



STUDENT VOICE

The danger of a single story: *Gari Yala*¹ (speak the truth)

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I am so happy and so humbled to be able to write about my experience in a wonderful enabling program that, like other enabling programs, leads many people, including myself, in securing a promising future through higher education. The opportunities that I was given during the 12-month period of the Yapug program at the University of Newcastle, where I am now an undergraduate in a Bachelor of Law and a Bachelor of Aboriginal Professional Practice, are synonymous with Yapug program philosophies. Yapug is a pathway program, which is designed to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to experience learning at university and gain entry into undergraduate degrees. It is particularly pleasing to highlight this program that does such meaningful and such necessary work for Australia's First Nations people, so thank you for passing me your time and reading my viewpoint.

My name is Taylah Gray and I come from the Wiradjuri people, in the west of New South Wales. In 2014, I graduated from Dubbo College Senior Campus. It was a significant moment for me and my cohort and let me tell you why. I am inspired here by something Martin Luther King Junior (1954) said: "... if we are to go forward ... we've got to go back". And it really took me a while to understand those words – "... if we are to go forward, if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back". So I did. I went back to the history of the people who came before me. One of those people was my father. A Wiradjuri man from Wellington, New South Wales, who was taken from his family and community because he was Aboriginal. Today we know this as the Stolen Generations – a period in Australian government policy (between 1910 and 1970) during which "[t]he forced removal of children created significant grief and trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families ... the impact of which is still being felt today" (Common Ground, n.d.). My father did get to go to school, but was forced to sit at the back of the classroom every lesson, and each time he put his hand up to answer a teacher's question, he was ignored and refused attention. That is what got me through Year 12. And that is what got me through Yapug to go on and enrol in a Bachelor of Law today. Knowing that I can have this different level of education, that my father and his ancestors were once denied of having. That is why in every lesson I attend at the university, I sit at the front of the classroom, because my father never had the right to do so himself. When I return to my community, I critically understand why my people are the victims of structural inequality. We, as Australian scholars and academics, must unapologetically acknowledge this shared history in order to move forward in the education sector, because these stories are so intertwined with the disadvantages

¹ The translation of *gari yala* meaning "speak the truth" comes from the traditional language of the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales, Australia.

experienced by Australia's First Nations people (Choo, 2016).

The emergence of a program like Yapug, I believe, is on the route of assuring that Australia's deep history of the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people does not shamefully continue to repeat itself in the higher education sector. Because of Yapug, my lifelong dream of attending law school became a reality. Yapug cradled and valued my education, and gave me the opportunity to learn relevant skills in academia, which will assist me in serving my community and people, following graduation. The Wollotuka Institute, which is a unit within the University of Newcastle responsible for all Indigenous activities at the University, has created a culturally safe environment that is so hallowed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, that I have classed it as 'my home away from home'. I was fortunate enough that the Wollotuka Director and Panel members awarded me an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Scholarship in 2018. Wollotuka's assistance has equipped me materially, and in a way that no other program or facility could compare to. The scholarship is especially meaningful because it recognises not only my current educational successes but because it also represents my future.

I would like to warn you of the danger of having a single story, an insight that was inspired by a Nigerian writer by the name of Chimamanda Adichie, who in her stories reveals the misconceptions of how African countries and peoples are often so negatively portrayed.

"Where do you come from?" someone asked me once on the streets of my hometown, Dubbo. I said, *"Here"*. To which they responded, *"No, but what are you?"* I said, *"My heritage you ask? I'm Aboriginal"*. *"You're too beautiful to be Aboriginal"* their response was.

Now let me tell you how this correlates with education. Historically, there was this belief in Australia that the concept of beauty was defined by everything that is the complete opposite of what I am. You know, not having my skin tone, my dark features or my broad Aboriginal nose that I inherited from my father. Due to this deceptive and, of course, unspoken teaching in our society, that person who asked me about my heritage only ever had a single story of how an Aboriginal woman should be. This single story of degrading an Aboriginal woman's identity, I think, comes from Western literature. As I began my journey through Yapug, I began to read unpleasant sources on the misrepresentation of women who were a reflection of myself.

According to Australian anthropologist, Phyllis Kaberry, there existed a view in the 1930s that Aboriginal women were "no more than domesticated cows" (Kaberry, 1939, cited in Humphreys, 2008, p. 18). The source goes on to read that black women were obligated to participate in the white economy as domesticated servants, stock workers, pearl divers, and even in the mining industry where "satisfying the sexual demands of their co-workers was usually considered part of the job" (Kaberry, 1939, cited in Humphreys, 2008, p. 13). And that Aboriginal women and their morals were so low that it was impossible for them to be raped. In a letter published in *The Queenslander* in 1880, a correspondent by the name of North Gregory, reflected on reports of Aboriginal women being raped: "Now, I have had considerable experience amongst outside blacks, and I have never heard of a single instance of this crime, and I believe that no inducement for the committal of this crime exists" (Foreign and Commonwealth Office Collection, p. 37). Thus, it was believed that Aboriginal women could not possibly be the subject of sexual abuse. Today, statistics reveal that Aboriginal women are among the most at risk groups for sexual violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018).

When you come to understand Australia's painful history, the statement, *"You're too beautiful*

to be Aboriginal”, was probably intended as a compliment. However, this statement is a form of institutionalised racism. The problem with stereotypes of Aboriginal people is that they make one story, become the only story. This very comment represents a tradition of degrading Aboriginal people, that being ‘unambitious’ and ‘ugly’, was the single story of people like me.

Now, what if that person had the opportunity to take a class at the Wollotuka Institute, where Yapug is based, and learnt how Australia’s economy today was built off the backs of Aboriginal slave labour. Or that the numerous highways were constructed from Aboriginal people’s song lines, and formed by our ability to utilise star navigation (Fuller, Trudgett, Norris, & Anderson, 2014). Or that the University of Newcastle’s very own Professor Stephanie Gilbert, a Wiradjuri woman, has received a prestige scholarship to study Indigenous issues at a national level. Or that one of the most driven women in the global modelling industry, Samantha Harris, is Aboriginal. What if they had known about Indigenous Australian historian and author, Bruce Pascoe, who recently contested in his book *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture* (originally published in 2014), that the world’s first inventors of bread were Aboriginal women? (State Library of New South Wales, 2016). What if they knew of an Aboriginal woman by the name of Terri Janke who runs her own law firm? Would their story of how Aboriginal people should be, be any different?

To quote Chimamanda Adichie (2009), “show a people as one thing and only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become”. In her TED Talk on ‘The danger of a single story’ she stated: “Stories matter ... Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people [and this has been done to Aboriginal people and other First Nations people for many years]. But stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie, 2009). So, her message is powerful: “The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of [their] dignity” (Adichie, 2009). We as Aboriginal people, finally, have the space to re-write history the way we have experienced it and continue to experience it. But, there is a long way to go – so let me tell you what it is like living as an Australian First Nations person today:

I am more than twice as likely to die in infancy or as a child.² If I go to school, I am two and a half years on average behind my school peers in reading and writing.³ But it is worse for my brothers, who, on average, are 15 months further behind in literacy.⁴ I am 10% less likely than my non-Indigenous peers to finish school.⁵ But if I live in a remote area, that figure is higher; only two out of three young Indigenous people in remote areas graduate from Year 12.⁶ There is almost a 50/50 chance that I won’t have a job.⁷ I am ten times more likely than non-Indigenous

² Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Report*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/indigenous/Health-Performance-Framework-2014/tier-1-health-status-and-outcomes/120-infant-and-child-mortality.html>

³ Nearmy, T. 2018, Closing the Gap in Indigenous literacy and numeracy? Not remotely – or in cities, *The Conversation*, 8 February, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <http://theconversation.com/closing-the-gap-in-indigenous-literacy-and-numeracy-not-remotely-or-in-cities-88704>

⁴ Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2018, *Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <https://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2018.pdf?a=1>

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009, *School Attendance and Retention for Indigenous Australian students*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=indigenous_education

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014, 4102.0 Australian Social Trends: ‘All Things Being Equal’, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0main+features72014>

⁷ Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait*

Australians to be removed from my family and put into foster care or out-of-home services.⁸ I am twenty-five times more likely to end up in youth detention than other Australians.⁹ Twenty-five times! It should be no surprise then that I am more likely to end up in prison than at university. I am eleven times more likely to be imprisoned than other Australians. But it is worse for Aboriginal women who are a reflection of myself; I am fifteen times more likely to end up behind bars, and the number of Indigenous women in prison has skyrocketed in recent years.¹⁰ Once we are in the system, we are much more likely to reoffend than other prisoners.¹¹ I am twice more likely to die by suicide than other Australians, and three times more likely to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm.¹² While Australia has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world, the picture is not great for me. My male family members are likely to live to just 69 years old; nearly eleven years less than other Australian men. And it is no better for the Aboriginal women in my family who will die on average nine and a half years sooner than other non-Indigenous women.¹³ We have a frighteningly long way to go if we are to improve the lives of Australia's First Nations Peoples and redress the lasting impacts of historical wrongs.

For these reasons, I have brought my hammers and my fists to everything I do in life, because as an Aboriginal woman I have two glass ceilings to shatter. In reflecting on my life journey so far, Yapug first, and now my undergraduate degree, will assist me in beating those statistics. Without pathways like Yapug, which supports Indigenous students to gain entry into university, Aboriginal students such as myself would be unable to pursue an undergraduate degree. The following statement by American Historian and anti-slavery commentator, Edward Hale, truly reflects the importance of the individual actor in changing the course of history, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do" (Greenough, 1902, p. 172). My passion for law is matched only by my love affair with achieving justice for Australia's First Nations people, so my decision and aspirations to specialise in constitutional law and land rights comes sincerely from the heart. But these aspirations do not belong to me. They belong to the generations of Australia's First Nations people who will come after me.

Islander Health Performance Framework Report, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/indigenous/Health-Performance-Framework-2014/tier-2-determinants-health/207-employment.html>

⁸ Australian Institute of Family Studies 2018, *Children in Care*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/children-care>

⁹ National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Legal Services 2017, *The Crisis of Indigenous Youth Detained in Australia*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <http://www.natsils.org.au/portals/natsils/Joint%20NATSILS%20and%20Amnesty%20Written%20Statement.pdf?ver=2017-08-28-121158-510>

¹⁰ Australian Law Reform Commission 2017, *Pathways to Justice – Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people Report 133*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/publications/fr133_11._aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_women.pdf

¹¹ Willis, M. 2008, 'Reintegration of Indigenous prisoners: key findings', *Trends & Issues in Crime & Criminal Justice*, no. 364, pp. 1–6, retrieved 6 December 2018 from <http://ezproxy.newcastle.edu.au/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sxi&AN=34409025&site=eds-live>

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017, *3303.0 Causes of Death, Australia, Intentional Self-Harm in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3303.0~2017~Main%20Features~Intentional%20self-harm%20in%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20people~10>

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018, *Deaths in Australia*, retrieved 7 December 2018 from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths/contents/life-expectancy>

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