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We Story: Decoloniality in Practice and Theory

Abstract

Western research and education draw heavily on evidence-based approaches underpinned by positivism. Reliance on this scientific approach informs what is to be counted, measured and tested – what can be ‘known’. In our experience, evidence generated using this approach does not always bring the most useful outcomes in our diverse, naturalistic settings. In fact, often the proffered solution can distance and de-humanise the very people expected to be beneficiaries. In this paper we, as researchers and educators from different cultural and professional backgrounds in the ‘post-colonial’ South Pacific, pose an alternative to this Western approach. We engage in a story saturated process akin to collaborative auto-ethnography. We first undertake a process of **owning our stories**, critically reflecting upon ourselves and how we approach evidence. In the context of values-driven, dialogical relationships, we experiment with intersectionality, inter-disciplinarity and experiences of time and space to critically explore our practice and experience of decoloniality and transformation. Then through **sharing our stories**, we critically reflect upon creative, culturally relevant practices. These stories include using poetry in social work education and health research, cake art and social work storytelling. We acknowledge cultural story forms, collaboration, and performance in a higher education setting. These experiences lead to **creating new stories**. We share examples of change; we ‘talk up’ to and challenge rationalist, evidence-based approaches in our respective professional spaces. We examine relationality

and indigenous epistemology underpinning our use of story. We present the power of story as a process of transformation towards decoloniality of theory and practice.

Key Words

Story, Decoloniality, Indigenous, Pacific, Research, Positivism, Western approaches

We story: Decoloniality in Practice and Theory

Introduction

“Story is how we will decolonize teaching and research” (Kovach, 2018 p.49).

Our elevation of story arises out of shared uneasiness with the unquestioned pursuit of evidence in health, education, and social sectors alongside deepening inequity locally and globally. Decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo, 2018), transformation for social justice, and thriving communities across Oceania/Pacific, are the underpinning purposes of our storying endeavour. While conceptualisations of decoloniality are “multiple, contextual and relational” (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p.4), here we apply Walsh’s definition of decoloniality as seeking to “make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought” (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, p. 17).

In this paper, we explore how stories bring those with different power positions in the postcolonial matrix to places of exchange, meaning making, and importantly, to shared action. Examples from our emerging story practices, as individuals and as a group, are woven through the phases of **owning our stories** and **sharing our stories**. We contend that in owning and sharing story, we are collectively **creating new stories**, experiencing transformation and pursuing decoloniality. Starting with owning our stories, we draw on our own cultural power to critically reflect on ourselves, our communities, our professional spaces and how we approach evidence. Explicitly naming and critically reflecting on our own positionality is foundational in qualitative research (Holmes & Darwin, 2020; Vaka, Brannelly, & Huntington, 2016), critical traditions (Freire, 1972; Waldron, 2017) and Indigenous approaches (Kovach, 2009; Sanga & Reynolds, 2017; Smith, 2012). Each author in turn describes how story processes have manifest in our work – this includes social work,

higher education, health, and research settings in various corners of the South Pacific. In the discussion we explore relationality and Indigenous epistemologies underpinning story-based approaches and the transformational power of story in decoloniality. Firstly, we define our conceptualization of story and describe our story process method.

Understanding Story

Story is a significant, daily human activity, and storytelling is regarded as “one of the most powerful elements of communication that exists” (Suzuki, Feliū-Mójer, Hasson, Yehuda & Zarete, 2018, p.9468). Put another way, human lives are narrated (Kearney 2002). Story is found in varied formats and styles in human society over time. Literature shows story in its various fictional forms such as essays, poetry, or plays. Oral story is created by speakers and listeners (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017) and tradition, knowledge and values have been transmitted in oral form through folklore, myths, legends, histories, and songs. Moreover, story is also found in non-linguistic forms as with animated artefacts like paintings and creations mediated in the physical, social, cultural, and spiritual realms. At times stories come alive through performances of plays, dramas, songs, chants and continue to be echoed and portrayed through creative non-linguistic objects to mediate profound themes about life. Story is creation which represents both the simplicity and the complexity of life.

Story does more than portray creative expression - it is representative and/or symbolic of times, peoples, and places. Through story, what is known is shared and can be used as a mode for navigating resolution of conflict at a community-level (Brigg, Chadwick, Griggers, Murdock, & Vienings, 2015). That is why story, as a powerful communication tool, possesses the power to shape many aspects of life and society. Story is perpetual, collective endeavour; it shapes people as individuals and shapes communities and nations. Although a story may be borne and reborn in someone’s mind, once that story is shared with another, a community’s story emerges to create something, often profound, about shared identities, memories, and

sense-making of life experiences. In many parts of the Pacific, body marking (tattoos) silently yet deeply speak story of history, identity, and status (Altieri & Omori, 2003; Treagus, 2008), including as being symbols of initiation into adulthood. Body marking, as a form of story, connects each person to their tribes and clans. So, when people trace identity through story, they connect with others and create new stories. Through these connections, stories echo, create and reinterpret histories, capture memories, influence discourse, and impact every aspect of life. Story is not just about what has been; story also presents current events, and offers predictions for the future. Story is a powerful medium for transformation.

Story is gaining momentum in discourses on decolonisation and decoloniality. Orality and dialogue are intrinsic to Pacific-Indigenous knowledge systems approaches to reflectivity and problem-solving (Evans, Guy, Honan, Paraide, & Muspratt, 2010). Storytelling is also an act of resistance employed for Indigenous resurgence (Archibald, 2008; Caxaj, 2015; Sium & Ritskes, 2013; Wilson, 2008). Although different language terms are used, contemporary Indigenous scholars engage story methods in a critical interface with non-Indigenous scholarship, practice, and contexts; this includes, for example, *pūrākau* from within Māori knowledge systems engaged as research method (Pouwhare, 2016), or *talanoa* as a Tongan (Vaioloti, 2006; Vaka et al., 2016) and Samoan (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014) method in social research. As such, story in Indigenous contexts sits not within uni-versal but pluri-versal experiences of knowing (Mignolo, 2018), yet “colonizers have not recognized this knowledge mobilization as a valid way of knowing” (Pidgeon, 2019 p. 49). As story-hearers and story-sharers, story is a medium of praxis in our projects and programs, our worlds of work. In our experience, when the rubric fails, when data is inadequate, and when we fall short, we return to story. In the remainder of this article, we describe and critically reflect upon our experiences of story and the potential of story to transform and decolonise.

Owning Our Stories: The Process

The process for developing this paper was intentionally story saturated. Our story process resembled a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach (Hernandez, Chang, & Ngunjiri, 2017; Hernandez, 2021). Decoloniality is necessarily a shared process. Beyond individual critical reflection, decoloniality requires transformative action in the relational space and at the institutional and structural levels. Stories, while involving individuals, does so in a context of collectivity. Our process in authoring this paper, therefore, engaged a collective process.

We are three women with diverse cultural, national, and professional backgrounds, who have worked together for more than a decade, having had various roles in relation to each other which have changed overtime. Our roles and connections are multi-layered and have variously included that of student-teacher, co-researchers, manager-employee, and importantly, we are all mothers and family friends. The work to develop this paper took place over a three-day period, during research and writing retreat at Michelle's home on the unceded lands of the Yirrganydji peoples (in North Queensland, Australia). Michelle accessed internal research funds from within her University (James Cook University) to support Tracie and Clare to travel from New Zealand and Papua New Guinea respectively. Our process built on existing mutually beneficial relationships between the authors, spanning the personal and professional realms, imbuing in-depth and rich exchanges through an organic, respectful, meaning-filled collaborative process. There was time for rest and immersion in the natural coastal environment, a central element of slow scholarship (Berg & Seeber, 2016) and resonate with Indigenous processes (Wilson, 2001). In addition to individual writing time, we intentionally set time aside for dialogue and collective reflection on our shared work. We were open to creative flow, to challenge, to new connections, and we were gentle with each other and with ourselves. Throughout our time together, whenever something stood out to us as pivotal, at whatever level, or we had a thought or feeling we

were trying to make sense of, we could opt to write words and phrases on paper and put them on a blank wall. At the end of our three-day retreat, we pulled these words and phrases together into this poem to capture our responses to the experience of the story process.

Our story: using story for transformation

*So much hope, energy high
Green shoots, new growth
New heights, and depths.*

*Confronting
I feel stuck
It's ok to be stuck?
This isn't being published today.*

*Relational epistemology – we accept the
Incomparable
Waiting for inspiration
Connections made, some f
a
l
l*

*Away (with the tears),
Gold remains amongst
Layers, and
Layers, and
Layers, and
Layers.*

*Stories have shape
It's hard, but worth it
Worth being away
From our babies.*

We turn now to how we have used story in a variety of research, education, and community settings, and then examine our conceptualisation of the transformational power of stories and the place of story-based approaches for future work.

Sharing our Stories

Story One by Tracie: Poetry, Auto-ethnography and Cake Art in Social Work Education and Research

I am New Zealand-born of mixed ethnic heritage, being Tongan (South Pacific Islands) on my father's side and Pakeha (white New Zealander) on my mother's side. I have been drawn to stories and the arts in recent years as part of my scholarship and contribution to social work education and research. In my social work training years in the 1990s in New Zealand, I participated in an extra-curricular structural analysis and 'decolonising ourselves' workshop specifically for students of Pacific ethnicities – mostly students of Tongan, Samoan, Cook Islands, and Fijian heritage – in a predominantly western-based university education system in New Zealand. This was the first time I realised the power of story to critically analyse our collective stories and to surface transformative response. Rev Muamua Strickson-Pua (Rev Mua), an urban Pasifika (Pacific heritage in the diaspora) storyteller, facilitated the workshop, telling his own stories, sharing his poetry, and rap. With his belief that we are all inherently artists, Rev Mua facilitated a process where we all wrote poetry, writing lines about our names, our families, and our education. We cried, we laughed, and we recognised ourselves, our families and our stories even in others' story-poems.

Prompted by this experience, I have adopted the use of story and poetry as a higher education teacher and researcher. For example, students, Pacific and non-Pacific alike, at the end of a teaching session on social work with Pacific peoples, are invited to write a four-line poem capturing what they take from the session into their practice with Pacific peoples. At first there are nervous giggles and self-doubt, but then the academic-essay-writing-students move on to expose raw responses in the distilled, intensified, emotion-filled form of a poem.

In recent years, Rev Mua facilitated a story telling event with Pacific university students as part of a Pacific learner success initiative. The potency of story, particularly poetry, to create a safe space to surface pain, politics, and power to transform was evident. One participant wrote a poem to her daughter, about a major decision she made when carrying her. Another participant disclosed experience of historical abuse, leading others to name similar experiences and what that had meant for their decision to pursue a social services career. A participant reflected that from under the proverbially ‘traditional island mats’, which are unrolled for families to sit and talk, there are things we need to pull out. Story for these Pacific students is a mechanism for owning and sharing lived experience and for forging transformed futures. These story experiences are reflected in Rev Mua’s poeumentary - meaning poetry meets documentary:

‘AMATAGA Beginning verse #2:

*In the beginning I Me
trying to understand We Us
why being Samoan was important
then resolving to appreciating others
by accepting myself I Me
becoming We Us family of humanity.*

PRAXIS Practice verse #3:

*Poeumentary became
a praxis of engagement
with others sharing
the human struggles
of liberation, understanding
and peace.*

(Rev Muamua Strickson-Pua)

Poetry is a powerful mechanism for bringing forth significant experiences, both positive and negative, to be named and to be owned (Norton, 2017). Further, although the writing of poetry was an individual act, the recognition and ownership was experienced collectively. This collective ownership was not something that took away from the individual's story, rather it was an awakening to the intersections of a shared story. Poetry in social work teaching is useful because to be effective agents of social change, social workers need to continuously reconcile their own experiences in relation to the role they undertake with individuals, families, and communities.

Auto-ethnography is another way I have engaged story. *Cake art as social work* (Mafile'o, 2019) is my auto-ethnography about cake art as social work metaphor and method, illustrating creative, sensory, and relational ways of knowing underpinned by Tongan *tā-vā* theory of reality (Ka'ili, 2017; Māhina, 2010). I create cakes for causes, to build community and to amplify a message. The following auto-ethnography excerpt demonstrates how cake-art is also a story form representing transformational change:

As a second-generation mixed heritage Pacific Island migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand, my place is in the borderlands, traversing indigeneity and coloniality. I split a coconut, its thick white flesh sitting in contrast to the deep brown textured shell. Exposed, the half coconut is poised on top cakes I create for others whose biographies also traverse the Pacific diaspora borderlands. While "coconut" has been used in derogatory ways to refer to Oceania peoples, in cake art it is re-framed. Traditional narratives of Hina and Tuna speak of the deep history of the coconut within Oceania cultures, and the everyday sustenance and healing sourced from coconuts. Grown in tropical homelands, the contrasting textures and colours of the

half coconut symbolises our grounding in “island” identities and our desire for decoloniality in the diaspora. (Mafile’o, 2019, p.126-127)



[Figure 1: Cake art - Coconut]



[Figure 2: Cake art – Moana/Oceania]



[Figure 3: Cake art – Fiji Independence]



[Figure 4: Cake Art – Island theme]

Storytelling invokes others' storytelling. For example, after presenting the auto-ethnography at a conference, a woman shared that on completing her PhD, she just wanted to bake. It grounded her. Another, who was a field education coordinator in a child protection agency, told me the story of how she bakes for her social work students to extend hospitality. Storying uncovers what has meaning, and ways to live, cope and give. Sharing stories, even about the ordinary-ness of life, reveals how the ordinary is worthwhile.

Sharing a story also requires an audience be open to receive from it. When I contributed an artistic response to a community development conference in the form of a cake creation, a highly esteemed scholar jested that in his next community development book he should have a cake chapter. Even amongst those who might be expected to be open to alternative ways of knowing, there can be a lack of readiness to engage creativity and story.

Poetry and auto-ethnography are story-based approaches I have used to embrace Pacific-Indigenous approaches in Western academic teaching and learning contexts (Mafile'o, Mataira, Saxton, 2019). Story has enabled a claiming of Pacific space and a humanising of the professional space. In story, there are glimpses of transformation at individual and relational levels (Huffman, 2018).

Story Two by Clare: Story-Based Methods as Decolonizing Teaching Strategies in a Literature Classroom

I am Clare Wedu Kokinai from Papua New Guinea (PNG), an ethno-linguistically diverse and poly-cultural country. Having been under German, British and then Australian colonial administration, PNG gained political independence in 1975 (Griffin, Nelson & Firth, 2017).

Experiences have taught me that stories are created and connected throughout a lifetime as people interact with others in multiple spaces and events. When growing up, my maternal grandparents who raised me shared stories about my socio-cultural connections. They enthusiastically talked about our ancestors, our land, and our ways of doing things as Yako-Koianungi people of the Lower Musa area in the Northern Province of PNG. They also shared stories of their pioneer missionary work in some of the remotest parts of our beautiful country. These stories influenced my perceptions about life, education and later a teaching career. I have been a teacher in primary, vocational, and secondary education before my current role in a higher learning institution in PNG.

Teaching literature to students from across the Pacific at this higher learning institution has been rewarding. I teach *Post-Colonial English Literature* and *Themes in Literature*. *Post-Colonial English Literature* involves a critical study of English literature from the Pacific, African, Indian and West Indian regions, by writers who do not have English as their first language. *Themes in Literature* explores themes through the study of a combination of poetry, drama, novel, and short stories. In examining the different works, students critically evaluate writers' ideas, style, and skill. In these subjects, students engage in critical analysis of the cultural and historical contexts, with specific emphasis on the impact of the colonial experience and its influence on literary form, technique, and subject matter.

I encountered some challenges teaching literature. At times, I found students not reading the given literary texts or not interested in class activities. This prompted me to vary my teaching approach. I recognised the need for students to respond to their colonial (Pacific) histories in more interactive, meaningful, and friendlier modes of self-expression; I started to use a combination of written, verbal, and enacted story-based teaching methods to engage my adult learners. Here I share three examples of story-telling teaching and learning experiences, and then conclude with the 'bilum' story analogy.

Diverse Pacific story forms

Students engaged in a task researching different forms of story telling in their Pacific localities. Several female students shared about how body tattoos are significant and portray a unique story:

In the Papuan region of PNG, women bear tattoos on different parts of their body. Their tatoos give identity, status and mark significant chapters and changes in a woman's life... They are non-verbal, silent breathing wonders worn on the face which seem to whisper, 'I am now a woman in my society and no longer a girl'... These tatoos are not just mere decorative lines... They... tell a woman's story. Facial tattoos relay that women think and create ideas. Tatoos on the chest, breast and belly signify the mother's role and strength in bearing and raising her children. Tattos on her arms tell that she uses her hands to plant, gather and feed; while the ones on her lap

shows where her children find comfort when they lay their heads there. She may not be heard in her community or at most times be a backbencher in her community, yet she is meant to stand by her husband as told by the tattoos on her legs. There is still more to be appreciated about these beautiful traditional breathing swirls of feminine lines. (Female, PNG)



[Figure 5: A PNG woman with facial tattoo. Picture Courtesy: Clare Kokinai]

There are chiefly tattoos that allow people within a community to identify their leaders. Tattoos portray dignity... or female tattoos are using symbols to reflect women's characters. (Female, Solomon Islands)

Humans are not the only bearers of symbols that tell different stories. There are other items that bear a story:

Stories are etched and woven into cultural tools and artefacts that say something significant about the society they belong to. (Male, PNG)

Stories share societal values as this student shares:

We tell stories in Samoa through legends and fables. This is one common way of passing our ancestors' stories from one generation to another. We tell them when we are paddling out at sea to catch fish or when we climb or plant coconuts and on many other occasions... the legends talk about morals and values in the society. (Male, Samoa)

One important occasion in which life stories are told is when a person dies and when mourners lament for their dead. In PNG, it is called the singing karai which is done to express appreciation of a life and express sadness for loss through lamenting as we mourn. The good deeds... will be missed or if the deceased did bad things in the

community, this can be mentioned as part of the lamenting. So, it is like a biography sung at death. (Male, PNG)

Stories are also danced:

Dances and costumes are ways in which story-telling is conducted in PNG. (Male, PNG)

Pacific story-telling has varied forms – stories are told through the mediums of the human bodies (Altieri & Omori, 2003; Treagus, 2008), coverings, and cultural objects. Stories are also cried, sang, and danced expressing various emotions. Stories need to be preserved and be shared knowledge. Stories are windows into people’s lives. At times their stories are untold or quietly preserved for themselves, but when given the opportunity, these stories come alive as spilled or typed ink.

Weaving personal stories with literature

In 2020, students wrote a narrative autobiographical essay; they narrated a selected life event of their own and related it to events, characters or conflicts in a selected literary text. As I assessed their narrative essays, I was intrigued by their shared experiences of struggle, identity, perseverance, and survival which emerged from the narrative autobiographical essays. This task also emphasised the power of unspoken stories that silently speak to a reader’s mind stimulating imagination while learning about the student writer. Each student’s narrative autobiography spoke stories they would not have directly or verbally shared with me or even others. An example is provided below:

“The Woman By The Well” is a dramatic monologue written by Sauni Rinehart. It is a rewritten piece relating to the original narrative in the Bible’s gospel in John 4: 23-26... the woman at the well (Bible) was never good enough for anyone in her society because of her shortcomings and was looked upon with disdain. Reading about this, made me think of myself. You see what a lot of people do not know is that I am an adopted child and I’ve always tried to do everything in my power in life to get the love and approval of my adopted parents which I unfortunately never got. At that time, as a kid I thought being a good sportsman, being musically talented or being mechanically creative would make my parents proud of me. However, it was evident to me that to them, I wasn’t good at any of those. (Male student).

Their stories have taught me that connecting to others' stories helps them to create their own stories and in doing so that connects academia, literature, and personal experiences in enriching and reflective ways.

Performing story

Performing parts of a post-colonial novel, Papua New Guinean novel '*The Crocodile*' authored by the late Sir Vincent Eri, gave students an opportunity to engage meaningfully with the text and explore sensitive themes of colonialism in a creative and culturally responsive manner. The activities were to create and perform short dramas, including: (1) the protagonist at different stages of his life to depict change as a post-colonial theme; (2) a funeral scenario, using tributes to portray the different characters' relationships and analyse the significance of loss because of colonialism; and (3) through a beauty quest scenario, present the different types of characters developed in this novel and analyse characterisation.

Figure 6 shows the group who used a funeral scenario to analyse characterisation and demonstrate 'loss' as a theme in post-colonial literature.



[Figure 6: Students performing a short play in a literature class]

Reflections from my students on this class activity showed that they were more engaged with the novel through the creative presentations than if asked to analyse the text as a discussion activity. The activity also encouraged team collaboration when analysing the text as post-

colonial literature. More so, they appreciated the creativity prompted when preparing and presenting their tasks.

This activity achieved several things. Stories of the past and those of our colonial history can be brought alive in our learning spaces through retelling our own stories. These stories are important because our colonial histories shape many things we do today. I also learnt that students did not just achieve the learning outcomes of this post-colonial literature subject but that the creative analysis tasks they presented in class prompted critical thinking, and opportunities for collaborative sharing and learning from each other and for my own learning too. Overall, these three experiences show that stories prove to be a powerful teaching and learning tool for decoloniality in Pacific literature classrooms. Story-based approaches enabled creative and collaborative learning, where students weave their own stories with that of local and international authors to effect dialogical, insightful and culturally responsive approaches to learning in a post-colonial Pacific context.

As I taught students, post-colonial themes using story-based techniques, it also helped me understand more my own history of colonialism, and its effects on my society. However, what I appreciated more, was to teach enthusiastically knowing that students connect well to their identities as generations influenced by their own histories and that they can use creative ways of re-telling stories in the present for self and others learning now and in future.



[Figure 7: Teaching in a Literature Class. Picture Courtesy: Clare Kokinai]

The value of story in my context as viewed through the ‘bilum analogy discussed next.

Every ‘bilum’ carries a story



[Figure 8: A bilum from Oro Province, PNG. Picture Courtesy: Clare Kokinai]

The statement “every bilum carries a story” (H. Stevens, personal communication, 2022), by one of my colleagues, inspires my Papua New Guinean cultural view of the value of story. Bilums, traditional string bags, are popular traditional handcrafts in PNG. Traditionally, they were made from twisted fibres of tree barks and plants. They are made in different styles, shapes and sizes representing the local societies their weavers hail from. Therefore, they are items of cultural and social identity. Bilums also serve various purposes; they are used to carry items, as infant carriers, for adornment, and as gifts. Bilums symbolise many things in my PNG culture and are an item of admiration and value. It is from the value inspired by PNG bilum that I explore story.

Just as bilums are valuable and purposeful in my culture, so are stories and ways of storying. Stories are made and carry with them many things; histories, memories, identities, values, messages, and lots more. Stories, teach, capture, and inspire admiration of events, people, and places. Just as bilum making passes skills, captures local identities of PNG and is admired for its display of creativity, stories create and impact many aspects of people's lives in authentic ways.

Story Three by Michelle: Storying into health through poetry

White amongst Brown, in the deep Blue

Whole-focused crashes against evidence-based

Waves of privilege rise up, swallow conceptions,

Then fall to again expose power

In the Pacific, not/my home

We story, take time

Trust the process

Generate find-ings,

That do not deliver.

Where do I step next?

As an Anglo-Celtic public health researcher with a social work background, I had my own experiences of poverty and marginalization. I grew up on a heavily-mortgaged farm stricken by drought and pestilence – benefiting as it were on the unceded sovereign land of the Gamilaraay peoples. It was on this land, in a tightly squeezed circle of family and faith, that I formed my identity, and dreamed my future. Social work, helping others, far-flung places, brown people who needed me – this is how I imagined my future.

I have done a lot of my own work since those teenage years; I now can see it was me who was in need. In this in-between time and space, I have acquired new frameworks and skills, have had (some) questions answered and have been welcomed by many amazing people across our globe - most often, and very generously, by peoples of the South Pacific.

In the Blue Pacific lies the island nations of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. From my first visit in 1992, to see my (now) husband - an Australian laboratory scientist at a Hospital - the people of Solomon Islands hooked my heart. For the last decade my family and I have also been privileged to live and work in neighbouring Papua New Guinea. It has been in Papua New Guinea that I have seen the power of story explicate, extract, and amplify formal research findings, including in my own PhD research with women exploring HIV prevention options (Redman-MacLaren, 2020). My concern with the scientific space, what I have observed happening when we use traditional scientific methods, is that we risk objectifying people. We re/present important, logically generated research findings about people, but presenting these findings in papers, conferences and policy forums – devoid of the complex human layers of the story – means we are not sufficiently influencing the policy makers and health service providers who have the potential to enact positive change. So, I am now exploring different ways of sharing research, including through poetry.

“Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lourde, 1984, p. 38). Winterson (1995), taking it one step further, states, “it is the poet who goes further than any human scientist” (p. 115). The use of story, created from my own response to another’s story, clarifies and magnifies the human experience to others (Hirshfield, 1997). The use of poetry in research is not an attempt to speak on behalf of others but provides an opportunity for the listener to bear witness to the story (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016, p. xiii).

So instead of, or at the very least alongside of, presenting traditional research data about people living with HIV in Papua New Guinea, I have experimented with poetic storying, such as sharing poems about a person living with HIV. Below is an excerpt of one such poem.

Ward 4B

From far away

I watch you breathe

Privileged to visit

Offering nothing,

What can I bring?

My sympathy, empathy

Values, plans . . .

None of these count today

Only your breath, as you reach inside

One more gasp

Sustains your life,

For what is left of it.

Like your body, your bed

Has no flesh beside it

To comfort, to hold you

Left beside the road,

Good Samaritan called St John

You are now safe inside.

Women in white

Pray and sing

For God and Humanity.

You watch (and breath)

And wait (and breath)
You squeeze a warm hand (and breath).
When the angels return
Sustained by lunch
Your body is covered in white too
But you are no longer there.

(Originally published in Redman-MacLaren, 2020, p. 4)

Using poetry as a story-based approach for transformation has elicited tears, silence, requests for copies of poems and maybe more importantly, storying back – the sharing of story in response to the poems. It has also started conversations about what action needs to happen next. Poetry connects us as humans and brings insights not available through a logical examination of empirical data. By evoking a response from the feeling part of the brain, including feelings of generosity and empathy, we can encourage action (Zak et al., 2007). It is because of these responses to my poetry work in PNG, I have now expanded my use of poetry as story with colleagues in Solomon Islands.

More than a decade ago, I was part of a team responding to an invitation to support research capacity strengthening activities with local community members, health workers and nurse educators based in and around a church-run hospital in the region of East Kwaio, on the island of Malaita, Solomon Islands (MacLaren, et al., 2015). Leaders in Kwaio wanted to move from being the researched to being the researcher (Redman-MacLaren, et.al., 2010). Now new ways of understanding and improving health of people in Kwaio are being enacted through the recently established Baru Conservation Alliance. Baru leaders work with tribal leaders living on tribal lands using tribal cosmologies and knowledge. Rather than focusing on health improvements using biomedical models, Baru is starting with their tribal peoples

using tribal stories. An example of such action is the menstrual health and hygiene work being led by Dorothy Esau, a leader in the Baru Secretariat, who is being supported by women leaders in East Kwaio, Solomon Islands and Australia (Esau et al., forthcoming). Dorothy is leading our work using stories – her own story (as shared at a recent conference) (Esau et al., 2021), stories shared by family members, school leaders, school students and health workers. As the move from researched to co-researcher to lead researcher occurs for Dorothy and colleagues in Solomon Islands, Kwaio epistemology is at the forefront and global health research models are now being seen as less helpful. My own role in this team has also shifted – from lead researcher to co-researcher and storyteller. One way I am expressing my support role is through the writing of stories through poems. Below I represent stories told by schoolgirls to Dorothy and others.

I.

I, young girl, sit at the mercy

Of a moon-guided current

Discarded fashion stems

A scarlet stream.

I rise, stay small

Hiding in full view, in

A room with no walls

Flying curtains for doors.

Nowhere to wash my tide

I wait for the moon to roost

With the darkness I move

To a cleansing source.

*Curious cousins giggle
While Shame clutches my throat
And constricts all, but
The unwelcome flow.*

II.

*I, young student, sit on my bag
Protect the chair
From being stained
Just. don't. move.*

*Some girls go home
Backache, no cloths, no games
Uncomfortable, dizzy
Unnoticed.*

*The toilet has no water
It is blocked
Try the teachers'
Prefer the bush.*

*Boys tease
Evil spirits, peep
Holes in the wall
Afraid of ghosts, no lock.*

Girls' issues tabutabu

Male teachers' shame

Mocked by students

Awkward, I go home.

III.

I, mother bisi,*

Once held you in

A week of repose, shelter

Chatter and ancestral laughter.

Now I am empty

My benches bare

You too alone

Surrounded by prayer.

My daughter, the mouth of this river

Will one day gush new life

The stain you now fear

Is your future power.

March to moon's pulse

With sisters, mothers

Aunts, cousins, and prevail

As we always have.

**a bisi is a menstrual hut where women stay when menstruating*

Instead of defending my power-full researcher position, manifest through my privilege and specialist research knowledge, I now seek to follow a different, story-filled tide – I now change the direction of my canoe, listen, and respond. In this way, I, with Dutta (2020), “...theorize poetry as a decolonial enactment: a form of witnessing that resists a disciplining colonial gaze and creates possibilities for decolonial onto-epistemic rupture/reorientation; in doing so, allowing for radical relationality and reciprocal knowing” (p.1).

The following discussion, ventures to deeper exploration of the potential of story-based approaches to enact decoloniality and critical methodology and to realise transformation. Relationality and Indigenous epistemology are posited first as underpinning ways of knowing which explain the unfolding of such transformation.

Creating New Stories: Discussion

Relationality and Indigenous Epistemologies

Our story practices expose and nurture relationality – this includes relationality between teachers and students, relationality between history and future, relationality between giver and receiver, and relationality between fact and feeling. Stories can contain ambiguity and help us to sit with the unknown and with changeability. In the telling of a story, the story can change, as story is dynamic and lived. Relational epistemology is wholistic, acknowledges connectivity between elements, and accepts the messiness of incomparable components sitting alongside each other. Huffman (2018) explains that relational epistemology attends to the interactive situated-ness of knowing by highlighting that knowing is done in connection to other people, involves relationship with non-human aspects, is many parted, and entails

deep interconnectedness (p. 26). In our experience, story is capable of encompassing and fostering knowledge relationally, evident in our examples above of stories interweaving to create new stories.

Yet our experiences in professional spaces reveal that there is often un-readiness to listen to and value the relationality offered by story. Colleagues may be too busy with getting tasks done to be interested in critically reflecting on teaching practice or funders simply seek clear indicators and concrete outputs. In these spaces, the positivist pursuit of objective and empirically factual knowledge can work to diminish story; there can be an uneasiness sitting in the unknown, in the absence of scientific hypothesis. Story, and the many layers involved in processing stories, can be counter cultural within Western professional contexts (Dutta 2020) and in the context of neo-liberal public policy (Mountz et al., 2015; Rustin, 2016; Martin-Sardesai, Guthrie & Parker, 2020). The potential impact is that we “end up straining our knowledge for only those pieces that fit the dominating perspectives” (Hart, 2010, p. 11). We need an epistemology that is more than logic (Lim, 2015) if our practice is to be transformative. To think and do decolonially, Mignolo (2011) argues, we become epistemically disobedient as we dwell and think “in the borders of local histories confronting global designs” (p. 277).

Indigenous epistemologies centre story and embrace relationality. Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems exist in relationship with the natural environment and a spiritual dimension (Durie, 2004; Hart, 2010). *Vanua*, for example, the word for both land and people, has been developed by *iTaukei* Indigenous Fijian scholars as epistemology and methodology (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). Indigenous languages of the Pacific are laden with metaphor and story (Helu, 1999), and repositories of knowledge are found in songs, dance, chants, and story and may not be in the written form (Mafile’o, et al., 2019). Aligning with Pacific-Indigenous epistemology, Mila’s (2017) Mana Moana approach draws from “Oceania’s library” in the

use of words, proverbs, images, metaphors and stories sourced within Pacific-Indigenous languages, cultures and contexts. *Tok stori* is identified as Melanesian story exchange practice, whereby “relationality, information and time come together to form a distinct way of being” (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). *Talanoa*, a shared practice amongst a number of Polynesian languages is described as relationally mindful critical oratory (Tecun, Hafoka, ‘Ulu‘ave, & ‘Ulu‘ave-Hafoka, 2018), and has been widely used amongst Pacific-Indigenous scholars as a research data collection method (Fa’avae, Jones, & Manu’atu, 2016; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006; Vaka et al., 2016). Some have gone further to suggest that *talanoa*, beyond a data collection method, also constitutes a methodological framework (Tunufa’i, 2016). For the Pacific diaspora, where realities are shaped by distance from lands, water, culture, and, increasingly, from Indigenous languages, story can become a pivotal access point for sense-making and for meaningfully re-connecting, reclaiming and revitalising indigeneity (Smith, 2012). In this way, stories are a way to operate in the epistemic borderlands to enact decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011).

Decoloniality Enacted Through Story

Layers of transformation through story can be understood using the schema (adopted from action research) of first person (ourselves), second person (us together) and third person inquiry (many others possibly at a distance - perhaps as you are from us, as you read this article) (Chandler & Torbert, 2003). If we are to authentically approach a relational epistemology, we need to start with ourselves as individuals - examining and owning our story. When we start with our own critical reflections it is “potentially empowering and transformative; offering embodied methods that help others to generate their own critical reflexive processes of knowing self in relation to cultural context and experience” (Alexander 2011, p.105).

Critical reflection is a deliberate process that moves story from being a nostalgic memory to a learning moment. As evidenced in our stories above, critical reflection examines the relationship between personal discourses and professional lives (Norton, 2017). Critical reflection encompasses critical reflection-on-action (after the event) and critical reflection-in-action ('thinking on your feet' during the event) (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Critical reflection generates knowledge by reflecting on a crucial incident and generalising the new knowledge to wider practice (Fook, 1999). As situated speakers (Richardson, 2000), we have critically reflected upon our stories as a decolonizing pathway to open up discussion about oppressive structures and systems. We have done this work with the hope of creating "new and transformative narratives that focus on equality, social justice and inclusiveness" (Ryan, 2018, p. 134). The process of reflecting and creating our story, is then witnessed into potency through the telling.

As we shared our stories, we learnt things we had not known about each other. Having worked together more than ten years on multiple research and writing projects, it was not until we engaged in the ceremony of story (Wilson, 2008) that we bravely walked in deeper, then climbed out to explore borderlands of our known selves, responding as we went to each other's story. Through this generous sharing and receiving, we were changed. The stories themselves revealed voids that were in fact, possible sites of transformation. Creating communities of inquiry where we willingly explore the possible incongruities between what we say and what we do is critical (Trullen & Torbet, 2018). Reality is a process of relationship, and this reality can only be known in relationship with other (Wilson, 2008).

Drawing on the seminal frameworks of Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, we understood our stories in a context, our stories as ceremony (Wilson, 2008). We set the stage (or the stage was set for us) through the decade prior to this meeting. We had tentatively started our sharing through email and online meetings, requisite given we all live on different

lands connected by the moana/Oceania. Once we had gifted a space for the sharing of story, we started weaving, borrowing from each other's wisdom to move forward. For example, in discussing students' *ta tatau* (Samoa) / *bua* (Papua New Guinea) (tattoo), we were reminded of our own belonging through the expression of symbols. Powerfully connecting us together in the moment, our stories held transformative potential (Kovach, 2018). The critical importance of witnessing the unfolding story, the careful holding of space for the storyteller and the respect for the story became evident in this ceremony.

Accountability to each other is essential for decoloniality. Approaches that centralize Indigenous ways of being require relational accountability - our story is valuable when we are accountable to each other (Wilson, 2008). "Cultural competence models emphasize knowledge acquisition while cultural humility emphasizes the need for accountability, not only on an individual level, but also on an institutional level." (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015 p.172). An example of collective accountability is our weaving of writing into this transformation story. As demonstrated by Clare's story, we can simultaneously be teachers and learners. This concept of reciprocal learning has also been demonstrated in work teams who embed cultural foundations, rules, and expectations in Indigenous Australian settings (McPhail-Bell et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2019).

In the midst of our shared storytelling, we attempted *allyship*, or perhaps more accurately, *accomplice* work (Indigenous Action Media, 2014). The experience and role of non-Indigenous researchers seeking to participate in transformational relationships, structures and systems has been described as the anti-colonial concept of *ally* (Kowal, 2015; Land, 2015; Max, 2005; Smith, Puckett, & Simon, 2015; Snow, 2018). Fredericks and others have more recently critiqued the use of the term *ally*, the next generation concept of *accomplice* is gaining traction (Fredericks, 2019; Indigenous Action Media, 2014; Powell & Kelly, 2017). The work of accomplice, as we experienced in this story-focused work, was to own the story,

own the reaction and not keeping the dirt that has been swept under the mat. “In these ways, one can see overlapping values of interconnectedness, justice-seeking, truth-telling, resistance, and survival in both testimonios and other Indigenous storytelling practices” (Caxaj, 2015 p.3).

Through story we have collectively explored connections and interfaces between individuals and society, demonstrating important work of critical approaches. Including a critical examination of social, cultural, and economic structures provides opportunity for decoloniality. Decoloniality relies upon a critical approach to “expose sociocultural and political processes that reinforce embedded power asymmetries” (Azzopardi & McNeill 2016, p. 292). It is in the owning and sharing of our stories that, together, we enact decoloniality theory and practice, and create new stories of transformation.

Storying in the borderlands

We seek to transform

Self, each other

The space we share.

Shrinking some notions

Swelling more

Pacific Blue holds us

Together.

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