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Wyld, Frances & [Fredericks, Bronwyn L.](#)
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Earth Song as Storywork: Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledges

Abstract

Is it possible for Indigenous ways of knowing, which draw on earth song and storywork, to find a place within the academy? Indigenous peoples recognise that the earth has a song, which we can listen to as story. In return, we can sing our story to the world and of the world. In this paper, the authors explore their own stories and songs. They explain the ways that listening to the earth's song and working with stories can inform their work in the academy – as teachers who support younglings to hear their voices and develop their own songs, and as the writers and tellers of curriculum. The authors ask whether it is possible for Indigenous academics to combine their academic work with Indigenous ways of knowing. They argue that, not only is the combination possible, it can be used to create a harmonious voice that will help them to reclaim their power as Indigenous academic women.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the earth's song and storywork (Archibald 2008; Martin 2008) as ways to bring harmony to our work in academia. We are Indigenous women who seek to reclaim Indigenous ways of being and knowing. We begin with the words of Black Elk, who recognises these songs and the ways they can be heard through engaging with an Indigenous worldview:

I learned their songs, but there are so many songs out there. There are countless songs. Like the fire, it has a song. That fire shapes and forms all life, and each shape has a song. And the rocks, the rocks have songs... each of the winged-people has a song...It is the same with the four-legged and creeping-crawler creatures...every creature has a song. (Black Elk 1991: 34-45)

For us, songs are like stories. They are the things that we have from the time we are physically born until the time we pass to the spirit world. Indigenous people often exchanged songs at gatherings when people met to trade goods or undertake business. We believe that the songs of the earth are shared when we are open to the sweetness and the sorrow that songs can bring, along with other emotions, stories and learnings.

We recognise that the earth has a song that Indigenous people listen to as story and, in return, we "sing the world" (Battise & Henderson 2003). The song might be listening to a bird in a garden. It might also be connecting to the harmony and melody of the song of difference that represents an Indigenous worldview within academia (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Earth song is a vital part of Indigenous knowing. As Indigenous academics, we know that the earth sings to us and that we sing to the earth and to all its creatures and environs. The song is a sensory phenomenon that is

recognised by non-Indigenous scholars (such as Merleau-Ponty 1962) and mythographers (such as Campbell & Moyers 1991).

In this paper, we seek to reclaim Indigenous song. We discuss a sensory way of knowing as a storyworker (Archibald 2008) and the songs that can once again be heard and understood as Indigenous philosophy. We sing to show our connection to the earth, to each other and to ourselves. When we cannot sing, we listen to others who sing for us until our voices return. We sing for the past, for the present and for the next generation.

In our work with students, we bring harmony to their own knowing until they learn to sing for themselves. It may be a form of humming that then forms a song (Öhman & Wyld 2014), or one that gives us knowledge (Black Elk & Lyon 1991). It may be about connecting song and story to know spirit. For us, song is the heartbeat of the earth; it creates a rhythm for us to dance to, and celebrate. To know this song as Indigenous peoples is to know that song is a harmony with the earth. The song must be brought back into balance to create a harmonious future.

In this paper, we focus on earth song and storywork within the academy. We seek to empower ourselves as Indigenous women and reclaim our voices by reflecting on elements of song and storywork. We begin with some acknowledgements. Firstly, we are mindful that there are Traditional songs that are specific to local geographical areas, or to particular animals and events, or that may have a non-human origin. In our reclaiming, we understand that our interaction with specific geographical areas is different from that of the past, but we also recognise that we may be stirred from the songs that are present within the earth and the place. Secondly, we acknowledge that place evokes powerful songs from Country and of Country. The associations and meanings of that place can be complex. Finally, we acknowledge that our empowerment relies on us being consciously aware of who we are in the moment, in the present, in the now, but connected to the past and the future – within a place, on Country.

Bronwyn reflects on being in tune with the present

Being in tune with the present is important, because things are missed when one is distracted for too long or when one focuses on the past or the future and not on the now. The story I share is partly an introduction to the self (Kovach 2009). It involves the songs of the place where I work and the songs of me.

My name is Bronwyn; I am a Murri woman from south-east Queensland. For most of my life, I lived on the Country where my ancestors lived, walked, slept, ate, undertook ceremony and listened to the songs of the earth. On and off over the past 20 years, I have lived in the Country of the Darumbal people of Rockhampton in central Queensland. I work as a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and the BHP Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement at CQUniversity. In my role, it is sometimes really hard to stay focused on ensuring an Indigenous worldview in all that I do. It is the sense of place, and who I am within the place, that I hold as central to my being. It maintains my equilibrium within the walls of the academy.

This story begins with me leaving one day. I got into my car at the university and, despite putting the keys in the ignition, I sat still. I sat silently and watched the way the leaves were blowing in the trees all around me. I noticed the shadows that the leaves and branches were making as the sun began to set. It was the start of spring, and the sun had cast an array of colours across the sky. I never cease to be in awe of the beauty of each day and the earth's magnificence.

As I sat still in my car, I began to hum one of my favourite humming tunes. I enjoyed the way it made me think and feel, deep within my being. I then drove out of the car park and turned left to go out of the rear gate – instead of taking my usual turn through the right gate.

I drove through the university, still softly humming. I saw a small group of kangaroos eating the sweet new shoots of grass on the lawn on my left as I manoeuvred around the roundabout. Hundreds of parrots flew over both me and the kangaroos, squawking and carrying on as they do most afternoons. The parrots were almost deafening and nearly covered my singing.

Then I saw a woman on my right, standing near a sign on the corner of a small laneway. I had a deep sense within my being that she was not OK. I stopped the car and reversed back about 25 metres, conscious that another car might come behind me. I asked, “Are you ok?”

As soon as I asked, she burst into tears. I motioned for her to come over and began to talk with her. I touched her arm. We talked there in the street, on the university’s driveway. I hugged her through the window and she allowed herself to be hugged and to cry and to share.

We stayed there for some time and other cars piled up behind us. No one beeped their horns; it was as if the drivers knew that someone needed help. It seemed that the songs of the birds calmed slightly to reflect this too. Then we released our hug and the woman said that she would be OK. She turned and walked back to where she was waiting and I drove on.

As I drove through the rear gate, there was a small frog mouth owl to the left, sitting along the first length of fence. He was out early and sat quietly watching, despite the traffic of trucks and cars. He witnessed my departure and made me think about my learning. I reflected on the things that had happened. What if I had turned right that day as usual, instead of left? What if I had not noticed the woman because I was focused on the kangaroos or because my head was full of work things? I felt I was meant to be exactly where I was – both in my mind, in my place, and in the sense of physical awareness of place, on Country. I was meant to be quiet in my humming and focused, so that I could see and hear the movements on the earth and then the woman who needed help right then.

In the same way, I know that I am meant to be in the job that I am doing, within the university where I work right now.

Frances reflects on a song of harmony for the next generation

There is a rhythm to knowing, but it is a song you must listen to deeply. If you do not listen deeply to an Elder, or if you interrupt, they may turn away. If you do not listen deeply to an Ancestor, they may take away your voice.

My story that is a prologue or introduction to the self (Kovach 2009) involves the songs of ancestors and Elders. My name is Frances; I am a Martu woman of Australia’s Pilbara region. I have lived all my life on another Country, the Country of the Kurna People of the Adelaide plains in South Australia. I work as a lecturer and in an Indigenous college within a university. I teach cultural studies, Indigenous philosophy, Indigenous research methods and history. I have to talk a lot, which is fine for a storyworker (Archibald, 2008). Generally, my rhythm of knowing is tuned and harmonious with the sacred tenets of an Indigenous worldview (Martin 2008). It is when I am continually pulled out of that space that I become discordant.

This story starts in a lecture. On my way to the lecture theatre, I had travelled in the lift with an Indigenous Elder who was going to give her presence to an exhibition

of her artwork. The previous week, she had given a lecture for one of my classes, talking on everything from Indigenous philosophies to relationship advice. I had warned the group in advance about her wonderful sense of humour, and she did not disappoint.

On this day, I was lecturing to a different group and on my own. They are a good group, and I feel blessed to have such engaged students. Half-way through the lecture, I started to lose my voice. I had to mute the recording to cough and fetch a drink of water. I managed to keep going, but chose to intersperse my words with the recorded words of Toni Morrison in her Nobel Prize winning speech (Morrison1993). I think that a good storyworker always has a few fall-back positions, so they can react to what happens or what they need in the moment. As I listened to Morrison, I thought about Sweden – the home of the Nobel Prize and a place that was soon to be my home for a week during a symposium. Listening to Morrison's words, everything started to make sense. Harmony returned to me as I storied instead of lectured. I told the students about my connection to Sweden. I told them about the irony of losing my voice in a lecture on language and power. I told them that I am losing my voice because I am losing my voice – both the literal and the figurative in place for a lesson. Tears welled in my eyes, but I looked out on my students and saw the future: I saw the voices that will take over for me.

Earlier that same day, I had noticed a magpie that could not seem to launch itself from a branch. Birds are my motif – my ontological informants (Wyld 2011) – so I felt that I had to take action. I rang fauna rescue, who asked me to take a photograph of the bird and send it to them. Fauna rescue rang back with advice, saying that the bird was a youngling ready to fly and there would be adult birds around caring for it. I watched the youngling and reported its behaviour to the rescue volunteer. Sure enough, an older bird did come to feed the youngling. The rescue volunteer explained that there would be changes in the way the birds sang to each other as the youngling was being cared for, to indicate a healthy story for the bird.

Thinking now about the youngling reminds me of the end to my story about the lecture. I sat with the Elder after the lecture, telling her about my fears. I said that sometimes I think we were letting the Elders down, because we were not as strong as they are. Maybe I was feeling a little sorry for myself and wanted a comforting answer. I was crying out like that youngling. But I was talking to the wrong Elder if I wanted to be babied. Her answer was in the affirmative: she told me my fears were correct. We do need to work harder to match the bold strength of those who have gone before us.

I am not a youngling. I have my own offspring who, like the youngling magpie, is almost ready to fly but is still calling out now and then for help. From the moment he was born, we have spoken together via song. Sometimes our song is harmonious, and sometimes it is discordant. This brings me back to Morrison's (1993) speech and her reflections on a discordant encounter that becomes harmonious. Morrison tells the story an old woman and a group of young people. The young people challenge the blind old woman to say whether the metaphorical bird that is in their hands is living or dead. The story moves to harmony as the young people are able to tell their story. They successfully sing their own song of knowing; they sing respectfully and become respected. In the tutorial that followed the lecture where I lost my voice, I asked the group to take turns in reading Morrison's speech. It helped the group to share an understanding: that one day it will be their turn to speak, to story themselves and to story the past. When that day comes, I trust that they hear the song and sing in harmony with the world.

Frances reflects on harmonics

Harmonics are integrated into nature. The earth song has a gentle flow that is pleasing to the senses. Two weeks after my encounter with the young bird and the lecture where I lost my voice, I was thinking about how to feed my own youngling. We had talked that morning about how we had not had a family meal together that week. So that day – a Friday – I decided to put in extra effort. I listed the possible food choices, and a smile crossed his face when I suggested a meal from our local Thai restaurant. Even in this small interaction, his smile showed the harmonics of the earth's song. I set out to walk the small distance to the friendly Thai restaurant (a place of comfort) for take away noodles.

On the way home, I noticed a line-up of trucks waiting to cross against traffic. They were using the train tracks, and preparing for their night shift work. I live next to the train station, but for many months now the trains have not run because the line is being upgraded and electrified. These trucks are specially designed to work on the train track.

I noticed a small group of men crossing to the middle of the road, resplendent in their fluoro colours. They were extending their working day into a Friday evening so that they could meet deadlines and get the track finished for the thousands of commuters who were frustrated at the delays in getting the line back into business. The workers were tiny figures against a backdrop of machinery and traffic.

I walked through the station on a shortcut to my home, and noticed the weeds that had grown up since the trains stopped running. I have lived by the station for 20 years, and I respect the behemoths that rattle past my home every 20 minutes.

The trucks crossed the road as I walked along the station platform. I waited under a light so that I was visible to the drivers; I wanted them to know that I was waiting for them to pass. They stopped, and I let them know that I wanted to cross the line. They called out, "Yes". As I crossed, I thought about the difference between these workers with their converted trucks and the trains that normally use the line. The workers are more gentle in their space; they are able to stop if needed. It made me think about being gentle in my space – of using Indigenous knowledges within the realm of Western patriarchy at the university. I felt empathy for the workers because they are like converted vehicles, trying to meet deadlines for frustrated commuters. Unlike the trains that barrel past my home with a sense of violence, these workers operate hybrid machines and were able to see and hear me as I asked if it was safe to cross.

I walked over the crossing, listening to music on my iPhone, with the bag of noodles in the crook of my elbow. A cat overtook me. I recognised it as a neighbour feline and called out to it, "Cat, run home now". This cat had moved into the area after the trains stopped running and did not know about the danger. I told it to run because I wanted it to realise that this was not a safe place. Even as I felt empathy for the railway workers – for I, too, will work tonight – I also felt empathy and understood the harmonics of being a misunderstood machine created for a purpose. The work would be over soon and the trains would return. Then, neither person, machine nor cat will be safe.

This story makes me reflect that the sacred spaces created as a harmony for Indigenous knowledges are fleeting, but while we can hear them we strengthen our being and knowing. The men and machines worked through the night putting up electrical cables, but I did not let them disturb my sleep. Instead, I thought of a harmonious song within the urban environment. I don't live on my desert Country, which is my ancestral homeland. Instead, I live and work here. I must not become

discordant; I must listen to the song created by modern living and remember that modern living is still inhabited by nature that needs to be nurtured. Our stories and songs have value within Indigenous knowledges and as Battiste notes many stories use animals as metaphors and when we privileging ourselves in using this system as teaching tools we can work towards decolonising education (2013).

Bronwyn and Frances reflect together on using song to write curriculum

We are conscious that privileging Indigenous voices within universities is a constant challenge (Fredericks 2011). We also recognise that finding a quiet space where the song can emerge is a challenge. To find the song, we have to set boundaries around work – so that there is time to do the work, and time and space that is set aside and named as sacred. We are interested in exploring ways to write a curriculum using Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Martin 2008), through the use of storywork (Archibald 2008). Success comes within this process when the song of the earth can be heard.

Frances starts the curriculum process with a ceremony to make the research strong (Wilson 2001). She asks herself, “Which voices want to be heard? Who am I am writing the curriculum for? What are the aims and objectives of the university? How do these balance with the aims and objectives of the Elders?”

I, Frances, often write curriculum at home, listening to a cacophony of birds roosting in the giant lemon-scented eucalypt tree. I use Indigenous ways of knowing and being to write curriculum because they can make sense of the chaos and because they use the senses to understand the world and hear its song. My work is not tamed through the discipline of non-Indigenous academic methods. Instead, it is tuned and brought into harmony through storywork. The chaos is an important element, as Battiste and Henderson (2000) note:

By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, the classic norms of anthropological analysis made it difficult to study zones of differences within and between cultures. Indigenous cultures became homogenous rather than diverse. Yet, Indigenous consciousness has always required particular responses to particular ecologies built on flux. European ethnographers understood these cultural borderlands as annoying exceptions rather than as central areas for inquiry. Actual Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and consciousness came to be seen as too messy, even too downright chaotic, to be studied. The Eurocentric emphasis on coherent wholes at the expense of unique processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions was and remains a serious limitation to Eurocentric understanding of Indigenous knowledge and heritage. In this sense, Eurocentric thinkers have taken culture as their abstract possession and Indigenous knowledge as merely symbolic and ideational. This search for stable, systematic regimes has reduces the knowledge that Eurocentric scholars claim to value “on its own term”. (Battiste & Henderson 2000: 31)

Writing curriculum, forming pedagogy and developing the story (also thought of as the study guide) requires a balance. This balance brings the Indigenous voice and allows us to balance *mythos* (the emotional and imaginal) and *logos* (the rational and pragmatic). When we build curriculum, we are not building machines. Instead, we are help to empower thinkers who will work towards caring for the earth. Aadlandsvik (2009) explains the tension between *mythos* and *logos*:

Tension has always existed between the two ancient Greek concepts of *mythos* and *logos*. *Mythos* is concerned with the cultural, imaginal, and emotional; *logos* is related to the rational, pragmatic, and scientific – with what are often called facts. In the West today, it is *logos* which dominates thinking in all areas, including education. (Aadlandsvik 2009: 94)

We like to ask questions as we develop curriculum: questions that help us to balance *mythos* and *logos*, and focus on Indigenous ways of thinking. How do we hear the song and bring curriculum into a place of harmony? Why should we? How do we bring an Indigenous worldview to pedagogy? That is, how can the relationship that is built between the student, teacher and curriculum include respect, reciprocity and relatedness (Archibald 2008; Martin 2008; Price 2012)? If we look to nature for a lesson, we might see a metaphor for this relationship in the ways that adult magpies sing with the youngling who is preparing to fly. To hear and recognise the song, we need a balance between academia and nature. For us, this might mean taking a break from working with the pragmatic (things like the embedding of course objectives, graduate qualities, theory and methods) to sense the world around us.

For little moments, we suspend our knowing, our epistemic selves, and retreat into being. We retreat into the metaphysical. Battiste and Henderson (2000) identify this Indigenous worldview:

In the Indigenous worldview, humans perceive the sensuous order of the natural world through their eyes, noses, ears, mouths, and skins (Abram 1996). Perceptions of the sensory world unfold as affective sounds and rhythm. As these sounds become words, humans participate in “singing the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Since people enter into language through their sensory relationships with the natural world, languages cannot be understood in isolation from the ecologies that give rise to them. (Battiste & Henderson 2000: 25-26)

We recognise that words alone cannot do the work of teaching, as Merleau-Ponty (2008) notes:

The predominance of vowels in one language, or of constants in another, and constructional and syntactical systems, do not represent so many arbitrary conventions for the expression of one and the same idea, but several ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises and in the last resort to live it. Hence the *full* meaning of a language is never translatable into another. (Merleau-Ponty 2008: 218).

To take this quote further I, Frances, add that most of my time involves teaching in English to English-speaking students. I am not translating the language, but I am conscious that I am translating an Indigenous worldview. I ask students to sense the world, and listen to the song and story that the world is telling them. I ask them to watch the behaviour of animals, and use animals as teachers (as I have done in my story). Animals can show us how to be in the world, in the way described by Merleau-Ponty (2004: 59): “Centred on the animal is what might be called a process of ‘giving shape’ to the world; the animal moreover has a particular pattern of behaviour”. Animals know how to sing the world, to live in harmony with that which gives life. They are sensory, and we can learn much from them.

Bringing songs of the world into the writing of curriculum involves deep listening. The result is a pedagogy that is harmonious. It gives us space and time to recognise

synchronicity – as in the example of the story of Frances losing her voice in teaching during a lecture on power and language, and this resulting in her knowing that another song needed to be heard. We can let emotion into our work through auto-ethnography (Richardson & Adams St Pierre 2005), and we can welcome intuition through storywork (Archibald 2008; Martin 2008). We need to always ask which song wants to be sung in this moment. Then, a song of praise to Mother Earth can be sung and a deep life can be lived because the world has provided lessons alongside our academic method and theories. In this way, we dance to a tune that allows us to blend the academic systems of working with an Indigenous worldview.

Bronwyn and Frances reflect together on silence

As Indigenous people working within an academic environment, we have learnt how to privilege and hear our own voices (Rigney 1999). We have learnt how to break the silences (Lorde 2007; Fredericks 2011) that continue to make a Eurocentric view dominant. We have learnt how to read the myths of other cultures to find commonality, and how to read the myths of the dominant culture to re-mythify (Barthes 1972) our own being and our own song, using our own words. Moyers recalls the way that Campbell listened to the earth song (Campbell & Moyers 1991):

It was impossible to listen to him – truly to hear him – without realizing in one's own consciousness a stirring of fresh life, the rising of one's own imagination. He agreed that the "guiding idea" of his work was to find "the commonality of themes in world myths, pointing to a constant requirement in the human psyche for a centering in terms of deep principles."

"You're talking about a search for the meaning of life?" I asked.

"No, no, no," he said. "For the experience of being alive."

I have said that mythology is an interior road map of experience, drawn by people who have travelled it. He would, I suspect, not settle for the journalist's prosaic definition. To him mythology was "the song of the universe," "the music of the spheres" – music we dance to even when we cannot name the tune. (Campbell & Moyers 1991: xvi).

We are aware that there are silences within academia to shut out this song. It is not trusted as logical or positivist. It cannot be proven. Intuition struggles to find its place within scholarly pursuits. But we know that it is the intuitive voice that students bring with them to class, to centre themselves and find their own song within the teaching content. The academy tends to silence students, and silence the next generation. But perhaps it is us – those who have learnt to privilege our voices – who need to be silent sometimes so that students can sing their songs. We understand what it means to be silenced when we want to sing about our experiences of being alive – of finding our truthful story, and finding our myth alongside the many cultural myths and stories of the peoples we belong to. We need to take care not to silence others.

We believe that singing in harmony with the next generation, with the students who are in our care, is an exercise in praxis. It is an ethical way of being (Arbon 2008; Martin 2008). We sing with the next generation within the storywork principles of respect, relatedness and reciprocity (Archibald 2008). It is a voice that can surprise others – particularly those who are all too often on the other end of anger and those

who are not in our care. We borrow from Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, who speaks of the flamenco and *duende*:

With idea, sound, gesture, the *duende* delights in struggling freely with the creator on the edge of the pit. Here, Angel and Muse flee with violin and musical metre but *duende* draws blood. It is in seeking to heal that wound that never heals that all that is strange and unprecedented in the work of man resides... The *duende* loves the edge, the wound, and gravitates to places where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible expression (Lorca, 1933).

Conclusion

We conclude by asking you to listen to the songs and stories that surround you. Can you hear the song of the world? Do you dance to your own tune? Are you in tune with the song? Or will you ask the world to make room for you – to stand aside so that only your voice is heard? Is your voice dominant or harmonious?

Now think about the Indigenous woman. Can she exist in your world only as your muse – perhaps living an angelic life to keep you safe as you barrel through like the trains on the mythical pathways of Eurocentricity? Do you listen to her songs and stories? Are you aware that they exist?

As Indigenous women, we have used the songs of others – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We use these songs in harmony with our own songs, for our knowledge is often used within the principles of praxis. We seek to enable, and to ensure that we do not become the oppressor.

At Frances's home, the trains are back on the track. Many of them are electric, and they glide past with purpose. They make little impact on the neighbouring environment. But they don't stop for us to cross. At Bronwyn's home two frog mouthed owls have moved into the tree next to her study and she is watches out for them each day.

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