



Decolonising through ReCountrying in teacher education

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All we are is a story. A good story is one of connection and obligation. Damu Paul Gordon, Senior Custodian, Karulkiyalu Country (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022).

We (spilly and benny) yarn and write together, intertwined in each other's stories, to share a story with you. This is a learning story for all people (including ourselves), though in this case particularly for teachers and the children to whom they are obligated. This story is about more deeply understanding 'self' as a socialised, cultural being, which is our interpretation of decolonisation as a transformative process, or 'derepression' as we would prefer to call it, following Fromm (1962), through simultaneously engaging new or different relational ways of knowing, being and doing in Country. Let's call this ReCountrying.

We are two cultural men who have undertaken our deepest (cultural) learning over the past decade with Damu Paul Gordon, in Karulkiyalu Country south of Brewarrina, NSW. We honour Damu Paul and Karulkiyalu Country for generously sharing this knowledge. We have both also done well though Western academia, and now, supported by Damu Paul and led by our Old Ancestors, work to bring aspects of this old cultural knowledge (the lore¹) of Karulkiyalu

Country into teacher education through Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy. As Noongar mother and daughter, Jill and Gladys Milroy point out, it is every child's birthright to grow up knowing their story of connectedness and obligation to their place, their right story (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). The 'right story' grows us into relational reciprocity with our place and all her beings, with Country² and Earthkin³, for social and ecological balance and wellness.

In her beautifully crafted book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) points out that *Wiingaashk*, or Sweetgrass, was the very first to grow on the Earth, arriving in the hand of Skywoman falling, a central actor in the Potawatomi Creation Story, along with Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon, Goose, Turtle and Muskrat. Sweetgrass is thus an important ceremonial plant and braiding Sweetgrass is working with the 'flowing hair of Mother Earth showing her our loving attention, our care for her beauty and wellbeing, in gratitude for all she has given us' (p. 5). Kimmerer, who has taught and researched in several universities, points out Sweetgrass belongs to herself and cannot be given except by a few for ceremonial purposes through ceremonial protocols. However, as teachers and educators we can braid the three strands of 'the flowing hair of Mother Earth' through our work, by including Indigenous knowledge, Western scientific and intellectual knowledge, and the knowledge held by Earthkin themselves. In our understanding from Karulkiyalu Country this latter strand is their

¹ The word 'Lore' comes from 'folklore', old tales and stories about fairies, dragons, goblins, elves etc. that people once believed as real but in recent times have been assigned to the category of 'fiction'. For us the Lore is real. It is truth. Country holds Lore. Ancestral storylines about how Country was originally created are Lore, as are the stories for all Earthkin (animals, plants, geographical, geological, cosmological features etc.). Earthkin hold their own Lore, which is their story of how they came to be, how they are connected with other Earthkin, who they are obligated to and who is obligated to them. Personal (Human)

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enactment of the Lore is though one's own story of connection and obligation – reciprocity with Country. In this way the Lore structures a multi-species kinship system, that is every child's birthright, their 'right story'.

² Country is a landscape 'large enough to support a group of people and small enough to be intimately known in every detail' (Rose, 2011, p. 17). It incorporates everything within, upon, and above the ground, including rocks, plants, waterways and other geographical features, animals, fire, weather, seasons and the cosmos, our Earthkin.

³ To designate non-human beings in Country some authors use 'other-than-human' or 'more-than-human'. Following Plumwood (2003) who used the term 'Earth-others' our preference is Earthkin, better representing our 'oneness' and connectedness.

(Earthkin's) lore. For example, if I want to know deeply about Kangaroos, by entering reciprocity with them, I can listen to and learn from Indigenous stories about kangaroos. They will provide knowledge and ethics from which I can learn how to live well. I can also seek scientific knowledge about Kangaroos. Yet these stories and this knowledge represent the first (most superficial) layers of Kangaroo lore. To learn the whole body of Kangaroo lore I must spend much time through many years with Kangaroos, over time more deeply entering relational reciprocity and learning directly from them. We have been well taught by Damu Paul and through our practice have directly experienced knowledge-sharing with various trees, animals, places and spirits. McKnight (2016, p. 12) points out this understanding also works to disrupt colonial thinking in education. Here he draws on Gotha (cited in Christie, 2010, p. 11) who says of children listening to such stories shared within a classroom:

They are not learning the true body of knowledge. To start the journey of learning the whole story or body of knowledge, the learning has to occur with and on Country so the knowledge can be observed, felt and understood on a spiritual level of connectedness.

Whilst we know the truth of this through our own direct experiences and learnings from a variety of Earthkin in Country, this is far from a straightforward undertaking in mainstream education. Sepie (2017) traces, through Western history, the progressive elevation of 'reason and rationality' to become the almost exclusively dominant form of knowing in contemporary Western societies and education institutions. This epistemic lens has led to stories and evidence of knowledge sharing and communication between Humans and Earthkin being relegated to the category of 'myth' which stands in opposition to 'fact' in the Cartesian binary of western thinking (Sepie, 2017). It works to deny the animacy, intelligence and communicability of Earthkin to hold and share their own knowledge, their lore. This despite there being a massive archive of anthropological evidence in the global Academy, collected over the previous few hundred years, documenting direct knowledge sharing and communication between Indigenous people and Earthkin (Sepie, 2017). Wall Kimmerer (2013) also shares many such stories of Human-Earthkin communication and knowledge-sharing, as do others (Abram, 2017; Arnold et al., 2021; Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Callaghan & Gordon, 2022; Gagliano, 2018; McKnight, 2016; Milroy & Milroy, 2008). Of this situation McKnight (2015, p. 278) writes:

Western notions of dualism place culture/nature in a binary relationship to manoeuvre Mother Earth

(Country) as subordinate to Western male culture, logic and reasoning.

Here western male power determines what counts as knowledge, and what does not through constructing binaries of unequal relations – 'male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, sun/moon, and European/Aboriginal' (McKnight, 2015, p. 278). This narrow array of prioritised ways of knowing, being and doing has worked its way into contemporary education. On such a basis we have previously critiqued contemporary schooling as embodying and enacting 'unaware anthropocentrism, rampant individualism and unfettered capitalism' (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). In proposing a way forward here, we intentionally avoid entering another dialectic of right/wrong, and simply point out that while there are many beneficial aspects of contemporary schooling (of which we are both successful products) it works to prioritise a far too-narrow set of ways of knowing, being and doing, and requires serious rebalancing. With permission provided by Damu Paul, we offer the ancient Googar Story which outlines the critical importance to the wellbeing of Country and Earthkin (including Humans), of ongoing balance between a full array of diverse ways of knowing, being and doing - sensory, kinesthetic, intuitive, spiritual, affective (e.g. love, empathy, curiosity, motivation etc.), inter-generational as well as rational, analytical, conceptual. (see Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020, p. 35–6).

'Derepression' – a decolonising process

In 1962 Erich Fromm drew together, under the banner of 'radical humanism' the sociology of Marx and psychoanalysis of Freud to construct a framework for explaining the dynamic interplay between culture (society) and individual needs and drives (self). Central to this framework is 'social character' which Fromm (1962, p. 71) identified as:

The nucleus of character which is shared by most members of the same culture, in contradistinction to the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other.

Social character is constructed and transmitted through societal structures, institutions and conditions such as political and geographical factors, cultural traditions, population size, modes of production and technology, educational processes etc. It manifests as clear and particular, patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding and behaving among individuals within a culture, and primarily operates subconsciously (habitually). The purpose of social character is to maintain order and harmony within any society by

enabling perceptions, thinking and behaviours that conform to social norms and patterns, without the need for conscious decision-making. This is mediated through a ‘socially conditioned filter’ that determines what we perceive and what we don’t, what’s real and what’s not, and how we think and respond (and how we don’t). The ‘socially conditioned filter’, which holds a strong linguistic component, ensures that only those experiences and perceptions that conform to society’s ‘categorical system’ are allowed into awareness.

Fromm (1962) proposed that whilst social character, operating largely through a socially conditioned filter is clearly enabling for order and harmony, it is equally limiting or ‘repressing’. As a radical humanist Fromm saw social character as a source of alienation from the authentic ‘self’ and offered a process for ‘waking-up’ to this false self. ‘Derepression’ is the process of opening-up to a broader, deeper reality, more authentic and profound than western, rational, dualistic knowing (Fromm, 1962). It is the process of consciously debunking social character, leading to a deeper understanding of our socialised, cultural selves, and thus opening the possibility for transformation and emancipation.

In contrast to such opportunities for transformation or emancipation, colonisation can be seen as orchestrated effort to embed, impose and / or enforce a different set of social norms and institutions for the purpose of control. Effective colonisation, over time will therefore lead to broadscale shifts in the social character of the original inhabitants of a place, enhancing socio-political control through conformity and / or fear. This idea, that colonisation is about ‘replacing’ the socio-political institutions that enable and maintain social character is reinforced in Sepie’s (2017, p. 11) exposition of colonisation where she writes;

Colonialism and globalization are the most recent incarnations of focused colonization processes, with the goal of ‘westernizing’ through instilling replacement institutions (both social and economic), whilst displacing people from place in systematic ways.

Massey (2017) identifies the westernizing imperative that arrived with the British in 1788 as the Eurocentric, rational, ‘mechanical mind’ through which nature was reconstructed as passive and inanimate, to be controlled and manipulated as commodity and resource, clearly also reifying anthropocentrism. This was accompanied by an immutable belief in the superiority of all things European (Pascoe, 2018) and an emerging capitalist impulse (Massey, 2017). Following far more eminent scholars (Apple, 2000, 2011; Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Foucault, 1988, 2002, 2005), we accept that mass schooling systems, such as our contemporary Australian education system, have historically worked to

primarily reflect and reinforce broader societal norms and belief systems. As previously mentioned we have critiqued contemporary Australian schooling for the reification of rationalism, anthropocentrism, capitalism and individualism, at the expense of other ways of knowing, being and doing (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; Wilson, 2021).

If ‘derepression’ is a process for coming to understand the ways we are socialised / colonised, and how this limits or represses us, what can it look like in teacher education, and what can it open us up to?

ReCountrying – ‘Relating with Country’ practice for ‘Country as Teacher’ experiences and learnings

In a previous publication we shared the Jumbal Story which is a local version, of universal Indigenous knowledge, that we Humans are composed of earth and water, as are all living beings (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). For many decades science has also held evidence to support this in a physical, biochemical sense (Suzuki, 1997). This ancient and literal knowing that we all come from Mother Earth, *Gunni Thakun*, in the Ngemba language of Karulkiyalu Country, is referenced by Old Indigenous Lore men and women through the oft quoted words, ‘I am Country. Country is me.’ Yet our Old People are not speaking only in a physical sense here. This knowing includes that wherever there is matter there is spirit, a difficult prospect for scientists to grasp when they are ‘so fully brainwashed by Cartesian dualism’ (Wall Kimmerer, 2013, p. 123). Thousands of generations of Indigenous children grew up knowing they are the same as all Beings, made of the same stuff, the same matter and spirit, flagging a Country-centric ontology of ‘Oneness’ and ethic of ‘relational reciprocity’ (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Callaghan & Gordon, 2022; Wall Kimmerer, 2013).

For tens of thousands of years prior to the arrival of the British in 1788 children undertook much of their learning directly with Earthkin, in-Country, often facilitated by grandparents. This required, through repeated practice, children’s cultivation of, stillness, sensory acuity, feeling and intuition, enabling relational reciprocity with Country and Earthkin. Following Hughes and Barlo (2021) we call this practice ‘Relating with Country’. This Country-centric pedagogy enabled an ever expanding and deepening connectedness and understanding through locally-based, cross-species kinship systems (Rose, 2011). The understandings and connections forged through this Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy became obligations once children passed through ceremonial rites-of-passage into adulthood (Gordon, 2021).

In 2021 we initiated a small research project focusing on reinvigorating Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy in schools, with a long-term goal of rebalancing school-based education in Australia, enabling all children to attain their birthright, their right story. Recognising the central role of teachers in this endeavour, and the nature of their professional socialisation into particular (limited) practices and ways of knowing, being and doing, we quickly realised the critical need for teachers to firstly undertake Relating with Country practice.

We have undertaken two iterations of Country as Teacher (CaT) research through the Affiliated Schools Research Program, a partnership between ACT Education Directorate and the Faculty of Education, University of Canberra. The first formative project (CaT1) ran from 2021 to 2022 and involved twenty-six teachers from four ACT schools, from primary school to secondary college. The second exploratory iteration (CaT2) is currently running from 2023 to 2024 involving over one hundred teachers in six ACT schools from preschool to high school. Both projects have included three research phases each lasting one semester. In Phase 1 participating teachers cultivated their Relating with Country practice through weekly sessions in-Country, followed by reflective journaling and yarning. In Phase 2 teachers collaboratively co-designed CaT units of work for their students. Phase 3 focused on implementing and evaluating these units of work.

Our formative research, CaT1 (Spillman et al., 2022, 2023) demonstrated that nearly all participants encountered various challenges when first beginning their Relating with Country practice. Some became hypersensitive to the distractions and disruptions of human activity in urban life, struggling to find a quiet enough place to be slow and still. Many battled to ‘find’ or ‘make the time’ in fast-paced busy lives, with some participants recognising for the first time just how ‘task focused’ they were, sometimes highlighted by their mental, emotional and physical discomfort when attempting to slow during Relating with Country practice. Many became aware of their constant flow of thoughts, and the difficulty they experienced ‘getting out of my head’. Early analysis from the CaT2 project clearly identifies similar patterns. In a conceptual way, these are the first layer of Country as Teacher experiences and learnings. It was only because participants went into Country to commence Relating with Country practice that they became aware of these aspects of their socialised, cultural selves, these patterns and habits. Here Country as Teacher enabled an awakening or ‘waking-up’ as Fromm (1962) put it, and thus began to operate as a process for ‘derepression’.

For the majority of participants, after several Relating with Country sessions, there was a transition into different ways of relating and knowing, being and doing, variously

described as ‘letting go’, being able to ‘breathe’, ‘returning to my littleness’, gaining ‘emotional balm’ and ‘heart stuff’, and ‘being palpably held by the earth’. Several participants reported improvements in their sense of wellness and feelings of being relationally more capable, personally and professionally. Often this shift into different ways of relating and knowing, being and doing was accompanied by enhanced sensory experiences. Many participants began noticing more about the places they visited. This cultivation of the art-of-noticing by engaging our senses through slowing, stilling, looking, listening, feeling and intuiting, engenders wonder, awe and gratitude, offering the doorway into relational reciprocity with Country (Abram, 2017; Wall Kimmerer, 2013).

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Declarations

Ethical approval The research referred to in this piece was undertaken with approval from the University of Canberra Human Ethics committee, approval number 11892.

Conflict of interest The Authors declare no conflict of interest in this research.

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