

Shielding Our Futures

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*Gawaian
Bodkins-Andrews*

Interviewed By:
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Page

Professor Gawaian Bodkins-Andrews is a Professor in the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges (CAIK) at the University of Technology Sydney. In this chapter Gawaian discusses his current Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Indigenous project *Shielding Our Futures Storytelling with Ancestral and Narinya Knowledges*. In the D’harawal language, Garuwanga-Waduguda-Narinya’o’Birad means ‘Storytelling with Ancestral and Narinya Knowledges,’ and Ngabai Yillimung’o’ngun means ‘Shielding our Futures’.

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“If you are not working on a large generalisable project and truly want consent for an Indigenous research project, you need to have the process of consent from the word go. Even the idea of the project has to be run by the Elders and preferably it should be coming from the Elders in and of itself.”

The project reciprocally engages with the oral histories of D’harawal Elders that engage with Garuwanga Waduguda (Ancestral Laws) and Narinya Wadugua (Living Laws) to emancipate representations of D’harawal Knowledges from dominant colonial-storytelling narratives that largely speak of assimilation, cultural loss, and our very extinction. In doing so this research will assist in revitalization and respect of Aboriginal identities and knowledges within urban communities.

The aims of the project are to see how Ancestral Knowledge and the wisdom of our Elders today can interact with and guide contemporary narratives, whether they be political, academic, or even scientific.

In sharing the research design, methodologies and approaches to the project, Gawaian encourages researchers to think about their ongoing obligations around consent processes. Dialogue and exchange around consent are not a mere ‘tick the box’ approach, but are methods that need to continue throughout the life of a research project and beyond. Gawaian also shares insights on respectful approaches to managing Indigenous peoples Intellectual Property rights through publishing in Open Access journals and sources to ensure that communities can protect and care for the knowledges for future generations.

About Gawaian

Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews, of the D’harawal nation, is a researcher and lecturer whose outputs are increasingly encapsulating and promoting Aboriginal Australian standpoints and perspectives across a diversity of disciplines (most notably education and psychology). Gawaian has managed and led numerous research grants investigating a diversity of topics including, mental health, mentoring, identity, traditional knowledges, education, racism, and bullying. His projects have led to the development of a strong foundation in developing robust and diverse research designs, with an increasing dedication to Indigenous Research Methodologies. From this framework, Gawaian is continually developing his experience in applying quantitative and qualitative methods within his scholarly work.

***SP Tell us about working with
the group of Elders on your project
and how you built the
relationships?***

GBA This is what you'd call an insider research project. Most of, or if not all, the co-researchers, the Elders and Knowledge Holders, have known each other and worked together for most of their lives. Even Professor Bronwyn Carlson and my Mum have worked for a long time with the Elders' Circle. In a traditional sense, I'm a member of the D'harawal Traditional Descendants and Knowledge Holders Circle. But I'm also semi removed from it because I'm a Western trained academic, where sometimes what I read and learn within academia has some tension (e.g., contradicts, erases) what I learn from the Circle and its Elders. I always defer to the Circle though.

The relationship is life long, however this particular project came about from the first time the Circle and myself worked together in academia. The Circle were my guides and mentors on my PhD. I probably would not have finished my PhD without the support of the Circle. That being said, my PhD had nothing to do with Circle activity. My PhD was a statistical thesis in quantitative methods, looking into the experiences of Indigenous High School Students. The Circle kept me ground in my culture though, and since then I've always been there to help the Circle when it's required, as you naturally do if you've got an Elders group or Kinship group, and they are all kin, whether it be by blood or not.

Following my PhD I worked more closely with the Elders Circle with a project focusing on lived experiences of racism. Although, it didn't have anything to do with our Traditional Knowledges, our Ancestral Stories. I, did, and still do a lot of community work for Circle members as part of the partnership

I have with them. This particular project arose out of a time when I was working with one of the Elders, Uncle Ross Evans, in partnership with Macquarie Fields Police, where we were doing storytelling within schools (it was all volunteer). There was conflict with the local Aboriginal Land Council at the time, which tried to sabotage the project (none of them were D'harawal), which for me was very stressful. I saw the Elders just shrugging, thinking this is what we're used to.

Uncle Ross, my Mum and Dad, who are senior members of the Circle, and I wrote a chapter together from that experience. That was the first chapter I've ever written where I attempted to actually incorporate our Ancestral and our Traditional Knowledges into an Western academic narrative. That was a process of healing for myself and Uncle Ross. The unintended consequence from that little bit of action was to see how valuable our Stories are, not only for the work we're doing in our schools, but for ourselves. We came to realise that academia wasn't necessarily separate from this. That was where the idea for the grant started. The rest is history in progress, I guess you can call it.

***SP Can you tell us about the research design,
thinking about ICIP and ethical guidelines when
you work with traditional and contemporary
Indigenous knowledges?***

GBA We make a disclaimer in our writing saying the Circle works from a particular storyline, which the Elders feel is strongly attached to the river system within the Sydney region, in particular, the Georges River. This is contested grounds as to whose nation it is, and we don't want to get into those particular debates. What we have is our Oral Histories, the Circle's Oral Histories, the Elders' Oral Histories.

The key issue for me is that the knowledge produced in this project is not released unless there is full consensus from the circle. We run on the full consensus model, not a Western democratic model where it's 50% plus one. Every Elder and Knowledge Holder must agree to the methodologies, methods and outcome of the project. We also have a very strong condition saying that what we produce cannot be used as a weapon against any of our other mobs. We always put in this disclaimer that we are aware there are other stories and

other connections to the land. We are in no way negating this. We are in no way saying that these other stories are wrong. Regardless, these are stories we are brought up with and this is the strength we get from these stories.

SP *My right to my knowledge might actually infringe someone in their right to their knowledge. That is really interesting. I think you have spoken about this, but do you want to say anything more about consent?*

GBA One thing that's critically important is, too often we think of consent as a tick-a-box process. A researcher has gotten an idea and then all they have to do is convince people to take part in the project, through whatever means. Then that's the end of consent so to speak. I need to stress, this coming in with a piece of paper within Indigenous research methodologies is not the start of the journey for the people in it. If you are not working on a large generalisable project and truly want consent for an Indigenous research project, you need to have the process of consent from the word go. Even the idea of the project has to be run by the Elders and preferably it should be coming from the Elders in and of itself.

The eventual stage where you get to this bit of paper where they sign it, there must be in absolute complete transparency and awareness of what the project itself is about. And I would argue that this awareness does not happen from a little piece of paper that's approved by an ethics committee. It's a growing process of a relationships with those you are researching with. That's my argument about consent. You would get away with a last-minute consent process within ethics committees, but it's not something I'm a big fan of, particularly when you are dealing with Indigenous Knowledges.

SP *This gives some life to what we might mean by iterative consent, for example, consent that is ongoing and continuing in negotiations.*

GBA Although the consent form has been signed, in our project, there is an agreement that is stated clearly within the consent form that no actions will be taken within the research

project, unless a full consensus is reached by the circle. This is not recorded in a tick-a-box, it is an ongoing consent that will last for the life of the project and beyond.

SP *Would you like to tell us something about your data collection?*

GBA If you want to look at it from a Western perspective, it is like a focus group interview or something like that, but it is most certainly not that. The data collection is monthly meetings with the Elder's Circle, where we get together usually around 11am and finish up around 4pm. It is cleared in the grant, so we might have a takeaway lunch from a lovely Italian restaurant nearby that makes good pizza and pasta, something that the Elders love. Our meeting is audio recorded that whole time. I understand that some Elders and particularly Aboriginal representatives don't like the idea of recordings, but this was part of the process. None of the Elders had issues here, in fact, they actually wanted it to ensure that their wisdom and their words are kept, as opposed to being lost in interpretation at a later date.

It's usually about three to four hours of recordings for each meeting. We've had nine meetings so far. There's an awful lot of data there, if you can call it as such. And it's a very fluid process, in terms of what the Elders want to talk about or feel they need to talk about; it is genuinely up to the Elders. Usually it is centered around a particular story, whether it's a story of an Elder's lived experience (Narinya), or an Ancestral Story (Garuwanga). And the Circle relates these stories back to their own lives and their own lived experiences. It's quite phenomenal. I would argue the data is owned by the Circle, although there's probably some legal issues. Within a month they receive the transcripts, recordings and my thematic analysis.

Then there's a meeting for validation of my interpretation of the themes, and this creates further discussion (data), what's missing, what's something that's emerged in the meantime and so forth.

SP *How are participants identified and deidentified within the research?*

GBA There's a bit of a gray area here and this is a systemic



issue with some universities. Elders will have their names on everything that's produced from the ARC grant. At the moment there are between seven to 11 members who come in out of the Yarning sessions and we have an agreement that everyone is authoring the output. But if we are quoting particular Elders, in the research output, pseudonyms are used. For example, some Elders may use a language name for their Spiritual Being (e.g., personal totem), or their favorite character within an Ancestral Story. This happens to protect their identities if they feel uncomfortable being directly named.

It's quite funny. We had a guest at the last meeting who wanted to work with the Circle on another project, and this guest was reporting back on some interviews that were conducted. The pseudonyms were used and she was being really good and very careful not to identify the Elders that were talking, using gender neutral pronouns and so forth. There was no risk of identification, but the Elders were chuckling and saying, "Yeah, I know that's you." That's because of the insider knowledges. But, when it's a stranger reading it the Elders are more protected. The reasons why I think it's important is multiple. It's a bit of a gray area and it does allow possible identification for people who know them. But that being said, nothing is produced without the approval of the Circle members. Risk of identification is something the Elders and the Knowledge Holders accept and are not particularly worried about.

The other issue I have is with the Circle members being named as co-authors, from an academic perspective. Some universities actually divide the credit of the authorship. The publication will not count fully as a paper to me if it there is shared authorship. Personally I don't care for this sole-authored prestige nonsense, it's all about individualism and greed and violates our ways. I think this is a systemic issue some universities need to sort out. And so if we are to publish with community members, Elders or co researchers, I think the universities need to be more aware of this issue.

Having Elders or Aboriginal Representatives on a

publication as co-researchers and co-authors of everything you produce gives them ownership of the publication. Also, we've come to realise that if we publish within a journal the copyright transfers to the journal, which is problematic. If we can purchase Open Access Rights, the copyright stays with the authors of the paper. So I would argue this is another thing universities really need to consider very carefully. Is it possible to create or identify journals that are more likely to be open access, or to provide funding to allow very specific journals with Indigenous Knowledges to be open access, to ensure the Knowledge Holders, Elders, Traditional Custodians, or whoever is named as author on that paper, retain the copyright and the ownership of the knowledges in that paper?

SP What have you learned from conducting your research?

GBA The most important thing as an academic researcher is, firstly, humility. We don't know everything. We can't expect those who we work with and the community members we work with, to know everything as well. Sometimes research can be a process of discovery for not only the participants per se, but the researchers. When I talk about discovery, I'm talking about one's own value systems, being aware of thinking, so already 'knowing the answer' (or even method) is really problematic in an Indigenous research context. So always be humble and defer to your Elders, your Knowledge Holders, your community representatives and so forth. They may say things that will be quite controversial that if said in public could create considerable conflict. It's not your position to judge that, because they are speaking of their own lived experiences and what they've gone through themselves.

The need to be humble and flexible is critically important. It is not just a data gathering process. This is a kind of

evolving data agreement process, where the data is of those who are sharing it, and although they may have shared something with you, that's vitally important to them, this is not your data to do whatever you want with. Too often the case with Indigenous researchers, whether they're non-Indigenous or even Indigenous themselves, is the researcher picking up a particular issue, or finding a little bit of evidence, and then it getting blown out of proportion and becoming used as a tool, or a weapon against mob. You have to be very careful and be aware of the consequences that come with sharing research data. And the first way to do that is to get full and complete agreement from those who have shared their knowledges with you. That's the most important thing for me.

SP What challenges have you experienced?

GBA COVID, massively. We have Elders who are supposedly retired (many do a hell of a lot of volunteer work), yet it's very difficult to negotiate times to come together despite their enthusiasm about the research. When COVID hit the fan, so to speak, they didn't want to stop the project, but I had to stop the project for at least six months. There were a lot of times I got requests to start the meetings up again. The meetings were for their own mental health, because this project, and being able to sit around in the Circle is a healing process. It helps them deal with the stressors coming out of community and colonial discourses. The challenge is to ensure that the research you are doing, both in the short and long term, is for the betterment, wellbeing, and cultural strength of those you are working with.