

My story for you is set in Yagga Yagga, south of Wolf Creek crater, in 1993. This is the place where the teenage jackaroos, James Annetts, 16 years-old, of New South Wales, and Simon Amos, 17 years-old, of South Australia, died in 1986. I was there undertaking consultations about mining activities on the Aboriginal

reserve that Yagga Yagga is located on. The community contains Martu from throughout the Western Desert.

This was meant to be a hub point for return to country, known then as the Homelands or Outstation Movement. The Government encouraged people to move from the large nearby community of Wirramanu (Balgo) to Yagga Yagga. Promises were made to different family groups that resources would be made available so that they could move onto more distant locations, which were their birthplaces. Unfortunately, Government abandoned the policy and the people at Yagga Yagga were stranded. You could not go home and there were no facilities to go back to at Wirramanu.

I learnt this story of the stranding of people at Yagga Yagga, not from anthropological studies or from Government reports. I learnt this from stories from elders at Yagga Yagga, with tears in their eyes looking over the horizon saying, "I should be over there". You do not go to places without permission and it is best to take elders with you so that they do not worry you will accidentally go where you are not allowed.

I needed to collect wood but there was not much near the community village. Two elders were keen to come with me so that while I was collecting wana (wood) for my fire they might be able to hunt *Marlu* (Kangaroo) or *Maru* (Emu). My driving for Wana often took detours for their hunt for *Kukka* (meat). After an hour, my elder giving directions announced, "Mmm we proper bush now!" My story memory bank told me "proper bush" meant we were lost. With a faint voice I asked, "Uncle you not been here?" After he looked intensely out the window he told me, "no". The other Uncle "had not been here either".

Whilst I was calculating how much water we had, where our two-way radio and emergency beacon were and with the observation that thankfully it was not too hot, Uncle quietly said "But Mummy came from here, I got songs". Both Uncles exited the car and clapping hands quietly sang for 15 minutes. I was still contemplating the benefits of twentieth century technology. The Uncles returned to the back seat and instructed me to "Drive that way young fella". With the Uncles singing and clapping, we took turn after turn, often with no road or track. But there was something strange, the clapping pace changed as we travelled. I realised that as I slowed for obstacles and then sped up, the "songline GPS" was changing accordingly. On the trip back I noticed an almost albino camel in a larger mob. I excitedly pointed it out to the Uncles. No response, probably because I had wood but they had no *Kukka*. It would be bully beef again tonight. Morning came and it was time for the mining meeting. The Uncle's were now sitting with the other elders laughing loudly. They must have admitted to being lost in country. "No way", they were saying "Nephew useless on *Kukka* then he wants to shoot a camel". Lesson of this story; do not go bush without the elders and do not talk about camels.

I live in Perth and travel across Australia. I collect and tell stories. It is a way of reconnecting with my Martu who now live in locations across Australia. It is a way to connect to younger generations who have little knowledge of who they are or who I am. It is a way to let those older than me remember the good times, and for them to load up more into my survival pack. It is a way to cherish time together with sisters found again, like Frances, my co-author.

I have extended my storytelling to the workplace. It is a way of restoring a masked history, stories of past Government activities, explanation that many past programs and policies are being repeated today, often when they have failed before. For example, during 2009, the Australian Government has been advocating the benefits of small communities – my memory bank reads Outstations; my question is, will these people be stranded in a new Yagga Yagga?

You can also transmit "ways of working" protocols to other colleagues in a direct and friendly manner. I tell stories in my lectures to demonstrate my views are based on my own real experiences and the knowledge of other Martu. Most of my stories are unwritten. That is because storytelling is personal and it is a person-to-person process. My elders cannot read the stories. Many of our young people do not learn in the written way.

My question to you is this: Do you need to read the written version to understand my story? Is this oral story Indigenous knowledge? I think it is. The larger question is how we pass on this knowledge without appropriating it into a mainstream academic system. When this occurs it separates the custodians of the stories from the knowledge, which is theirs.

Indigenous oral storytelling is marginalised in academic institutions. It is often framed in anthropological studies instead of being a transmission of important information. Canadian scholar Kovach (2009, p. 96) states that:

> The anthropological focus on the rich oral traditions within tribal societies has tended to relegate story to a historic cultural method that lacks currency within contemporary knowledge centres. The underlying assumption is that oral tradition is of pre-literate tribal groups that no longer has the same application in a literate and technological world.

If Aboriginal knowledge is important for the creation of a better society through its stories of disempowerment, colonisation and its effects, then the epistemologies and methods need to be equal to others. Kovach (2009, p. 94) also states that "In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from teller. They are active agents in a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon".

Everywhere, Martu oral histories, land tenure information and genealogies are being usurped by the

Western written record collected by others. In dealings with organisations, such as the National Native Title Tribunal, genealogies can be presented orally, but to be accepted as part of the claim they must be filed as written documents.

This colonisation of knowledge actually goes further. Martu connection is based on a four-section skin system. This descent line is through our mother. My grandfather was Purungu; my grandmother was Milangka. My father was Panaka; my mother was Garrimarra. I am Milangka; my wife is Purungu and our children are Panaka. My daughter's husband will be Garrimarra and their children will be Purunga. My cousin's grandmother and my grandmother were sisters. What skin was my cousin's grandmother? Milangka of course. What skin was my cousin's mother? Garimarra of course. What skin is my cousin and co-author? Milangka of course. I think of her as my sister. But when we are required by the tribunal to send a genealogy, it must be according to the English system. They relegate her to my second cousin once removed. As Indigenous researchers we need to examine our role in this process. Are we prepared to argue that this Aboriginal form of knowledge transmission is equal to the system we are immersed in at our institutions?

## Craig: This is my last story

We were in Northbridge, Perth. I was dining with a Martu elder, and Chairperson of Wangka Maya Language Centre in Port Hedland, Mr Thomas. It was January, the height of summer. This was dry country summer, not the tropics where he came from. Very quickly clouds gathered and there was a heavy five minute shower. Greenhouse effect? El Nino or Al Nino? Mr Thomas explained the reason was "that it was time for little birds to leave the nest but they needed the rain to clean their feathers. It happened at this time every year." Can you accept this explanation even though it is not drawn from mainstream meteorology?

## Frances: To be storied

To write stories I look to the work of Noonuccal scholar Martin (2008) who quotes Cree scholar Wilson (2001) to speak of using ceremony to make research strong. I have adapted this in the use of storytelling as inquiry and writing as certain conditions must be in place for a good session of writing. The writing then takes on an almost phenomenological appearance, weaving experience and knowledge of the world as an Aboriginal person into a good tale. It is what I believe when ancestral knowledge comes into play. The Social Sciences are moving away from the great tradition of anthropologising exotic cultures far from home (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) instead there is a movement towards researching your own culture.

Before I learnt to see writing and research as ceremony I was guilty of an anthropological mindset. By working alongside other Aboriginal people in teaching and research I have learnt to know that the story is gifted and I must know what I can and cannot tell. I have become aware then of when others story me; mythologise my ending instead of allowing me to be in control of who I am, I become weak. My Aunty, Doris Pilkington, wrote the story of our family and it was made into an international film. I am very grateful to her as it gives me a lasting connection to a grandmother I never met because of the effects of child removal. The stories are homage to Martu resilience, motherhood, connection to country and the tradition of storytelling. In teaching it becomes a great resource and students very respectfully ask me when they want to use snippets of the film in their presentations. They know that to me it is also a snapshot of enduring grief.

But not all non-Indigenous people understand that to include into a discussion a story of my family you need to acknowledge this grief. I recall a very recent academic talk where a colleague threw the film into the discussion and an involuntary shiver ran through my body. The Aboriginal woman and colleague next to me gave me a reassuring pat, as if to say I feel your pain. Not only did the unthinking colleague put me into a space of grief, but they made me feel culturally unsafe, I went from being colleague to being object. How does that then make me the sovereign owner of my right to tell my own story as a Martu storyteller to be strong in the ceremony of storytelling? Moments like this I need to retreat into the storytelling of my own journey of survival and reconnecting to culture.

## Frances: Hunting and gathering

I am following Craig down Brunswick Street in Melbourne in Victoria. We are both here for union meetings and have a day off to explore the city. I see multiple references to hunting and gathering through shop signs and the DVD of the same name, making it impossible for me to ignore this as a symbol of story. And I know that in this walk brother is hunting; hunting for a place to eat, for bargains, for memories. We find a place to eat, on the outside it is more than shabby chic, it is almost derelict, but the inside offers a haven of welcoming decor and delicious food.

Normally on a day like this I would be finding work to do but I have been liberated by brother and his Western Australian colleague and taken on a hunt through Melbourne via trams and on foot. But I know as a storyteller I am still working, composing story in my head, engaging in the sights and sounds for enjoyment now and later. I am a storyteller and if I am not telling stories I am a ghost of my real self.

We finish lunch and begin our hunt down the other side of the road, after over an hour in this street it is starting to come alive for me. The culture of

Brunswick Street starts to show itself to this one who cannot live without culture as much as she cannot live without story. I open my senses to the culture of the street, seeing that this shabby street is loved through pockets of care and expression. A lush walled street corner garden offers a bit of nature and sanctuary for the city dweller. The many eateries are well populated producing food from all over, putting the stamp of the cosmopolitan on the place yet still retaining its own sense of being. The trams shimmy and shake down the street, stopping to let passengers in and out. Brother introduces me to a shop that offered up good shoe bargains in the past and I go in and find a pair for myself; my colour, my style at a decent price. He tells further stories of the street and past visits, stopping outside one cool youthful shop to tell me that his daughter and my co-author had some retail happiness in there last year. And I know that on this walk family are not forgotten but are storied within stories.

## Frances: Story to find your way home

I am home from Melbourne now, storytelling interrupted by my father dropping off gifts from my mother. He asks me about my trip and talks about some maintenance needed for my home. Home is very important to me, the place where all that I am is held and honoured. I get home from work or trips interstate and need to touch things and engage in homes' richness. But I am aware that there is another trip I need to make; to the place that is my cultural home, Jigalong. And I know I am writing stories to find my way home, to be ready and to be worthy as a Martu storyteller.

A few years ago while on secondment from the College I work for I was acting as student advisor to a different campus. It was university break and I had the room to myself and took the time to look through the bookshelves. I came across a book by Tonkinson titled *The Jigalong Mob: Aboriginal Victors of the Desert Crusade* (1974). I knew that what I had in my hand was anthropology written by a white man and I felt a variety of emotions. I was happy to find information about my mob but it was bittersweet, I didn't want one of my first introductions to be in this way. I wanted to learn about my mob from my mob. I felt a deep yearning for home, and sadness because of disconnection but would also learn in the months to come that ancestors are always with me, offering ontological and epistemological gifts that could come to fruition through storytelling as inquiry.

I learnt to listen to inner ancestral voices, to watch birds that would bring messages on how to be, to engage in research as ceremony and to embrace storytelling as an academic method (Martin, 2008). I am in my home now and I also journey to home. And I become so strong in my storytelling that I know it is not just a way to be or a method to use in writing my PhD but it is the story, my strength, my connection to culture.

## Kirra: The Lizard Gang

In my section of this paper I want to talk about how my story *The Lizard Gang* came to be.

I am an Aboriginal person; I belong to the Martu people from the Western Desert. Today my people live at the communities in Jigalong, Wiluna, Punmu, Cotton Creek and Newman. Many of my family live all across Australia. My mother is Italian, with my grandparents both coming to Australia from Italy in the 1950's. I am 15 years-old, and have an identical twin sister.

My story is about four lizards, Boo, Eliza, Zed, and Zoro. They live in the bush around Karratha, and have to work together to survive the floods that follow a big storm. I got the idea for my book after seeing the effects of floods around Broome and Karratha in 2004 after a cyclone. My family was driving all the way up to Broome for a holiday and on the way I saw the bridge near Karratha that had been destroyed by flood waters from a river. I wondered how the animals survived and what happened to them if they could not swim.

Later that year, my class took part in the *Make Your Own Storybook* Competition as part of a library project. Everyone in my class had to write a story and they were entered in the *Make Your Own Storybook* Competition once they were completed. The first thing I decided was the title for my book. I remember sitting in our library with my class mates around me and after hearing what we had to do I said to my class mates that I was going to call my story, *The Lizard Gang*. It was just one of those things that come to you, but I guess my love of lizards affected it in some way. I remember sitting in my school's library working on my book. Once I had the title, the story just followed.

I was the only one out of my classmates to win a prize and I felt very proud of it. Of course back then I never dreamed that at 11 years-old I would be a fully published author. It just never crossed my mind, but the more the publishing process progressed the more I was able to believe. It was such a great experience to watch and look at all the changes books have to go through to be seen on the shelves.

First my parents sent the book to Magabala Books, an Aboriginal publisher, in Broome, who agreed to publish it for me. Magabala Books then arranged for Grace Fielding, a wonderful Aboriginal artist, to interpret my original lizard drawings and turn them into characters exactly as I imagined them, except far better drawn than I could ever accomplish in my wildest dreams. They were just perfect for my book. Grace's paintings then had to be transferred into a form for books.

Then my book had to be styled. That meant someone else decided where the words and drawings would go

on each page, what shape and size the book would be, even what sort of paper it would be printed on. Finally, two years after I wrote my book, it was published. In November 2006, Magabala Books launched my book, ***The Lizard Gang*** at the museum in Perth and I was able to meet Grace Fielding. She was so wonderful and nice, and it was just great to have my whole family there to support me as they have been doing before it and after.

My story is also about me. When I was in Year 4, I was one of the shortest people in my grade and at that time everyone around me was good at sports. People used to tell me, "You can't do anything because you're so small". It hurt a lot when they said this. But when they found out that I had won third prize in the ***Make Your Own Storybook*** Competition, I think they all had a greater respect for people who are not like them.

I am showing people that just because I am not the greatest swimmer or the tallest in the class, it does not mean that I cannot achieve great things. How we look or act in no way defines what we are capable of doing and achieving if we put our mind to it. My book is telling everyone that we are all special. We all have skills and talents, even if we don't know it, and that by working together, we can achieve anything, just like my lizards, who managed to survive the floods by working together as friends, instead of worrying about who is the best or the greatest.

And I guess in a way my story shows how I wish people had acted back in Junior School, even though it was not my exact thought when I wrote the book. Thinking back to it now, I think that people who understand the meaning of my moral can understand more about life and equality. It reminds everyone that Aboriginal people are great storytellers. We all have stories to tell and importantly, we like to listen to stories because that is how we learn and support our culture.

## Conclusion

This paper has already discussed and acknowledged the importance of Aboriginal stories by Aboriginal people being heard within the academy, but as this paper shows it benefits the storyteller too. The champions of narrative as a method of inquiry are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. For the writer it becomes a firm place to sit within their own epistemology and ontology. As Richardson and Adams St Pierre (2005, p. 962) state it can be liberating:

> First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times. Second it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone. Nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of "science writing" on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche; writing is validated as a method of knowing.

Martin (2008) and Kovach (2009) speak of storytelling as methodology, connecting it to Indigenous ontology's and the relationships Indigenous people have with their world. Both authors ask for both an ethical standpoint and an understanding of how the storyteller is positioned and who they answer to in a tribal relationship.

Many Australian universities now have Indigenous worldviews within the curriculum in a move to address disadvantage. But in using narrative we can move beyond simply telling stories of hardship we can move into a space where Indigenous knowledges are valued. Examples of this are knowledge in ecology, post-colonial survival and alternative medicines. By using a continued privileging of our voices as both communication and as strength in research methodology we find a niche that can be shared by others who know how to be in our space.

Martu people are one of many groups in Australia who like to tell a good story by being centred in their own ontology. The spaces have opened up within the academy to use storytelling as research method and knowledge transmission. Since colonisation we have been forced to live in two worlds, knowing both our own traditional knowledge and Western approaches to scholarship. We now have those dual skills yet we can also stay firmly planted in our worldview. It is time for our stories to be heard and shared with respect not as narratives open to criticism based on the epistemologies of others. Story will connect you and we should all feel connected to the country we live on, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, to learn to care for it as it has cared for us.

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## About the authors

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Kirra Somerville is a Martu woman and the daughter of Craig Somerville. She lives in Perth where she attends school with her twin sister Jarra. Kirra wrote her first book *The Lizard Gang* when she was nine years old and won a prize with this story in the 2004 Western Australian Children's Book Council of Australia *Make Your Own Storybook* Competition. Kirra loves reading, drawing and gymnastics. She also loves to write, especially about animals in the Australian bush.

Frances Wyld is a Martu woman and cousin to Craig Somerville. She is a researcher, lecturer and Doctor of Communications candidate at the University of South Australia. Her doctorate is a study of Aboriginal women in academia using auto-ethnography and storytelling. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Library and Information Management and a Master of Education Studies and describes herself as a storyteller, crossing disciplines and creating patterns to describe life as a social scientist. She lives in Adelaide with her teenage son.