



## Who's your mob?

*Aboriginal mapping: Beginning with the strong story*

*by Justin Butler*



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### *Abstract*

As an Aboriginal person, I see firsthand how the dominant culture influences relations of power and privilege through systems, institutions and dominant ideas about best practice. My work involves exploring ways narrative practice aligns with Aboriginal worldviews and how this can support respectful and decolonising practice with Aboriginal people who consult us. In this paper I describe practices that challenge damage-centred accounts that locate problems within individuals and communities. Guided by our Aboriginal worldviews, I work alongside the people with whom I meet in my work to find ways to decolonise our minds and explore multi-storied accounts of people's lives by starting with and building upon stories of strength using narrative maps of practice.

***Key words: narrative practice, decolonisation, mapping, Aboriginal worldviews, re-membering***

Throughout my life, I have heard single, damage-centred stories about my people, Aboriginal people. These are stories of addiction, poverty, despair and helplessness; of reliance, demotivation and discouragement. They never fit with me. In my Aboriginal family counter-stories were invited to flourish. I attribute this to the many conversations I had with my nana, Mary. Aboriginal affairs were always discussed with young people and adults. From a young age, I understood that the personal was political. This is not to say that damage-centred stories have not affected me. These stories are prevalent in others' descriptions of my people's identity and lifestyle. Together, my family explored the damage-centred stories, but these accounts were placed within their broader social, historical and political context. Power, as described by Adichie (2009), is the ability to tell the story of a person and make it their definitive story. Dominant discourses, mainstream media accounts and popular opinion combine with elements of power and white privilege to render invisible the broader social contexts that produce damage-centred accounts of Aboriginal people's identity. The single story becomes the definitive story. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti (2000) wrote that dispossession can be enacted by commencing a person's story with 'secondly' and neglecting what happened first: 'start the story with the failure of the African states and not with the colonial creation of the African states and you have an entirely different story' (Adichie, 2009). The stories told about Aboriginal people by media, popular opinion and political leaders are 'secondly' stories. For example, they discuss poverty and consequent crime but don't show these as consequences of colonisation. However, if we consider the wider story – the story of invasion, genocide, dispossession and forced removals – we produce a different account of these 'secondly' stories. Placing stories of addiction, poverty, despair, helplessness and shame in their broader social, historical and political context, allows us to separate these problems from people and communities and invite new understandings. When we neglect consideration of racism, invasion and colonisation, all we're left with is the damage-centred story, which can make our stories vulnerable to pathologising analysis (Kelley, 1997). Over time, damage-centred stories can lead to an internalised sense of shame and render invisible the strong story that is 80,000 years of continuing culture, language, lore and spirituality. They also obscure what Visenor (1994) described as *survance*: that Aboriginal people have not merely survived the effects of invasion and colonisation, we have resisted.

### Commencing with the strong story

Drahm-Butler (2015) explained that as Aboriginal people, identity is our strong story. Within my work as an Aboriginal narrative therapist, stories of culture, connection and identity

are privileged during and after my first meeting with Aboriginal people. These stories are built upon and explored, thickened and enriched. Identity and connection to culture is a specific skillset within our people. When I meet with someone for the first time, I ask, 'who's your mob?' and they ask this of me. This telling of our identity goes back into distant history, before colonisation. However, we also acknowledge that, for many, this story has been stolen. Therefore, from the outset, the telling of this story invites consideration of the politics of experience. When we begin our conversations here we resist colonisation by resisting disconnection from family, kin, culture, language, lore or country. Instead, we start our story with an act of *survance*, one that counters disconnection and looks to reconnect through situating ourselves in culture, identity and belonging. This is a strong story, which assists in decolonising our mind from the beginning (Chilisa in White & Denborough, 2014)

### Aboriginal mapping

Michael White (2007) described narrative practice through the use of maps. These were not step-by-step accounts of how to conduct narrative practice, but maps to guide us. I recognise the ways that Aboriginal people use mapping as acts of *survance*. Aboriginal mapping can provide a fundamental step in decolonising the ways we tell our stories. Chilisa (interviewed in White & Denborough, 2014) stated that commencing any research or interaction with a statement that situates ourselves – our belonging, our totems, connections to family and to country – begins the 'decolonisation of the mind'. Mapping connects Aboriginal people by privileging stories of identity and culture. The stories of our ancestors are more available to us when we start here; so too are stories of the skills and knowledge that have been passed down through the generations. Prioritising these over discourses of 'professional knowledge' is a small step towards decolonising our practice.

Kaurna Elder Aunty Barb Wingard has said:

We always find ways to make links and to make connections. What is it that links us? Sometimes shared sorrow, shared injustice is the connection, other times is our wish to share skills, passion and knowledge. There are many different ways that we link storylines. (Wingard, 2013)

In my experience, narrative practice is respectful of the cultures of the people with whom we meet in our work because we acknowledge people as the experts in their own lives. We seek to honour skills, knowledges, people who

teach us, and the ways that stories shape our identity. Below are the first Aboriginal mapping questions I use with all Aboriginal people I meet with:

- Who is your mob? (Where is your traditional country?)
- Where is that country? (Where is that in Australia? What are the boundaries?)
- Who is your family? (How might we be/are connected through family?)

Michael White (1997, 2007) described a decentred posture in which the person consulting us is the expert in their story and the holder of knowledge and expertise. Aboriginal mapping is connected to this idea; it sees stories of identity and connection as belonging to individuals. Bracho (2003) argued that the description of a person's cultural identity is something that must remain with the individual; it should not be defined by others. We, as Aboriginal people, acknowledge this, as our elders and ancestors also teach it. We respect Aboriginal peoples' cultural belonging, identity and clan stories, and that respect is reciprocal. A person's story is sacred to that person and nobody but them can tell their story. In this way, Aboriginal worldviews and narrative practice can be linked, valued, respected, and built upon. When people are invited to tell their story from the perspective of locating their expertise, this assists with building rapport and contributes to addressing the power I hold as an educated, employed man. Further, joining with people in their struggles as a co-researcher acknowledges my position as part of the 'collective experience' and creates opportunities for collective action (Epston, 2014).

The initial question, invoking a location in distant history, generally sets the scene for future conversations. Chillisa (in White & Denborough, 2014) explained that colonisation has contributed to a loss of confidence in ourselves. Further, colonisation has instilled a lack of confidence in our knowledge and understanding about our own cultural identity. It is important to remember that, due to invasion and ongoing colonisation, many Aboriginal people have had this knowledge taken from them. This contributes significantly to an internalised sense of identity loss, shame and disconnection. It therefore must be considered in my conversations. A further reason why I believe our interactions with Aboriginal people must commence with Aboriginal mapping is to shortcut to people's strong stories and to place shame and disconnection into a broader context. While remaining decentred in my posture, I remain influential and scaffold quickly to identify the person's strong story so we can build on this and consider the ways that this story can be drawn on in the face of problems.

## Populating the room through re-membering questions

White (2007) described our lives as being shaped by an association composed of significant people and identities. This association contributes to individuals' identities of the past, present, and future. Narrative practice takes a particular interest in the history of storylines, skills and knowledges, values, hopes and dreams (White, 2007). Richly describing responses to the initial Aboriginal mapping questions can contribute to a renewed sense of identity and can assist people to reconnect with those who instilled the values, skills and knowledge that constitute their identity.

Aboriginal mapping invites people to populate the room with stories of ancestors and family, to begin the yarn with people's strong story. As Aboriginal practitioners, we can build on this knowledge of mapping and identity by asking further questions that enrich the strong story of identity through re-membering:

- What do you think it means for your ancestors that you carry on the connection to your tribe?
- If they could say something to you about this, what would it be?
- In the face of invasion and all that we've been through, you are still able to identify with your mob. What do you think this would mean to your ancestors?
- What would it mean for them to hear you acknowledge their contribution to your Aboriginality today?
- How might your responses to these questions help to shape the direction of your future from here? What does thinking about your ancestors and their thoughts and feelings make possible for you into the future?

Myerhoff (1982, 1986; see White, 2007) observed that through re-membering questions, the stories of individuals' lives can be given a shape that extends from the past into the future. In an Aboriginal mapping context, the focus is not on grief, but rather on exploring our ancestors' contributions, which can assist people to reconnect and develop a renewed sense of identity into the future.

In my experience as an Aboriginal person and narrative practitioner, these questions offer and provide a platform to hear stories of strength, resistance, culture, connection and identity; stories of acknowledgement, hope and honour. Words like pride, happiness and joy are often expressed in response to these re-membering questions. Enriching these responses can be a dignifying and honouring experience. Populating the room with those who have contributed to an

individual's identity helps to thicken and acknowledge stories of pride, happiness and joy. Richly describing and reviewing the relationship with and contribution of a person's ancestors contributes significantly to people's sense of individual knowledge. This can provide a basis for the development of local ideas about how they may proceed into the future (see White, 2007).

Holding conversations that begin with strong stories and actively seeking to join in the exploration of these, generates

an opportunity for Aboriginal people to notice their position within the millennia-old practice of Aboriginal mapping. This can be an empowering experience. Conversations guided by Aboriginal worldviews and narrative therapy have contributed to identifying and building upon strong stories, even within some of the most colonising and degrading systems in today's society. An initial meeting that begins with and continues with the strong story of cultural identity and connection led by those who consult us, can only have beneficial outcomes.

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## *A reflection from Anthony Newcastle*

I feel really empowered by this paper. I would like to share this with groups that I work with, as I think very much that the description of 'Aboriginal Mapping' in this article will help to further clearly articulate the 'what and why we do' when we meet each other.

This article works hard to make visible some of the invisible in terms of causality and its effects. As I read this paper there were times when I really did think about this idea when Aboriginal people talk they describe 'who I am' and 'where I'm from' as opposed to descriptions often made by non-Aboriginal people when introducing themselves as 'what I do' and 'where I work'.

I love the Aboriginal mapping questions. This is a clear link between narrative therapy and our cultural way. I think that by using this, people are able to think about the description of first and second story. I really liked this.

The strength and internal fortitude of Aboriginal people who have had to carry the burden of intergenerational colonisation and yet insist on maintaining their Aboriginal identity, despite successive government and dominant society attempts to diminish, it is something I at times stand in awe of rather than ridicule for. To carry so much and yet still be standing ... if that's not strength and triumph, what is?



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