In this article I discuss a story told by the South Australian Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal elder, Aunty Hilda Wilson (nee Varcoe), about the time when, at not quite sixteen, she was sent from the Point Pearce Aboriginal Station to work in the Adelaide Hills, some 500 kilometres away, as a housekeeper for “one of Adelaide’s leading doctors”. Her secondment was part of a widespread practice in early and mid-twentieth century Australia of placing young Aboriginal women “of marriageable age” from missions and government reserves into domestic service. Consciously deploying Indigenous storytelling practices as pedagogy, Hilda Wilson recounted this episode in a number of distinct ways during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Across these iterations, each building on the other, she exhibited a personal resilience in her subjectivity, embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems of relationality, kin and work, which informed her agency and determination in a challenging situation in which she was both caring for a white socially-privileged family of five, while simultaneously grappling with the injustices of a state system of segregated indentured labour.

Kirmayer and colleagues propose that “notions of resilience emerging from developmental psychology and psychiatry in recent years address the distinctive cultures, geographic and social settings, and histories of adversity of indigenous peoples”. Resilience is understood here as an ability to actively engage with traumatic change, involving the capacity to absorb stress and to transform in order to cope with it (Luthar et al.). Further to this, in an Indigenous context, Marion Kickett has found the capacity for resilience to be supported by three key factors: family connections, culture and belonging as well as notions of identity and history. In exploring the layers of this autobiographical story, I employ this extended psychological notion of resilience in both a domestic ambit as well as the broader social context for Indigenous people surviving a system of external domination. Additionally I consider the resilience Aunty Hilda demonstrates at a pivotal interlude between girlhood and womanhood within the trajectory of her overall long and productive life, and within an intergenerational history of resistance and accommodation.

What is especially important about her storytelling is its refusal to be contained by the imaginary of the settler nation and its generic Aboriginal-female subject. She refuses victimhood while at the same time illuminating the mechanisms of injustice, hinting also at possibilities for alternative and more equitable relationships of family and work across cultural divides. Considered through this prism, resilience is, I suggest, also a quality firmly connected to ideas of Aboriginal cultural-sovereignty and standpoint and to, what Victoria Grieves has identified as, the Aboriginal knowledge value of sharing (25, 28, 45).

**Storytelling as Pedagogy**

The story I discuss was verbally recounted in a manner that Westphalen describes as “a continuation of Dreaming Stories”, functioning to educate and connect people and country (13-14). As MacGill et al. note, “the critical and transformative aspects of decolonising pedagogies emerge from storytelling and involve the gift of narrative and the enactment of reciprocity that occurs between the listener and the storyteller.” Hilda told me that as a child she was taught not to ask questions when listening to the stories of an Elder, and her own children were raised in this manner. Hilda's oldest daughter described this as a process involving...
patience, intrigue and surprise (Elva Wanganeen). Narratives unfold through nuance and repetition in a complexity of layers that can generate multiple levels of meaning over time. Circularity and recursivity underlie this pedagogy through which mnemonic devices are built so that stories become re-membered and inscribed on the body of the listener. When a perceived level of knowledge-transference has occurred, a narrator may elect to elaborate further, adding another detail that will often transform the story’s social, cultural, moral or political context. Such carefully chosen additional detail, however, might re-contextualise all that has gone before. As well as being embodied, stories are also emplaced, and thus most appropriately told in the Country where events occurred. (Here I use the Aboriginal English term “Country” which encompasses home, clan estate, and the powerful complex of spiritual, animate and inanimate forces that bind people and place.)

Hilda Wilson’s following account of her first job as a housekeeper for “one of Adelaide’s leading doctors”, Dr Frank Swann, provides an illustration of how she expertly uses traditional narrative forms of incrementally structured knowledge transmission within a cross-cultural setting to tell a story that expresses practices of resilience as resistance and transformation at its core.

**A “White Doctor” Story: The First Layer**

Aunty Hilda first told me this story when we were winding along the South Eastern Freeway through the Adelaide hills between Murray Bridge and Mount Barker, in 1997, on our way home to Adelaide from a trip to Camp Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri cultural education centre co-founded by her granddaughter. She was then 86 years old. Ahead of us, the profile of Mt Lofty rose out of the plains and into view. The highest peak in the Mount Lofty ranges, Yurrebilla, as it is known to Kaurna Aboriginal people, or Mt Lofty, has been an affluent enclave of white settlement for Adelaide’s moneyed elite since early colonial times. Being in place, or in view of place, provided the appropriate opportunity for her to tell me the story.

It belongs to a group of stories that during our initial period of working together changed little over time until one day two years later she added contextual detail which turned it inside out.

Hilda described the doctor’s spacious hill-top residence, and her responsibilities of caring for Dr Swann’s invalid wife (“an hysteric who couldn’t do anything for herself”), their twin teenage boys (who attended private college in the city) along with another son and younger daughter living at home (pers. com. Hilda Wilson). Recalling the exhilaration of looking down over the sparkling lights of Adelaide at night from this position of apparent “privilege” on the summit, she related this undeniably as a success story, justifiably taking great pride in her achievements as a teenager, capable of stepping into the place of the non-Indigenous doctor’s wife in running the large and demanding household. Successfully undertaking a wide range of duties employed in the care of a family, including the disabled mother, she is an active participant crucial to the lives of all in the household, including to the work of the doctor and the twin boys in private education. Hilda recalled that Mrs Swann was unable to eat without her assistance. As the oldest daughter of a large family Hilda had previously assisted in caring for her younger siblings. Told in this way, her account collapses social distinctions, delineating a shared social and physical space, drawing its analytic frame from an Indigenous ethos of subjectivity, relationality, reciprocity and care.

Moreover Hilda’s narrative of domestic service demonstrates an assertion of agency that resists colonial and patriarchal hegemony and inverts the master/mistress-servant relationship, one she firmly eschews in favour of the self-affirming role of the lady of the house. (It stands in contrast to the abuse found in other accounts for example Read, Tucker, Kartinyeri. Often the key difference was a continuity of family connections and ongoing family support.) Indeed the home
transformed into a largely feminised and cross-culturalised space in which she had considerable agency and responsibility when the doctor was absent. Hilda told me this story several times in much the same way during our frequent encounters over the next two years. Each telling revealed further details that fleshed a perspective gained from what Patricia Hill Collins terms an “epistemic privilege” via her “outsider-within status” of working within a white household, lending an understanding of its social mechanisms (12-15). She also stressed the extent of her duty of care in upholding the family’s well-being, despite the work at times being too burdensome.

The Second Version: Coming to Terms with Intersecting Oppressions

Later, as our relationship developed and deepened, when I began to record her life-narrative as part of my doctoral work, she added an unexpected detail that altered its context completely:

> It was all right except I slept outside in a tin shed and it was very cold at night.

Mount Lofty, by far the coldest part of Adelaide, frequently experiences winter maximum temperatures of two or three degrees and often light snowfalls.

This skilful reframing draws on Indigenous storytelling pedagogy and is expressly used to invite reflexivity, opening questions that move the listener from the personal to the public realm in which domestic service and the hegemony of the home are pivotal in coming to terms with the overlapping historical oppressions of class, gender, race and nation. Suddenly we witness her subjectivity starkly shift from one self-defined and allied with an equal power relationship – or even of dependency reversal cast as “de-facto doctor’s wife” – to one diminished by inequity and power imbalance in the outsider-defined role of “mistreated servant”. The latter was signalled by the dramatic addition of a single signifying detail as a decoding device to a deeper layer of meaning.

In this parallel stratum of the story, Hilda purposefully brings into relief the politics in which “the private domain of women's housework intersected with the public domain of governmental social engineering policies” (Haskins 4). As Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out,

> what for White Australia was cheap labour and a civilising mission, for Indigenous women constituted stolen children and slavery. Protection and then assimilation were government policies under which Indigenous women grew up. (96)

Hilda was sent away from her family to work in 1927 by the universally-feared Sister Pearl McKenzie, a nurse who too-zealously (Katinyeri, Ngarrindjeri Calling, 23) oversaw the Chief Protector’s policies of “training” Aboriginal children from the South Australian missions in white homes once they reached fourteen (Haebich, 316—20). Indeed many prominent Adelaide hills’ families benefited from Aboriginal labour under this arrangement. Hilda explained her struggle with the immense cultural dislocation that removal into domestic service entailed, a removal her grandfather William Rankine had travelled from Raukkan to Government House to protest against less than a decade earlier (The Register December 21, 1923).

This additional layer of story also illuminates Hilda’s capacity for resilience and persistence in finding a way forward through the challenge of her circumstances (Luthar et al.), drawing on her
family networks and sense of personhood (Kicke tt). Hilda related that her father visited her at Mount Lofty twice, though briefly, on his way to shearing jobs in the south-east of the state. “He said it was no good me living like this,” she stated. Through his active intervention, reinforcement was requested and another teenager from Point Pearce, Hilda’s future husband’s cousin, Annie Sansbury, soon arrived to share the workload.

But, Hilda explained, the onerous expectations coupled with the cultural segregation of retiring to the tin shed quickly became too much for Annie, who stayed only three months, leaving Hilda coping again alone, until her father applied additional pressure for a more suitable placement to be found for his daughter. In her next position, working for the family of a racehorse trainer, Hilda contentedly shared the bedroom with the small boy for whom she cared, and not long after returned to Point Pearce where she married Robert Wilson and began a family of her own.

**Gendered Resilience across Cultural Divides**

Hilda explicitly speaks into these spaces to educate me, because all but a few white women involved have remained silent about their complicity with state sanctioned practices which exploited Indigenous labour and removed children from their families through the policies of protection and assimilation. For Indigenous women, speaking out was often fraught with the danger of a deeper removal from family and Country, even of disappearance. Victoria Haskins writes extensively of two cases in New South Wales where young Aboriginal women whose protests concerning their brutal treatment at the hands of white employers, resulted in their wrongful and prolonged committal to mental health and other institutions (147-52, 228-39).

In the indentured service of Indigenous women it is possible to see oppression operating through Eurocentric ideologies of race, class and gender, in which Indigenous women were assumed to take on, through displacement, the more oppressed role of white women in pre-second world war non-Aboriginal Australian society. The troubling silent shadow-figure of the “doctor’s wife” indeed provides a haunting symbol of - and also a forceful rebellion against – the docile upper middle-class white femininity of the inter-war era. Susan Bordo has argued that that “the hysteric”

> is archetypal of a discourse of ‘pathology as embodied protest’ in which the body may [...] be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view in extreme or hyperliteral form. (20)

Mrs Swann’s vulnerability contrasts markedly with the strength Hilda expresses in coping with a large family, emanating from a history of equitable gender relations characteristic of Ngarrindjeri society (Bell). The intersection of race and gender, as Marcia Langton contends “continues to require deconstruction to allow us to decolonise our consciousness” (54). From Hilda’s brief description one grasps a relationship resonant with that between the protagonists in Tracy Moffat’s *Night Cries*, (a response to the overt maternalism in the film *Jedda*) in which the white mother finds herself utterly reliant on her “adopted” Aboriginal daughter at the end of her life (46-7).

**Resilience and Survival**

The different versions of story Hilda deploys, provide a pedagogical basis to understanding the broader socio-political framework of her overall life narrative in which an ability to draw on the
cultural continuity of the past to transform the future forms an underlying dynamic. This demonstrated capacity to meet the challenging conditions thrown up by the settler-colonial state has its foundations in the connectivity and cultural strength sustained generationally in her family. Resilience moves from being individually to socially determined, as in Kickett’s model.

During the onslaught of dispossession, following South Australia’s 1836 colonial invasion, Ngarrindjeri were left near-starving and decimated from introduced diseases. Pullume (c1808-1888), the rupuli (elected leader of the Ngarrindjeri Tendi, or parliament), Hilda’s third generation great-grandfather, decisively steered his people through the traumatic changes, eventually negotiating a middle-path after the Point McLeay Mission was established on Ngarrindjeri country in 1859 (Jenkin, 59). Pullume’s granddaughter, the accomplished, independent-thinking Ellen Sumner (1842—1925), played an influential educative role during Hilda’s youth. Like other Ngarrindjeri women in her lineage, Ellen Sumner was skilled in putari practice (female doctor) and midwifery culture that extended to a duty of care concerning women and children (teaching her “what to do and what not to do”), which I suggest is something Hilda herself drew from when working with the Swann family. Hilda’s mother and aunties continued aspects of the putari tradition, attending births and giving instruction to women in the community (Bell, 171, Hughes Grandmother, 52-4). As mentioned earlier, when the South Australian government moved to introduce The Training of Children Act (SA) Hilda’s maternal grandfather William Rankine campaigned vigorously against this, taking a petition to the SA Governor in December 1923 (Haebich, 315-19). As with Aunty Hilda, William Rankine used storytelling as a method to draw public attention to the inequities of his times in an interview with The Register which drew on his life-narrative (Hughes, My Grandmother, 61). Hilda’s father Wilfred Varcoe, a Barngarrla-Wirrungu man, almost a thousand kilometres away from his Poonindie birthplace, resisted assimilation by actively pursuing traditional knowledge networks using his mobility as a highly sought after shearer to link up with related Elders in the shearing camps, (and as we saw to inspect the conditions his daughter was working under at Mt Lofty).

The period Hilda spent as a servant to white families to be trained in white ways was in fact only a brief interlude in a long life in which family connections, culture and belonging (Kickett) served as the backbone of her resilience and resistance. On returning to the Point Pearce Mission, Hilda successfully raised a large family and activated a range of community initiatives that fostered well-being. In the 1960s she moved to Adelaide, initially as the sole provider of her family (her husband later followed), to give her younger children better educational opportunities. Working with Aunty Gladys Elphick OBE through the Council of Aboriginal Women, she played a foundational role in assisting other Aboriginal women establish their families in the city (Mattingly et al., 154, Fisher). In Adelaide, Aunty Hilda became an influential, much loved Elder, living in good health to the age of ninety-six years. The ability to survive changing circumstances, to extend care over and over to her children and Elders along with qualities of leadership, determination, agency and resilience have passed down through her family, several of whom have become successful in public life. These include her great-grandson and former AFL football player, Michael O’Loughlin, her great-nephew Adam Goodes and her-granddaughter, the cultural weaver Aunty Ellen Trevorrow. Arguably, resilience contributes to physical as well as cultural longevity, through caring for the self and others.

Conclusion

This story demonstrates how sociocultural dimensions of resilience are contextualised in practices of everyday lives. We see this in the way that Aunty Hilda Wilson’s self-narrated story resolutely defies attempts to know, subjugate and categorise, operating instead in accord with distinctively Aboriginal expressions of gender and kinship relations that constitute an Aboriginal sovereignty. Her storytelling activates a revision of collective history in ways that valorise
Indigenous identity (Kirmayer et al.). Her narrative of agency and personal achievement, one that has sustained her through life, interacts with the larger narrative of state-endorsed exploitation, diffusing its power and exposing it to wider moral scrutiny. Resilience in this context is inextricably entwined with practices of cultural survival and resistance developed in response to the introduction of government policies and the encroachment of settlers and their world. We see resilience too operating across Hilda Wilson's family history, and throughout her long life. The agency and strategies displayed suggest alternative realities and imagine other, usually more equitable, possible worlds.

References


