



# Yarning as decolonising practice

by Katie Christensen



*Katie Christensen is a Wurundjeri woman who was born and raised on Dja Dja Wurrung Country in Central Victoria. Katie has extensive experience working in the domestic violence sector supporting women who have experienced violence and men who have used violence via case management and facilitating healing groups. Katie trained and worked as an Aboriginal health worker and a Koori maternity support worker and facilitated Kaalinya Inyanook, a mums and bubs group that focused on wellbeing and information for new mothers. Katie currently works with Open Circle as a restorative justice conference facilitator, embedding narrative therapy skills into the restorative justice process. Katie has a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work. [katie.christensen@gmail.com](mailto:katie.christensen@gmail.com)*

## Abstract

Yarning has become part of decolonising my practice. Yarning is a way to divest from colonised ways of being and working and of showing respect for First Nations ways. It also supports me in grappling with what is irreconcilable within settler coloniser–Indigenous relations and moving towards returning land and life to Indigenous peoples. This paper shows how I have adapted Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) model of yarning as a research practice and applied it to therapeutic conversations in combination with narrative practices including therapeutic letters and outsider witnessing. It describes work with Mim and Lucy, including transcripts of practice and therapeutic letters that embodied yarning as a decolonising practice.

**Key words:** *decolonising; Aboriginal; First Nations; yarning; therapeutic letters; outsider witness; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: she/her

I am a woman of mixed ancestry – of First Nations and settler colonisers. I am a Wurundjeri woman, born and raised on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. My family have lived here for generations, so this Country and community are very special to me. This place, these people, are where I have lived and learnt our ways – of time, of welcome, of yarning, of respect and of community. These are the ways that I, as a fair skin Wurundjeri woman, connect to and experience my Blakness.<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my Ancestors who guide me; my Elders who growl me, school me and grow me; and any First Nations people who might read this. It's my intention that in this paper you will read my pride in our ways and, as Alfred Taiaiake (2015) says, join me in 'making our way back to the fire'.

I have come to hold my skills as a Wurundjeri woman closely, and to hold them up just as high as other sources of knowledge. Through trying out maps of narrative practice and tweaking them to suit my own settings, I have reconnected to the value of yarning (Drahm-Butler, 2015; Dulwich Centre, 2020). 'Yarning is conducive to Indigenous ways of doing things ... Yarning is a process that cuts across the formality of identity ... and demands the human to human interaction where both are knowers and learners' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 47).

The following practice stories focus on yarning as a decolonising practice. I show how I adapt and apply Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) model of yarning as a research practice, and how I combine this with narrative practices including letter writing and outsider witnessing. Bessarab and Ng'andu identify four types of yarning: social yarning, research topic yarning, collaborative yarning and therapeutic yarning. Each of these is discussed below through stories of my work with Mim and Lucy. It is my hope that sharing these stories with you extends an invitation to look for doorways in dark places, and to take some of my learnings as doorways into learnings of your own.

## Decolonising

Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 1) stated that 'decolonisation is not a metaphor': that it is essentially 'repatriation of Indigenous land and life' to First Nations people. Rather than seeking reconciliation, decolonisation attends to what is irreconcilable within settler coloniser-Indigenous relations. There are no easy paths in the unsettling work of decolonisation, and there is no way

to reconcile a relationship that never existed. There are serious risks to reducing 'decolonisation' and 'decolonising practices' to respect for First Nations ways of being, doing and living, without including the repatriation of land.

When I refer to the decolonising of my mind and practice, I am referring to the journey back to the fire, back to the land: the throwing off and discarding; the disruption of colonial ways, ideas, hierarchies and their resulting internalised judgement. The journey includes noticing the ways we do the work – attending to power, practicing welcome, doing community, and making those practices visible and teachable. These are small steps along the journey back to the fire, to land back. Throwing off the heavy and unnecessary robes of colonisation is a powerful exercise, but it does not equate to land back, nor should it get in the way of true decolonisation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 98) described decolonisation as 'a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power'. It is in this way that when collaborating with others, I am seeking to move away from psychological colonisation as part of a larger decolonising effort.

## Social yarning

Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) described social yarning as the informal and unstructured yarning that happens to establish a relationship before discussing the topic at hand. To me, social yarning describes practices of welcome, locating ourselves, sharing and establishing connection. It's where I structure safety and invite accountability into the yarn. Language is always so important, so I seek to talk like I normally would, to find everyday terms that encapsulate narrative ideas as well as using my collaborators' own words. The language I use and the time I spend on practices of welcome (Wingard, 2013) attend to relations of power.

When I first met with Mim, we spent time talking about our days, how good our kids' 'negotiation' skills are, and how COVID had affected what we now saw as an 'outing'. After a while I felt a shift – that our opening yarn had reached its natural end – and I asked, 'so what would you like to talk about?'

Mim stated that she would like to talk about how it's hard to continue with her own healing. When she became a mum, she began to notice that others hadn't healed and weren't interested in healing. We spoke

about this briefly and I checked in to make sure I understood what Mim was talking about and that I was not making assumptions.

Before proceeding further, I asked, 'So just before we really jump in, how will I know if something comes up that is a no-go zone – like will you shake your head or will you look away or say "nah, I don't want to go there"?' After a moment of thought, Mim decided that she would feel okay to tell me she didn't want to talk about that today.

Now we had practiced welcome, established connection and structured safety, we were ready to go. Social yarning, which I used to call 'easy yarning', opens doorways to collaborative yarning, research topic yarning and therapeutic yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

## Collaborative yarning

Collaborative yarning is a key principle of First Nations narrative therapy (Dulwich Centre, 2020; Wingard et al., 2015). Through this type of yarning, we exchange skills and knowledges; we co-create documents to keep these knowledges close and to share them with others; we collaborate with others to provide witness to preferred identity stories. This is where I might use narrative practices such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), the 'questioning normality and escaping failure' checklist (Denborough, 2014, pp. 160–162), migration of identity (White, 1995) or outsider witnessing (White, 2007), just to name a few.

I was working through the 'questioning normality and escaping failure' checklist (Denborough, 2014) with Mim. Mim is also a First Nations woman, and as we went through the questions, we applied them through the lens of our shared experience, and considered both colonised and First Nations expectations. For example, the expectations on the checklist include 'to always be in control of my emotions'. We explored the double bind this presents for us as Blak women: the trope of the 'angry Blak woman' and the experience of being strong Blak women who have grown up needing to advocate for ourselves and our community. Both of these influence our actions and identities in different situations. Mim and I collaborated on documenting her responses, and we reshaped the questions as we went.

## Therapeutic yarning

Therapeutic yarning happens when traumatic or intensely personal or emotional stories or topics arise. From a First Nations narrative practice perspective, the focus will shift to enquiring about the person's response because no-one is a passive recipient of trauma and 'it is important to focus on our resistance, not our victimhood or struggle' (Makungu, 2021). This is where I would use re-authoring and re-membering practices, looking for the absent but implicit and strong story lines (White, 2007).

While we were working on the 'questioning normality and escaping failure' checklist, Mim was talking about her experiences at high school and an emotional story arose. At that point, the checklist was put on hold, and rather than exploring societal expectations, I focused on Mim's responses to the event and what her responses told us about what she held precious.

Katie: What would you do when the teachers would single you out?

Mim: Whenever I got too, I don't know – overwhelmed, you might say? – I'd just walk home.

Katie: So when the chips were down, your act of resistance was just to get out of there? And what were you taking a stand for when you did that do you think?

Mim: Well, the teachers were arseholes [laughs], you know? I was quite a good student in Years 7 and 8 and I was annoyed that none of the teachers could even see that: I wasn't a 'naughty kid'.

Katie: So, you were taking a stand for – what would you call that, do you reckon?

Mim: I don't know. My own future, I suppose? I remember thinking, well Year 9's been shit, why would I do Year 10? I think Shona [Mim's sister] was at the stage where she had to choose whether she was going to stay on to do Year 12 at school or go to adult education. So I thought, well, we might as well go together and I can help her because she was going through a rough time. So there were probably family reasons as well.

- Katie: So there was taking a stand for your own future and, I get the sense – I might be wrong – that there was a bit of protecting yourself as well.
- Mim: Mmmm [nodding].
- Katie: You were saying, ‘why am I going to put myself through XYZ again?’ So there was a bit of knowing ‘that doesn’t work for me’.
- Mim: Yeah definitely, and I also felt like I was smarter and better than what I was doing and producing. I knew I wasn’t leaving because I was dumb. I knew that.
- Katie: What enabled you to go back to education after feeling so invisible, and having a not-so-great experience?
- Mim: Well, I think I was also proving to myself and also others that I’m not dumb. I can easily do the work and just to show people that I didn’t leave to do nothing, that I can dedicate myself. I think I was trying to prove to myself that I’m not the problem here! I was extra determined to stick out the course and have really good attendance – which I did.
- Katie: So, proving to yourself that ‘I’m not stupid’ and ‘I am not the problem’ in this scenario.
- Mim: Yeah. Now I have a hard time going into schools and telling parents that school’s important when at my core I don’t believe that.
- Katie: So, what has drawn you to working in Aboriginal education if you’re not buying into that?
- Mim: I think it was to hold the schools accountable. My outlook is about supporting the kids and parents when they need it in a culturally safe way. When kids are struggling or disengaging, I’m like, ‘well, what’s the school doing then?’ That’s what I want to know. I don’t want to know what the family’s doing or not doing: I want to know what the school is doing.
- Katie: What does this speak to in terms of what’s important to you?
- Mim: I’m passionate about dismantling the education system. That’s what I’m passionate about.

## Research yarning

Research yarning can be employed whenever people consult us about problems: we can co-research those problems together through yarning (Chilisa, 2014). I employ externalising practices and scaffolding, and check in to ensure that I am on a shared train of thought. I’m also double listening for the absent but implicit (White, 2000) and looking for doorways to stories of forgotten skills and glimmering moments.

Research yarning and collaborative yarning often cross over, and I use similar maps to research problems and skills. I might employ the migration of identity metaphor or use the Tree of Life process in research yarns.

## Letter writing

Letter writing can become an extension of yarning practice. Letters serve to reinforce the work that is done in developing preferred stories and unearthing skills and knowledges, and they continue the work in between or beyond the end of therapeutic conversations (White & Epston, 1990). Letters enable contribution and can help negate any expectations of change, as they are subtle and lack the euphoria that can lead to such expectations. They are an invaluable aspect of narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, p. 69). I am a sucker for a letter in the mailbox. Receiving a handwritten letter in our modern times is a symbol of something so very precious – someone’s time! Having said that, it’s not the most inclusive or decolonised way to communicate. In these modern times, I find that I mostly send letters electronically, either by email, video recording, text or via social media platforms like Messenger – it all depends on how the people I consult with would like to receive communications.

I met with Mim to yarn about the healing journey that had begun when she became a mum. We shared insider knowledge here as two First Nations mothers coming together, and as we moved through social yarning to collaborative yarning, we quickly landed in a therapeutic yarn where much was shared and tears were shed. I was keen to continue the conversation and to offer some outsider witnessing and felt that a letter would be a great way to do this. It would also mean that we were connected on this topic without having to speak of it again.

Hi Mim,

I wanted to touch base to see how you are and if anything has come up or changed for you since our yarn the other day.

You spoke of how the experience of not feeling valued and safe as a kid led to you developing the skills of being protective of others and of being 'good' to stay safe. You also spoke about how these skills came from being observant and noticing what not to do. This was often processed through writing in your diary, an exercise that has stayed with and sustained you through your life and continues to this day.

It was during your time with the First Nations dance group and your teacher Lou that the idea of being 'good' and not speaking up was challenged, and you were encouraged to find your voice and take up some space. Things that had been hidden and not spoken of were now able to be discussed in this space and your feelings were validated. Dance turned out to be the perfect expression of this, as you were finding strength and pride and confidence through your connection to culture and representing this in public through performance. The relationship with Lou was pivotal to you becoming the person (and mother) you are, and in turn, you provided a source of pride for Lou and an opportunity for her to realise her own dreams of performance and sharing culture with younger generations and the wider community. This has been a beautiful bond that you both often revisit whenever you get the chance to catch up.

These skills and wisdoms you have developed along the way, and the belief that everybody deserves to feel heard, validated and safe, have been reawakened in you since becoming a mother to Jayla and Marli. They strongly influence how you parent and what you want to make possible for them into their future. You wish for them to be able to believe in themselves, and if they have an idea to just give it a go without doubting themselves. You wish for them to not have to do so much internal work and healing in their adult lives.

I was drawn to what you talked about in relation to becoming a mother, and the healing journey this sparked. The unpacking of your experiences

of being mothered led to a new understanding of life that has sometimes felt isolating, but it was hard to pinpoint where this isolation came from. You clearly painted a picture of how you hold your children and your role as a mother precious, and how you are staying close to the values of people being heard and validated. This is influencing the way you mother your children.

Our yarn led me to reflect on my own experience of becoming a mother. I too was taken on a journey of reflection and healing, and with my new perspective and new identity as a mother, I often felt isolated from my family as I connected to the values I treasured. What was my role now in my family? I felt as though so much had changed within me and didn't know where I fit anymore. During our yarning I was reminded that the values I hold dear are ones that were formed in my childhood – through the good and the bad – and that I too don't want to diminish any spirit my kids have. I too want them to be confident to speak up, take up space and not be afraid of life. I am still me with the same values and beliefs, I have just journeyed a little further than I had before and have fresh perspectives. Hearing about part of your journey reminded me that I hope this continues throughout my life.

Thanks again for sharing part of your story with me. I look forward to any yarns we will have in the future!

Regards  
Katie

Mim sent a response to this letter:

Oh wow, Katie, you totally captured and articulated in this letter exactly my thoughts and feelings about our session and about becoming a mum, and you've written it out so clearly. This has given me more confidence in what I was saying coz, to be honest, at times and reflecting afterwards, I wasn't sure if I was making any sense! Taking up space was my exact goal this year. That term resonates sooo much! It's also comforting to hear that becoming a mum took you on a similar journey. The letter is really nurturing and reassuring.

## Outsider witnessing

I sometimes use outsider-witnessing questions to help shape my follow-up letters to people after our yarns to offer some validation and cement emerging preferred identity stories that have taken form during our yarning. I have found this to be used to great effect and my collaborators have volunteered positive feedback.

Lucy was a social work student who, after completing her first year in a Master of Social Work course, returned home to China for Christmas. Thanks to COVID, she had to stay there. So here we were, a young Chinese woman and a middle-aged Aboriginal woman with shared experience as students in the time of COVID-19 and a somewhat shared experience of gender and being 'other'. When we met online, we began with a social yarn. I asked Lucy how her studies were going and how COVID-19 was affecting the area she was in China. My intention was to invite a free-flowing conversation, one that would ease tension and offer Lucy some distance from the problem she had come to yarn about (Newcastle, 2017). My hope was also that in sharing some of our experiences and tapping into the friendship ethic, Lucy might find a little more ease when we started talking about more vulnerable topics related to the problem.

Lucy and I yarned weekly for some time. We externalised 'anxiety', 'internalised judgement' and being a 'rebellious child' – problems that were pushing Lucy around and convincing her that her achievements had come through luck rather than being deserved. Lucy spoke about the one-child policy, and we explored its effects and how it played out in the home, the school system and in life expectations. I asked questions to uncover what helped Lucy keep going despite anxiety and internalised judgement telling her she wasn't good enough. We spent a lot of time on her responses to anxiety and internalised judgement. I asked about this 'rebellious child' and what she was standing up for. What did Lucy think about the young Lucy who had stood up for what she held precious? In this way, I sought to help re-story her identity from disobedient child to child responding to a situation and standing up for herself. As a result of these yarns, the problems had taken a step back and weren't taking up so much space and being so loud for Lucy.

During our yarns, I had shared with Lucy the things I was learning from her – either via letter or when winding up a yarn. In one of these letters I wrote,

When you spoke of feeling like you had opportunities because of luck, it reminded me of times I have felt the same. After hearing your story, I think it might have been anxiety on my shoulder too telling me I'm not good enough. Next time I hear anxiety telling me that, I will think of your skills and turn to my own skills of persistence and 'faking it 'til I make it' to help me push through.

I was so happy for Lucy and proud of the work we had done together. I had a sense that we had both experienced katharsis through our yarning, but it felt unfinished (White, 2007).

I took up a suggestion from David Denborough and Tileah Drahm-Butler to bring in Sophie – a narrative therapist who was living in China – as an outsider witness. This ended up being a profound and deeply touching experience for us all. I talked Lucy through the outsider-witnessing process and asked if she would be interested in giving it a go. Both Lucy and Sophie were willing, so I worked towards finding a way to make this happen across continents, language differences and schedules. It was settled that Lucy and I would co-create a document for Sophie to respond to. Sophie wanted space to consider Lucy's story and give her a thoughtful response, so communicating in writing gave her time to respond. During this time, I kept close cultural protocols of holding time loosely, giving people time to absorb the story and tell their own. I really wanted to create a virtual yarning circle that respected Lucy's and Sophie's cultures and ways of sharing vulnerability while keeping shame at bay.

After Sophie had sent a letter of response to Lucy, Lucy and I met up for a yarn. Lucy shared Sophie's response with me, which felt like such a generous gesture. I think it spoke to the trust we had built and our decolonising learning together – we were neither experts nor novices, but we were both influential. As a final touch, Lucy and I recorded a video response to Sophie's witnessing, including a retelling and a reflection on the impact Sophie's letter had on Lucy. These are some of Lucy's words:

It is helpful for me to know that there are other people in the world who have the same kind of dilemma and struggles with family and with their own life. ... Thinking about those situations while I was reading Sophie's feedback was a bit different experience than previously when I was just recalling those experiences by

myself because this time I know that I wasn't doing anything wrong, or at least it's not all my fault. But previously I might feel like I was the rebellious kid and I wasn't obedient to my parents enough to be considered a good kid. But this time when I got Sophie's feedback, the big difference was that now I am aware that this is not all my fault, or not even my fault at all – and so there's more courage for me to recall this sort of experience and not blame myself for it in any sense. It was definitely very empowering for me to rethink that picture in my mind while I was reading Sophie's feedback, and I was not feeling any negative attitudes towards my previous self, younger Lucy. It's definitely very reassuring for me as well this time to reflect on that experience.

The outsider-witnessing experience clearly solidified all the work Lucy had done breathing life into alternative stories and preferred identities. Although they lived some distance away from each other (three hours' drive), Lucy and Sophie have met up in the time since our talks finished. This speaks to the profound impact our outsider-witnessing yarns had on both of them. By decolonising my view (and inviting Lucy to do the same by openly valuing her contribution and working towards decentred practice), we were able to shift power from the individual to the collective, honouring all of our skills and wisdoms, collaborating and structuring meaning for all involved.

## Conclusion

As practitioners, we are given the gift of being transported via story, of gaining new perspectives and meanings with every session. When we seek to decolonise our practice, we disrupt hierarchies and their resulting judgements. We attend to power and invite collaboration. This makes space for katharsis (White, 2007) for both collaborators. For me, staying connected to these understandings helps me to stay decentred and to come from a teacher–learner perspective (Freire, 1972). There really is 'wonderfulness in the everyday' (Epston, 2014) and I hope you are all encouraged to look for it.

When I think of the very bones of narrative practice, I think of the brilliance of the people who consult with us. We can meet people where they are at, using their language, exploring their context and uncovering the brilliance of their existence. We can facilitate the sharing of people's wisdoms and make connections through time and space. I hope that you will take up the invitation to follow your collaborators' lead and adapt the amazing blueprints narrative practices provide us with. Each time we do this, we expand on the history of narrative practice. I am so excited to see where these skills, wisdoms and innovations take us.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Photographer and Kuku and Erub/Mer woman Deacon first used the term 'blak' in her 1991 exhibition 'Blak lik mi'. 'Deacon asserted an expression of urban Aboriginal identity that is authentic – baring little, if any, resemblance to the colonisers "boxed in" one dimensional definition of Aboriginal Australians that, even today, continues to be derogatory and misinformed.' (Munro, 2020).

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