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Storying Ways to Reflect on Power, Contestation, and Yarning Research Method Application

Cammi Murrup-Stewart Dr
Monash University, cammi.murrup-stewart@monash.edu

Petah Atkinson
Monash University, petah.atkinson@monash.edu

Karen Adams Professor
Monash University, karen.adams@monash.edu

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Abstract

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Keywords

Indigenous, settler-colonialism, Yarning, storying, Indigenous research methods

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Storying Ways to Reflect on Power, Contestation, and Yarning Research Method Application

Cammi Murrup-Stewart¹, Petah Atkinson², and Karen Adams²

¹Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health, School of Psychological Science,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

²Gukwonderuk Indigenous Health Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Internationally within academia settler-colonial processes occur in various ways alongside a growth in the use of research methods conceived with Indigenous knowledges. However, most research environments and practices are built upon and privilege dominant non-Indigenous settler-colonial knowledge systems. It is within this power imbalance and contested space that Yarning research method is being applied and interpreted. Underpinned by an Indigenous Research Paradigm, we employed storying ways to examine researcher experiences of settler-colonialism and the Yarning research method. The story outlines challenges and pitfalls that researchers can fall into and critically examines how researchers can fail to recognise the depth of Indigenous knowledge embedded within the practice. This story is gifted by creating an imagined narrative interview with a character called Settler-Colonisation, whereby we identify a litany of settler-colonial processes impacting Yarning research. Scrutinising the epistemological and methodological practices and processes enacted in academia is imperative for better-informed application of Indigenous research methods and create sustainable research more generally.

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Introduction

The growing application of research methods inclusive of Indigenous knowledges can challenge academies largely informed by dominant settler-colonial ideologies. Settler-colonisation is “a distinct method of colonising involving the creation and consumption of a whole array of spaces by settler collectives that claim and transform places through the exercise of their sovereign capacity” (Barker, 2012, p. 1) and are essentially forms of racism (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The intent is to eliminate native peoples and their ways of knowing, being and doing via processes, such as, genocide and assimilation and replace this with a settler-colonial society (Wolfe, 2006). Internationally, settler-colonialism plays out within the academic context in various ways dependent on diverse cultural, historical, social, political, and economic determinants (Smith, 2012). However, locating settler-colonialism can be challenging as it is often conceptual, nuanced or hidden (Barker, 2012) and can often be “difficult to identify, track and dismantle” (Preston, 2013, p. 43). This paper seeks to expand understanding of settler-colonialism’s role in relation to a research method conceived through Indigenous knowledge called Yarning.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across the world are commonly contending with the complexity of how to include and understand the role of Indigenous knowledges

within settler-colonial academia (Morgensen, 2012; Nakata, 2002; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012). Paramount to this are development of methodological underpinnings by Indigenous academics to inform this, such as: relationality, respect and reciprocity (Moreton-Robinson, 2017; Wilson, 2001, 2008); researcher reflexivity (Fredericks et al., 2019; Martin & Mirraabooa, 2003); holistic and interconnected understandings of the way the world functions (Gee et al., 2014; Martin, 2008) and resistance and political integrity (Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012). However, inclusion of these methodological concepts is by no means a straightforward matter particularly considering the ways in which academia interacts with Indigenous knowledge systems. Martin Nakata (2002) offers the “cultural interface” to consider these “different conceptualisation[s] of the cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings of a knowledge system” (Nakata, 2006, p. 272):

Differences at epistemological and ontological levels mean that, in the academy, it is not possible to bring in Indigenous Knowledge and plonk it in the curriculum unproblematically as if it is another data set for Western knowledge to discipline and test. Indigenous Knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems work off different theories of knowledge that frame, “who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence, and related issues. (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001, p. 57; cited in Nakata, 2007b, pp. 188-189)

Within academia, there is a changing expansion of Indigenous research methodologies and methods being applied in a variety of ways. However, Nakata’s cultural interface identifies an ongoing tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research practices situated within such settler-colonial dominated environments where power imbalances are at play (Nakata, 2007a). Indeed, there is significant contention surrounding Indigenous knowledges that relate to dominant cultures, intellectual property rights and cultural appropriation. Hence, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has called for:

The safeguarding of intangible heritage, understood as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage...including in addition to traditional craftsmanship the domains of “Oral traditions and expressions,” which cover a large variety of forms that transmit knowledge, values and collective memory and play an essential role in cultural vitality. (Nakashima, 2010, p. 9)

The growth of research methods conceived with Indigenous knowledge, such as Yarning method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), has been touted as a win for Indigenous people (Leeson et al., 2016) with “an assumption that anyone can use it” (Atkinson et al., 2021, p. 8). However, most research environments and practices are built upon settler-colonial knowledge systems, privileging non-Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing and some have contended that these are unsustainable, lacking ability to connect and respond to localised socially and ecologically regenerative processes (Paradies, 2020). It is within this contested space that Yarning research method is being applied and understood and this is generating both positive research outcomes alongside problematic concerns. There is potential that without

meaningful consideration of epistemology, ontology, and axiology in the decision to engage with Yarning method in research spaces the application of the method may be inappropriate, misguided or unethical. As such, the present article reflects on the use of the Yarning research method through the perspective and experiences of Indigenous academics who have applied the method.

What is Yarning Method?

Conceived with Aboriginal knowledge of communication (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) the research method Yarning is proliferating Indigenous research in Australia. Yarning typically has a specific purpose and is founded on the principles of relationality and connection; a way of facilitating Aboriginal ways of thinking, being and knowledge sharing (Fredericks et al., 2011; Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Smith, 2012). Descriptions of the Yarning frame it as a data collection method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010); however, it can be applied in other ways, such as, to negotiate research plans (Walker et al., 2014) and reflect on data (Adams & Faulkhead, 2012).

Yarning as a research method holds its foundations in Yarning as a cultural practice. As a cultural practice, Yarning is a communication style involving knowledge sharing and meaning making predicated on experience with the process, existing relationships and shared knowledge and memories (Atkinson et al., 2021; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Walker et al., 2014). Therefore, as with Yarning as cultural practice, within research Yarning the qualities of the relationality present between the research and intended research participants is imperative. If shared explicit and tacit knowledge and memories gained from everyday localised Aboriginal normativity (Simpson, 2017) are not present, the fundamental elements for how Aboriginal people practice Yarning with each other are absent (Atkinson et al., 2021).

When looking specifically at Yarning as a method, over the last decade there has been a growing understanding and conceptualisation of the method and its nuances (Atkinson et al., 2021; Shay, 2021). Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) article is most often cited as the seminal work and includes a brief description of possible different types and/or stages of Yarning as a research process (although these aren't always used linearly). These include (1) Social Yarning: "Conversation that takes place before the research or topic Yarn is informal and often unstructured, follows a meandering course that is guided by the topic that both people choose to introduce into the discussion" (2010, p. 16); (2) Research Topic Yarning: "takes place in a un or semi structured research interview. The sole purpose is to gather information through participants' stories that are related to the research topic... [it is] also purposeful with a defined beginning and end" (2010, p. 16); (3) Collaborative Yarning: "Yarn that occurs between two or more people here they are actively engaged in sharing information about a research project and or a discussion about ideas" (2010, p.16); and (4) Therapeutic Yarning: "here the participant in telling their story discloses information that is traumatic or intensely personal and emotional. The researcher switches from the research topic to the role of a listener" (2010, p. 16). Walker (2014) add two additional "types"; Family Yarning: representing the personal connection and relationships of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Cross-cultural Yarning: "the indigenous researcher or participant adaptive to Westernized rules and protocols" (2013, pp. 1222-1223). Geia et al. (2013) further describe some practical steps of engagement using the Yarning approach. These include preparing and relationship building, engaging in dialogue using a "reciprocal respectful attitude" (2007, p. 16), telling your (researcher) story, and listening to their (participant) story.

Some literature articulate application of Yarning practices in preliminary research work to identify research aims (Gibson, 2020; Reilly & Rees, 2018; Walker, 2014) and some describe

Yarning data collection methods in various ways, for instance, from individuals as interviews or Yarns and, from groups, focus groups or Yarning Circles (Bovill et al., 2019; Chapman, 2014; Dean, 2010; Gibson, 2020; Meiklejohn et al., 2019). Some simply express that they used Yarning, with complete lack of description regarding the exact processes (Atkinson et al., 2021). Data collected through Yarning has been variously audio recorded and transcribed, collected through note taking, observation, story boards and likely more (Atkinson et al., 2021). However, as Atkinson et al. (2021) argue, “what should concern the research community is when published studies suggest the use of Yarning methods but upon closer inspection, they have used focus groups and face-to-face interviews” (p. 194). Despite the lack of clear guidelines, the method is generally theorised to create a more informal and trusting research environment that builds relationship between researchers and participants by respecting Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010).

Researchers frequently state that use of Yarning method brings authenticity and improved cultural safety to their research (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Dean, 2010; Leeson et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2014). Cheree Dean (2010) argues that the use of Yarning within research processes induces standards for a more appropriate application of Indigenous research, thereby benefiting Indigenous peoples and strengthening an Indigenous Research Paradigm:

When Yarning is utilised during research it reflects four aspects of the Indigenous paradigm: knowledge systems, ways of doing, perspectives, and participation in research. Yarning demonstrates the diversity of Aboriginal knowledge systems, and its flexibility allows this diversity to be catered for and respected within the research arena. (Dean, 2010, p. 10)

However, a deeper critical reflection of the processes involved in how this has been achieved is often lacking (Atkinson et al., 2021; Hughes & Barlo, 2021) and there has been little critique of how researchers are applying the Yarning method, particularly within a largely settler-colonial dominant research context. These concerns reflect several critical questions regarding what is happening at the cultural interface with Yarning method and as authors we drew on crucial questions to interrogate:

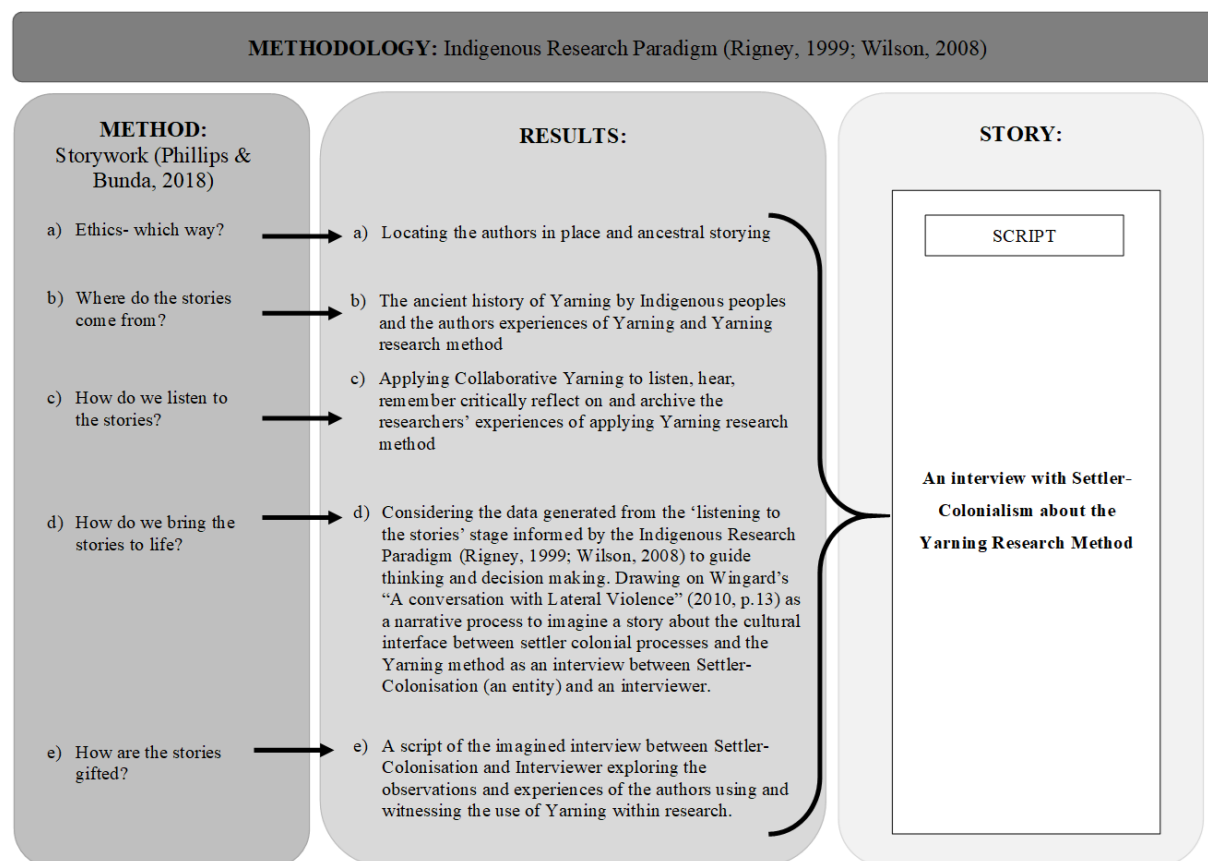
Whose research, is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? (Smith, 2012, p. 10)

Methodology

This paper uses an Indigenous Research Paradigm as its methodology which is inclusive of Aboriginal ways of knowing being and doing based in relationality (Wilson, 2008). It also privileges Indigenous voices through political integrity and resistance aiming to address power imbalances derived from ongoing processes of settler colonialism (Rigney, 1999). This methodology allowed us to critically examine the complex and multi-layered processes and power dynamics occurring within Yarning research practices which consequently inform the quality of the research knowledge production. Therefore, the research question was “how do we as researchers experience Yarning research at the cultural interface and within a largely settler colonial dominant research context?” The authors, in line with an Indigenous Research Paradigm’s principle of relationality provide relational accountability by critically reflecting on our holistic engagement with the Yarning method as: “the researcher much look at an entire system of relationships. To break any piece of the topic away from the rest will destroy the

relationships that the piece holds with the rest of the topic” (Wilson, 2008, p. 120). In doing so, we employed the questions of storywork (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) which provided a method to critically reflect on our engagement with Yarning research and experiences of settler-colonial processes in relation to this in Australia (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Method

Storywork is an age-old tradition of Indigenous peoples globally for sharing information nuanced by localised understanding and relationships (Archibald, 2008). Stories are “vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective. They promote social cohesion by entertaining and fostering good feeling” (Kovach, 2009, p. 95). In research, storying is multifaceted. For instance: it informs the research aim, to create story (Saunders et al., 2015); it can inform the research topic (Saunders et al., 2015) and it can assist with making meaning of data by the researchers taking the time to sit with data and understand it via story (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). In this research we applied the five storying ways method identified by Phillips and Bunda (2018) to examine the cultural interface between Yarning and settler-colonialism. This includes answering questions related to (1) ethics-which way, (2) where the stories come from, (3) how to listen to the stories, (4) how to bring stories to life, and (5) how stories are gifted.

Which Way?

This way involves considering the multiple dimensions of the research positionality and “who we are in storying and how do we engage with others?” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 73).

With shared experience of applying Yarning method each participating academic identified as Aboriginal, with a variety of tribal connections and differing academic backgrounds. Each author has experience using Yarning in Aboriginal life to be differing degrees commensurate to their engagement in their respective communities. The first author is an Aboriginal woman born and raised on Wurundjeri Country, with family connections disrupted through Stolen Generation policies. She is an early career academic who conducted individual Yarns as part of a Ph.D. with young urban Aboriginal people about cultural experiences. The second author is a Yorta woman, with family connections Waywuru people and to Kulin Nations people through Wurundjeri and Taungurung. Similarly, this author had worked with Yarning methods in her Ph.D. research via individual Yarns with urban and rural Aboriginal people about medical care. The third author is a Wiradjuri woman with research experience in Yarning with people about experiences of attending an Aboriginal ceremony, Yarning circles (a form of Yarning that occurs in a group setting (Dunleavy, 2013) about smoke-free workplaces and collaborative Yarning. Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) description of Yarning between researchers about the research project) to analyse data on research partnerships.

Where the Stories Come from?

This way poses thinking about origins of stories (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). The story of Yarning as a communication and knowledge sharing process is an ancient one, as Australian Indigenous people have one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world (Malaspinas et al., 2016). A further part of Yarning's story is that it has also been conceptualised as a research method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). The story presented within this article arises from the authors who have experience in applying the Yarning method in research and are listening to, observing, and critically reflecting on our own experiences and on other researchers' descriptions of employing the method.

Listening to the Stories

This way involves the dynamism of simultaneous multiple telling of stories for listening, hearing, remembering, and archiving (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). To listen to our own (the authors') experiences and critical reflections on applying Yarning research method at the cultural interface we chose to collaboratively Yarn (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) about this. During Collaborative Yarning, the authors shared their reflections experiences of applying Yarning research method and the associated challenges, enabling factors, positive illustrations, reflections on the complexities and how Indigenous people and non-Indigenous researchers describe use of Yarning research method. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the 90-minute Collaborative Yarn took place online, using the Zoom video platform. The primary purpose of the Collaborative Yarn was to collectively reflect on each of our experiences using the Yarning method. This included: reflecting on the Yarning method processes we applied, including whose research was this; whose interests it served; who designed it and carried it out; any benefits and challenges we perceived and experiences of publication and dissemination of findings. The Yarn was transcribed, with each author reviewing the transcript for accuracy and reading this to further reflect on the stories and their meaning.

How to Bring the Stories to Life?

This way focuses on creativity to bring stories to life so they can be felt as a lived experience by audiences (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Within this project the authors considered the data generated from the "listening to the stories" stage drawing on the Indigenous Research

Paradigm (Rigney, 1999; Wilson, 2008) to guide thinking and decision making. Phillips and Bunda explain that “from the stories that we gathered through emergent and immersed listening, we then asked, how do you bring stories to life” (2018, p. 73). As such, further Collaborative Yarning took place to reflect on the transcript and consider how to bring story from the transcript to life. The Collaborative Yarn between authors one and three (author two was unavailable due to family and cultural commitments) identified a key issue. This was that literature on Yarning research method lacked a critique of an element of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2002) we experienced as researchers when applying Yarning research method. The element related to our identification of the often invisibilised and taken for granted settler-colonial processes occurring when yarning research was applied. In keeping with storying ways recommendations, we chose to reveal this element in a creative format. In this way, we drew on Wingard’s “A conversation with Lateral Violence” (2010, p. 13) as a narrative process to express this element as a story. Rather than locating the problem within individual research situations or even researchers, we imagined that settler-colonialism was an entity of itself and a problem in the “realms of culture and history” (Denborough, 2008, p. 43). Therefore, the format of an interview involves an interviewer and an imagined character, Settler-Colonialism, to role-play our understanding of this element (Cronin-Lampe et al., 1999; Wingard & Lester, 2001). To do this, the authors collectively created dialogue in the form of a script. Guided by the principles of an Indigenous Research Paradigm (Wilson, 2008), the dialogue drew on the authors’ relationships and experiences with Yarning method, highlighting issues relating to power that can be hidden to some people and, as such, they can become problematically normalised. The reflections made during our collaborative Yarns also informed the dialogue integrating the authors’ observations, experiences, concerns, and priorities regarding the use of Yarning research method within academia.

How are Stories Gifted?

The final storying way is to gift the story (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Hence the story of critical reflection on the Yarning method observations and experiences has been brought to life in the script of an imagined conversation between an interviewer and Settler-Colonialism. Below we gift this story to readers in the hope that it provides further information and consideration for applying the Yarning method.

Table 1

An Interview with Settler-Colonialism about the Yarning Research Method

Interviewer: Hi everyone, we’re here today to talk with Settler-Colonialism about the Yarning research method. Yarning is an ancient Indigenous way of sharing and learning knowledge, particularly utilised in Australia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. More recently it has been employed as a research method by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.

Interviewer: So, hello Settler-Colonialism, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

Settler-Colonialism: Look, I don’t really like to draw attention to myself, it’s better if people don’t know I exist and just think my way is the everyday normal. That way I can be sort of invisible but powerful, I love power, power’s great. I’m obsessed with owning, extracting, and consuming resources. I’d like to own everything, that would be terrific. I’m also keen for my way of doing things to dominate, I’ll even use violence or elimination methods to make sure this happens, but I do it for peoples’ own good. At heart I’m just a homemaker and most people are welcome in my

home, if they accept that it is my home, even if I took it from them. Oh sorry, did I go off track? What were you talking about?

Interviewer: Well, I wanted to talk to you about the Yarning research method. I've noticed you've been using the method lately. I'm curious, why did you decide to use it?

Settler-Colonialism: Well, I wanted to do research about Aboriginal people, because I'm really concerned about them, so I wanted to be culturally appropriate and culturally safe. So, I thought a good opportunity would be to copy what Aboriginal people are doing in research and then that would do the trick.

Interviewer: Do you think that might be called cultural appropriation? You know, when someone from a dominant culture takes from a marginalised culture, reinforcing the power imbalance?

Settler-Colonialism: Not at all, I hope you're not misunderstanding me. I'm just trying to do the right thing here. I care about Aboriginal people and just want to help them with their problems. I'm very respectful and write a lot about what Aboriginal people say Yarning is. Please never mention cultural appropriation, it will put a spanner in the works for my approach to research!

Interviewer: Hmmm, well could you tell me a bit about how you conducted the Yarning research?

Settler-Colonialism: Yes of course, I did what I think Aboriginal people are doing when they say they use Yarning.

Interviewer: I noticed in your research methods you mention interviews and focus groups instead of Yarns and Yarning circles. Why was that?

Settler-Colonialism: They are excellent colonial qualitative research terms, I like them.

Interviewer: Do you think people have different levels of Yarning skill? I'm thinking of people who have grown up with Yarning as a lifelong learner and those very new to the practice.

Settler-Colonialism: There's no university qualification for Yarning, so you know, I think anybody can use it, I mean I did. Anyway, the way I see it, it looks good to say you used Yarning, even if you didn't.

Interviewer: Do you think you've got the Yarning method down pat?

Settler-Colonialism: Well, I've used it in research that has been published so, you know, I have peer-reviewed evidence that I'm good at it. I'm not sure who the peers were, but I'm quite frankly glad they got me over the line. I can't get published in journals run by Indigenous peoples though, so I've given up trying to get published there. If I were being completely honest, I think the Yarning method could be more rigorous, I mean it would be good if it could meet the qualitative research evaluation tools that I invented. Like I said earlier, my way is the best way.

Interviewer: Aboriginal peoples in Australia have the longest continuing culture in the world and Yarning is a part of this. Do you think this requires rigour and complexity?

Settler-Colonialism: I measure rigour and complexity with my worldview and settler-colonial ways of knowing, being and doing, which are very strenuous and thorough. So, from this perspective I don't consider their use of Yarning to be rigorous per se, it's just one of the informal things they do and that suits them and is culturally appropriate. I repeat, my way is superior and best.

Interviewer: What do you enjoy most about Yarning research?

Settler-Colonialism: Well, it's simple and very natural, it's easy to use. As the name suggests, it's really just talking or narrative as far as I'm concerned. Using the method also sets me apart as culturally appropriate and that's pretty useful to me too. I mean, it helps me meet ethics requirements and ultimately, it's a tool that I can adapt to my own needs.

Interviewer to audience - *eyeroll* What an unlikable character**Interviewer: I've seen you write about how you used Yarning to build trust and relationship with Aboriginal people, can you tell me about that?**

Settler-Colonialism: I said I was using Yarning, so my participants trusted and liked me, and I created a safe space. I often see Aboriginal people introducing who they are and where they're from, so I did the same thing to build relationships and trust. Actually, it was all a bit awkward because this revealed I had little shared understanding or connections with the participants. I think probably my introduction just set me apart and distanced me further from them, but people did look politely at me when I was talking.

Interviewer: You keep saying Aboriginal people have problems can you tell me more about that?

Settler-Colonialism: Yes, well, if I was being completely honest, I am the source of most of the negative circumstances Aboriginal people experience. But I prefer to say Aboriginal people have problems and are disadvantaged and vulnerable. In the past I would have said less civilised, but I'm not allowed to say that anymore. By saying Aboriginal people have problems I can position myself as superior and more knowing, so I can help. That way I don't have to take full responsibility for what I caused, and I can maintain power. I do love power.

Interviewer: Did you have any connection to the Aboriginal people you did Yarning with?

Settler-Colonialism: Oh no, well sometimes a little. But that's a good thing, I can see things that Aboriginal people can't because they are too close to their own problems. That's the point of research, to be as removed and unbiased as you can, that way the researcher can really see what is going on, where the problems are.

Interviewer: What do Aboriginal people get out of the Yarning research you do?

Settler-Colonialism: They get to talk to a culturally respectful researcher and might get a voucher or a meal in appreciation for their time or travel. People might sort through some of their problems, as a researcher I mean to help. Also, local Aboriginal people, who know their community better than me, can spend time helping me with my research. For instance, as my research assistant, collecting data, sitting on my advisory committee or chaperoning me. They get to be my cultural conduit to the community I'm currently interested in, yeah, I like that, cultural conduit. The best thing about having an Aboriginal on my research team is they build trust with local Aboriginal people for me, help me get ethics approval and get me published. They don't need to stick around for the whole research project though, once the data is collected, I won't really need them. From the research, I'll devise ideas about how to help fix Aboriginal problems. Essentially, I am in control and sometimes I pay Aboriginal people to help me and sometimes I don't.

Interviewer: OK, so while you've been talking, I've been thinking that you haven't been using the Yarning method at all. I am thinking you can only see glimpses of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. It seems you have little understanding of Aboriginal worldviews

and experiences that are grounded in everyday Aboriginal life. You are missing a great deal of the components needed for Yarning. I think you want to own and culturally appropriate Yarning to increase your power, is that true?

Settler-Colonialism: Well, I don't know why you would be so surprised about that, I was perfectly honest with you in the beginning of this interview that I like power and to own everything. My way is the best way after all.

Interviewer: Well thanks anyway Settler-Colonialism for your time.

Settler-Colonialism: No problem, this will be great for my CV! Being interviewed about my experience with Yarning will add to my expertise on it.

Considerations for Future

The cultural interface we traverse in the interview with Settler-Colonialism outlines the complexities the authors have observed and experienced when applying Yarning as a research method from within the academy. As Geia and colleagues (2013) rightly posit, there is a growing presence of Indigenous approaches to research, including Yarning method, where the "Eurocentric comfort zone is undergoing a shaking and ruffling of its academic feathers" (p. 14). However, our argument is that our experiences and observations of the use of Yarning as a research method, as storied within the interview, depict more than settler-colonial discomfort. Through their commentary, the character Settler-Colonialism reveals a litany of settler-colonial tactics that cause injury to Yarning method and, in parallel, Indigenous knowledge systems and knowledge producers in research. It is important to note that the conceptualisation of the character Settler-Colonialism does not represent non-Indigenous or Indigenous peoples (although this is highly relevant) but rather the settler-colonial processes still at play. This distinction is pertinent as, like it or not, all researchers in settler-colonised countries are exposed to ongoing settler-colonial processes (Nakata, 2006; Smith, 2012).

The character Settler-Colonialism predominantly conceptualises Yarning method as a smokescreen to magically mitigate power dynamics. For instance, this occurs via settler-colonial moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and virtuous expressions (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) whereby any application of Yarning method is assumed to help Aboriginal people and in this dynamic, the helper or researcher assumes a role of power via saviourhood. This is employed alongside racist ideology, a deficit discourse, where complex social issues are articulated as problems belonging to and arising from Aboriginal peoples (The Lowitja Institute, 2018) whilst settler-colonists' significant roles in these are glossed over or made absent. In addition, the internal undermining of Yarning method is operationalised via explaining structured and complex oral traditions involving relationship and memory (Atkinson et al., 2021; Barlo et al., 2020) as informal, simple or natural. These descriptions subtly imply that colonial methods are more formalised and structured requiring higher levels of discipline and diligence. This is further articulated by replacing Yarning terminology with settler-colonial qualitative terms (such as interviews and focus groups) and suggesting the method benefit from settler-colonial ways of qualitative knowing, being and doing. These undertakings promote assimilation (Said, 1978; Wolfe, 2006) situating settler knowledge as superior with this serving to erode and replace Indigenous knowledge and similar criticisms have been articulated regarding storying methods (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) and Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing (Roher et al., 2021), with, undoubtably further reflection and commentary on how Indigenous research methods are being applied to follow.

Further power issues arise with the character Settler-Colonialism claiming ownership of the Yarning method via an assumed entitlement to use it and using Aboriginal peoples as research resource, all under the guise of virtuous activity. For instance, Aboriginal people are conceptualised in subservient roles to support Settler-Colonisation as cultural conduits through provision of assistance, advice, and chaperoning. These types of articulations express power via possessive logics as, “White possessive logics are operationalised within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of common-sense knowledge, decision making and socially produced conventions” (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xii). In this regard, when Settler-Colonialism encounters unfamiliar Aboriginal spaces, they acquire the resource of Aboriginal knowledge for navigation, not unlike settler-colonists of the nineteenth century. This points to a requisite deeper reflection on power dynamics in Yarning research, the importance of Aboriginal led research and the consequences for research quality if settler-colonial dynamics are not examined.

As previously mentioned, without the presence of existing explicit and tacit knowledge and memory derived from everyday localised Aboriginal normativity, a far more superficial conversation will take place that is missing the components that make a Yarn relevant and useful to Aboriginal people. In these circumstances researchers are enticing Aboriginal study participation under the guise of cultural appropriateness and familiarity, that, does not exist. This phenomenon has commonality to a settler-colonial mechanism described in America, as “playing Indian” which creates “ambiguous middle ground ... a place in which Americans and would-be Americans create Indian Others and bring them to material life through costumes, theatrics, and rituals” (Deloria, 1994, p. 7). Non-Indigenous researchers asserting use of Yarning method are especially at risk of unintentionally “playing Aboriginal.” This occurs through creating an Aboriginal Other that enacts elements of Yarning method with a blindness to the relational intricacies and complex processes involved in handing down oral culture via embedding shared memories between generations over millennia (Nunn & Reid, 2016). Pertinent to this are concepts of cultural misappropriation:

A one-sided process where one entity benefits from another group’s culture without permission and without giving something in return ... to avoid misappropriation, it is necessary to engage in creative collaborations with Indigenous partners that go beyond “cultural advising” and do much more than merely asking for advice from an Indigenous person. (Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage Project, 2015, pp. 3-6)

Given this list of concerns with the application of Yarning as research method, it is imperative that as researchers, we continually reflect on the research practices we apply to improve and strengthen research quality. This is particularly important as “the shape-shifting nature of colonisation persists in the present and will remain unfinished business for Indigenous peoples” (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 192). What may help with this, is for Yarning method to be understood in the context of a complex power-imbalanced interface whereby issues of researcher positionality, experience, and epistemology and axiology can be treated as practical and ethical issues for researchers to reflect on and respond to. Examining the epistemological and methodological practices and processes enacted by settler-colonialism in academia is imperative in fulfilling the mandate of ongoing decolonisation. It will also benefit the development of more sustainable and regenerative research practices more generally (Paradies, 2020). The authors sincerely hope that this critique and examination will inspire or assist further researcher reflections on Indigenous knowledge, research methods and settler-colonialism. Without this continual process of reflection, there is a risk of further perpetuation of damage to Indigenous knowledge systems.

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Author Note

Dr. Cammi Murrup Stewart is an Aboriginal woman born and raised on Wurundjeri Country, with family connections disrupted through Stolen Generation policies. She is an early career academic who conducted individual Yarns as part of a Ph.D. with young urban Aboriginal people about cultural experiences. Please direct correspondence to cammi.murrup-stewart@monash.edu.

Petah Atkinson is a Yorta Yorta woman, with family connections Waywurru people and to Kulin Nations people through Wurundjeri and Taungurung. Her career includes many years working in the Indigenous health sector, and she is currently a lecturer and completing her Ph.D. on racism in medical education which has involved Yarning research. Please direct correspondence to petah.atkinson@monash.edu.

Professor Karen Adams is a Wiradjuri and Director of the Gukwonderuk Indigenous Health Unit at Monash University. Her career has involved working in the Indigenous health sector for many years and conducting research addressing inequity for Indigenous peoples with some of this involving Yarning methods. Please direct correspondence to aren.adams@monash.edu.

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