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CHAPTER

Encounters with Racialized Ignorance: Case Studies for Narrative Truth-Telling in the Humanities and Social Sciences 🔓

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Abstract

The study draws on research by Indigenous and social archaeologists, Indigenist scholars, and philosophers to expose forms of ignorance caused by racialization. Indigenous doctoral students from Ghana, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste decided to partner with two non-Indigenous philosophers to share narratives—"storyworks" (Archibald 2008)—aimed at exposing racialized ignorance in research involving Indigenous peoples and in places marked by colonial heritage. The shared narratives focus on encounters with white ignorance as understood by political philosopher Charles Mills. According to Mills (2007, 2015), white ignorance refers to epistemic malpractices caused by white racial privilege and mechanisms of cultural transmission that perpetuate racialization. The essay begins with a critical exposition of Mills' concept of white ignorance, which is interpreted from the perspective of the theory of distributed truth-telling. This analysis is then followed by a series of truth-telling narratives— Storyworks 1 to 6—and philosophical exegeses regarding decolonization efforts.

Keywords: distributed truth-telling, decolonization, Indigenous storytelling, racialization, storyworks, white ignorance

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1. Storyworking Racialized Ignorance

We are writing in a global context marked by (1) the lingering effects of historical dispossession, subjugation, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2016; Ninomiya et al. 2023), and (2) the resilience of Indigenous communities and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledges (Coulthard 2014; Langton and Corn 2023; Smith 2021; Watene 2024; Wiredu 2002). In this context, taking Indigenous narratives seriously is a crucial part of repairing historical and testimonial injustices (Bullot and Enciso forthcoming). In inquiries into such injustices, Indigenous scholars have emphasized the importance of practices identified as "storywork" (Archibald 2008).

In contemporary Indigenous scholarship, *storywork* refers to stories that can communicate social understandings and generate knowledge about how to transform institutions and practices (Archibald 2008; Archibald, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo 2019; Atalay 2020; Behrendt 2019). In the present study, we build on research by Indigenous and social archaeologists (Atalay 2020; McNiven 2016; Munawar 2024; Porr and Matthews 2019; Schneider and Hayes 2020; Smith, Ralph, and Pollard 2017), Indigenist scholars (Archibald, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo 2019; Moreton-Robinson 2015), and philosophers (Haslanger 2000; Mills 2017; Wylie 2015) to analyze six storyworks aimed at exposing cases of ignorance caused by racialization. Specifically, we propose that storyworks can contribute to the description and evaluation of a social phenomenon that Charles Mills calls *white ignorance*, which denotes "a non-knowing grounded specifically in white racial privilege" (Mills 2015, 217).

The truth-telling narratives we share are invitations to researchers in archaeology, the humanities, and the social sciences to use resources available in Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophies to critically examine the pervasiveness and self-erasing aspects of white ignorance. The seminal thoughts articulated in our inquiry arose from a workshop devised to introduce critical thinking resources for doctoral students. The workshop was hosted at Flinders University and featured participation from Indigenous researchers as well as people working with diverse Indigenous communities. Indigenous participants in the room resonated with Mills' account of white ignorance and began sharing how encounters with white ignorance had affected their personal and professional lives. It was agreed that the Indigenous researchers should write down these narratives as part of general truth-telling efforts to foreground Indigenous voices in higher education contexts as well as decolonize research. In addition, it was agreed that the non-Indigenous coauthors could usefully contribute their own reflections on the concept of white ignorance.

In what follows, Indigenous narratives on white ignorance shared at the workshop by three Indigenous doctoral students from Timor Leste, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea (Storyworks 1 to 4), and non-Indigenous narratives shared by two philosophers (Storyworks 5 and 6) are intertwined with philosophical reflections. We begin with a brief survey of the concept of white ignorance and the contribution that narratives can make to truth-telling and decolonization efforts.

2. White Ignorance Versus Distributed Narrative Truth-Telling

The concept of white ignorance refers to a web of epistemic malpractice defined by "what whites characteristically get wrong" (Mills 2015, 217–218). The background claim to the philosophical theory of white ignorance is that, at least since the colonization of the Americas, "whites were (and are) in general privileged across the planet, originally saw themselves as the superior race, and that this foundational miscognition necessarily ramified throughout their other perceptions, conceptions, and theorizations, both descriptive and normative, scholarly and popular" (Mills 2015, 218). In other words, as white people came to dominate the world, they started imposing their parochial understandings and conceptual frameworks on non-whites. This led to the racialization and subjugation of non-whites.

It is important to note that Mills' account of white ignorance does not just apply to white people. White ignorance "will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved" (Mills 2007, 22)—see Storywork 6 for an exemplification. It is necessary, then, to understand white ignorance as a phenomenon of cultural entrenchment of epistemic malpractice and bias. It is "a particular optic, a prism of perception and interpretation, a worldview" (Mills 2015, 217–218) rather than a set of individual beliefs that are simply mistaken.

Mills (2007, 2015) does not directly discuss the dependence of white ignorance on cultural learning (Heyes 2018; Ingold 2022; Tomasello 1999) and cultural entrenchment through scaffolding (Wimsatt 2014; Wimsatt and Griesemer 2007). Mills' descriptions are consistent, however, with the thought that white ignorance is a major problem precisely because it refers to culturally entrenched biases and epistemic malpractice (see Bullot and Enciso forthcoming). Mills expresses the problem of the cultural entrenchment of white ignorance through a metaphor of an ignorant agent that fights back. White ignorance is epistemic malpractice that is "militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly" (Mills 2007, 13). What the active character of white ignorance suggests is the necessity of a counter-active effort to break the "deep cognitive naturalization of Eurocentrism and whiteness in our outlook" (Mills 2015, 222)—here, again, we interpret "naturalization" as a descriptor used by Mills to refer to the problem posed by the cultural entrenchment of epistemic malpractice. In higher education and research, one manifestation of this phenomenon of cultural entrenchment can be readily identified: "Whites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions" (Mills 2007, 34). When white ignorance is at work, "people of color will be denied credibility and the alternative viewpoints that could be developed from taking their perspective seriously will be rejected as a priori wrong" (discussing Fricker 2007; Mills 2015, 222) —a process we illustrate in Storyworks 1 and 3.

Mills argues that each of us has a duty to contribute to truth-telling practices and moral revolutions that can end the injustices associated with white ignorance. He notes: "[a]chieving a new world will require an admission of the white lies that have been central to the making of our current unjust and unhappy planet"; a thought he clarifies by stating that "global justice demands, as a necessary prerequisite, the ending of global white ignorance" (Mills 2015, 225). But what can be done to end white ignorance? In what follows, we apply Bullot and Enciso's (forthcoming) conception of truth-telling, which suggests that a form of truth-telling they refer to as "distributed truth-telling" can end white ignorance. In Bullot and Enciso's account, distributed truth-telling corresponds to grassroots truth-telling efforts unlinked to formal state processes implicated in racialization (Bullot and Enciso, forthcoming). Specifically, distributed truth-telling is conceptualized as a set of non-elitist practices that weave three components: first, multisite, multiformat, and multiscale inquiries into injustices; second, remedial imaginings and reasoning about moral repair and reconciliation futures; and finally, emotions suitable for motivating agents to cooperatively plan and implement the social changes that undermine white ignorance.

The present study suggests that storyworks can be an important instrument for distributed truth-telling. As exemplified by Storyworks 1 to 6, narrative truth-telling is a way of exposing the misrepresentations and malpractice pertaining to white ignorance. In so doing, truth-telling of the appropriate type can forge the improved understanding necessary for transforming structures and institutions away from upholding white racial dominance. Historical narratives are one of the cognitive resources that can help in ending the collective denial that feeds white ignorance and marginalizes Indigenous voices.

One objection to the epistemic use of narratives is premised on the view that the dependence of narratives on speculation and intuitive psychology undermines their epistemic credibility. This view has led some philosophers of science to devalue the use of narratives in scientific thinking (Rosenberg 2018). We think, however, that this concern can be surmounted. Narratives can productively postulate relatively speculative causal connections between well-documented events separated by phenomena marked by a local underdetermination of evidence. As noted by Currie and Sterelny, this speculative and imaginative component

of narratives "can aid in overcoming local underdetermination by forming scaffolds from which new evidence becomes relevant" (Currie and Sterelny 2017, 14). In other words, narratives can assist historical inquirers to fill gaps in the existing evidence, whether these gaps have arisen from the aging process or, as described in Storyworks 4 and 5, because evidence has been deliberately destroyed or tampered by human agents.

The role of narratives as scaffoldings for searching for and finding novel evidence is relevant to exposing white ignorance notwithstanding its insidious self-erasing proclivities—see Storyworks 4, 5, and 6. Despite the fact that a variety of manifestations of white ignorance are well-documented, one of its distinctive features is the routine erasure of the evidence of its own production. Caroline Elkins (2022), for example, has exposed how British imperial authorities systematically destroyed archival evidence to conceal the atrocities involved in Britain's various colonial projects. The challenge posed by this self-erasure is why place-based, detailed historical narratives by people who have encountered white ignorance can be so important to building credible evidential resources about white ignorance. By enriching our cultural and political understandings of the historical contexts in which the mechanisms of white ignorance operate, narratives can provide a means to fill the evidential gaps left by the routine self-erasure of white ignorance.

In the next two sections, Indigenous doctoral students report storyworks describing their encounters with white ignorance. Storyworks 1 to 4 exemplify how Indigenous narratives—and, in later sections, non-Indigenous Storyworks 5 and 6—pertain to a kind of distributed truth-telling that can help erode collective denial and white ignorance. Mills was adamant that the point of talking about the concept of white ignorance was to defeat it: "improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression" (Mills 2007, 22). The narratives we share are intended to contribute to an ongoing discussion about how the bureaucratic structures regulating research practices in Western tertiary institutions (Storyworks 1–3) and cultural heritage institutions (Storyworks 4 and 5) remain steeped in white ignorance despite increasing efforts to decolonize them (Storywork 6). The narratives reveal that many protocols maintained by these institutions are inappropriate for Indigenous people doing research outside the realm of Western borders and contexts. The point of telling these narratives, and of our distributed truth-telling, is to change these structures and practices in line with the objectives of decolonization and Indigenous empowerment.

3. White Ignorance in Academic Institutions

In this section, we report storyworks in which the narrators describe encounters with white ignorance in academic research contexts. Storyworks are written in the first person to more effectively communicate the perspective of the person who experienced the events recounted. Some details have been intentionally omitted, however, to protect the authors from the risk of silencing and retaliation.

3.1. Storywork 1: White Ignorance About Interviewing in Timor-Leste

I would like to share encounters with white ignorance and epistemic injustices experienced during my academic journey as an Indigenous doctoral student. These experiences not only made me feel belittled but also impacted my mental health. The first epistemic injustice I experienced occurred while I was preparing to conduct fieldwork using qualitative data, specifically Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

During our preparation of the interviews, a white senior colleague in a position of authority over me advised me to follow a guidelines book on how to conduct FGDs properly. I was sent a series of literature reviews that provided general instructions describing how to best conduct FGDs. As a PhD student, I listened and took the time to read and understand the guidelines. It became clear to me, however, that the pieces of advice provided in the guidelines would be challenging to apply in the context of Timor-Leste. This is because all the examples

were based on a Global North (developed countries) perspective. When I expressed my views on this matter to my academic colleague, I was ignored. I was asked to follow the guidelines because they had been corroborated by peer-reviewed work. Therefore, my experiences were overlooked by my academic colleagues because I was labeled as an inexperienced international PhD student. This experience can be understood following Chilisa (2019) as academic imperialism, where there is a dominance of Western knowledge and practice over local intellectual and cultural traditions. This led to the dismissal of my Indigenous knowledge, a form of epistemic injustice that Miranda Fricker (2007) identifies as testimonial injustice.

Although I could see the flaws in the prescribed guidelines that contradicted what was happening at home, I chose to accept the prevailing opinion to avoid conflicts with my colleague in position of authority. During our fieldwork, it became evident that the method that the guidelines suggested on how to conduct the FGDs failed to be context-sensitive to Timor-Leste. As an example, the guidelines did not consider that participants tend to arrive late by Western standards. The delays in participant arrival resulted from rural residency, limited access to transportation, and inadequate road infrastructure. I am not claiming that all the preparatory rules outlined in the book were irrelevant. Rather, these rules became irrelevant during the fieldwork. Following the guidelines felt unnecessary because they were written by someone who had neither experienced the cultural context of Timor-Leste nor conducted research fieldwork there. For example, it took us almost two hours to conclude the discussion for each FGD with Timorese participants, which is much longer than the forty-five minutes recommended by the guidelines. This is not surprising to me because Timorese people take their time to build trust through extended conversations. By contrast, in the Global North, forty-five minutes can be sufficient to conduct an FGD because time is monetized and wasting hours for volunteer works ought to be avoided.

After that first experience, I started to notice that my Indigenous expertise and my Indigenous voice were systematically dismissed. I was repeatedly told that my arguments were just opinions because they had "no scientific credibility" in the realm of academia. As Absolon (2022) shows, research students often are overpowered. This issue connects to my second experience after the fieldwork, wherein the data in the local Indigenous language (Tetum) needed to be transcribed and translated into English. My senior academic colleague advised me not to handle the Tetum-to-English translation because they were concerned about the potential for data manipulation and interpretative bias. So, I agreed with the advice, and the project hired a professional translator. Initially, I assumed the translator would be a native Timorese speaker with the capacity to understand the figures of speech used by Timorese, which are tricky to comprehend and translate for non-native speakers. Surprisingly, the translator who was hired turned out to be an Australian who had been residing in Timor-Leste for some time and had expertise in English-to-Tetum translation. However, being able to translate Indigenous languages and concepts into English requires bicultural skills and knowledge (Absolon 2022).

My senior colleague requested that I transcribe the audio recordings of interviews in Tetum. While doing so, I noticed that the Timorese participants used many figures of speech. To ensure that the translator understood the nuances in my transcription, I wrote down exactly what the Timorese said during the FGDs. However, when my colleague sent the transcription to the Australian translator, he emailed my colleagues stating that the Tetum text resembled something written in a Timorese newspaper. The implied meaning of this statement was that the Tetum text was not formal academic language. My senior colleague then showed me the email correspondence with the translator, which suggested that my Tetum was inadequate, according to the Australian translator. I felt indignant that a white person was asserting knowledge of my own language over that of an Indigenous native speaker. I found it insulting to my Indigenous acumen. Yet, as a student, I felt powerless and did not know how to respond. I cried and felt caught in the vise of a moral dilemma. But I knew that the translation contradicted the original language, Tetum. So, I begged my colleague to listen to the Tetum version and compare it to the English version again for verification. However, I was not allowed to do so.

For the sake of my own PhD project, but against my senior colleague's demands, I decided to verify the translation to ensure the reliability of my research work. It is crucial to gain an understanding of the Indigenous context to ensure the validity of the research and its applicability to reality (Kovach 2021). My PhD project is part of a larger initiative in which my academic colleagues also participate as team leaders and chief investigators. Therefore, when we presented together at conferences or symposiums, questions were raised by the government, academics, and other Indigenous people. During these presentations, I found myself having to correct my senior colleagues when answering questions. Eventually, my senior colleagues gained awareness of the translation errors made by the non-Indigenous translator.

The impact of white ignorance in academia is particularly evident for international students, especially those coming from the Global South, and it affects their well-being due to social injustice. Furthermore, students' status can impact their ability to share their lived experiences, as they are often perceived as lacking scientific credibility.

3.2. Storywork 2: Whitening Research Ethics and Working with Children

In the spirit of decolonizing African research and philosophies (Wiredu 1998, 2002), I will share personal experiences from my time at an Australian university to illustrate the manifestations of white ignorance. These examples suggest that white ignorance is not simply a lack of knowledge; rather, it is often a stubborn proclivity to dismiss diverse ways of knowing. This systemic dismissal creates epistemic barriers and reinforces colonial power dynamics in the processes of knowledge production and research grant application.

The first experience relates to my time as a doctoral researcher. During a submission of an ethics application for fieldwork, I encountered an issue that later drew my attention to concerns about white ignorance in institutional guidelines. My research focused on young people, including individuals as young as fourteen and fifteen years old, so I initially designed my project to include this group. However, in line with my university's ethical guidelines and as in many other countries, including Australia, individuals under eighteen years are categorized as minors. Consequently, I was required to obtain a Working with Children permit before I could include potential participants below age eighteen in my study. Moreover, I would need to conduct interviews with these minors through their guardians.

In my response, I explained that although these young migrants were classified as children, they were actively engaged on their own in informal economic activities pertinent to the study area, such as migration and street vending (sometimes with a more senior person, but never with a parental carer), and that I could ethically and safely access and interview them. I further clarified that the Working with Children permit system did not exist in the country where my study was conducted, but this explanation did not suffice. The committee remained resolute, emphasizing that without the permit, I could not include participants under age eighteen in my research.

Although legitimate in an Australian context, the requirement of a Working with Children permit imposed a bureaucratic burden that was inappropriate and unrealistic given the specific cultural and legal realities of my research project. As a result, I was constrained by these circumstances to exclude all potential research participants below eighteen years. This resulted in a loss of insights regarding the migration experience of young people, which could have enriched my research. These young migrants possessed valuable experiences and perspectives critical to understanding the topic I was researching: the migration of young people. Their exclusion not only narrowed the scope of my study but also highlighted the challenges of applying rigid Western ethical frameworks to research in non-Western contexts, where local social realities can significantly differ from Western contexts.

3.3. Storywork 3: Whitening Publications

The second instance of white ignorance occurred in relation to publications in African journals compared to journals from Western countries. A colleague of mine, also a student from a developing country, prepared a grant application for fieldwork related to their doctoral research, with their supervisor as the primary applicant. As part of this application, my colleague needed to list their publications from the last five years. Most of my colleague's publications were in journals that are published in Africa and developing countries. However, upon reviewing the application for submission, the supervisor decided to remove all the papers published in African journals, retaining only those published in Western outlets. The supervisor did so without providing any explanations and then submitted the application. While the grant application was eventually approved, this decision devalued my colleague's contributions and years of work. The decision also indicates systemic bias in favor of knowledge generated in Western contexts and by Western researchers.

By excluding my colleague's research without regard for content quality, the supervisor undermined the credibility of African journals and erased important knowledge needed to understand local issues from a non-Western perspective, even if they were applying for funding. This experience demonstrates systemic problems in academia, where Western publications are often seen as the gold standard, while research from the Global South is marginalized. It raises questions about the types of knowledge valued in global academic hierarchies and perpetuates inequalities in recognizing diverse scholars.

3.4. Exegesis

The experiences narrated in Storywork 1 illustrate racialized ignorance in which Indigenous or Global South scholars are either discredited or marginalized (Mills 2007, 2015). The white colleague's insistence on following FGD guidelines, which are inappropriate in the context of Timor-Leste, evidences a disregard for Indigenous knowledge and localized experience. Critics could argue that adhering to specific guidelines is not a racialized disregard but a reflection of methodological rigor and consistency in academic standards. Although methodological rigor is necessary, the assumption that Western-centric guidelines could be applied universally disregards the local social context and Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. As academics, we have the responsibility to identify and engage with various ways of knowing rather than rigidly applying one-size-fits-all guidelines that have not been tried in different cultural and geographic contexts. This experience could also be explained through epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007). Epistemic injustice occurs when certain voices are marginalized within knowledge systems. This can happen through testimonial injustice, where a person's knowledge is devalued (Fricker 2007). The dismissal of the student's knowledge of the local conditions perpetuates an epistemic injustice, where the Indigenous scholar's insights are devalued due to their perceived lack of scientific "credibility."

The experience with ethics committees in applying guidelines for Australian society to a different cultural context in Storywork 2 aligns with the concept of white ignorance. The insistence on adhering to Australian ethical standards for research involving minors, regardless of the local context, is a reflection of the colonial knowledge hierarchy that treats Western norms and policies as universally applicable. This illustrates a core aspect of white ignorance, wherein Western standards are considered superior and universally applicable to all situations, overlooking local cultural and social realities (Mills 2007). Although consent is required to collect data on people between the ages of eight and seventeen in the study area, there are no requirements for parental consent (Munung et al. 2022). This means that, according to local standards, the researcher could have obtained the consent of young people to participate in the study.

By imposing a Working with Children permit requirement in a context where it is neither legally nor culturally necessary, the ethics committee ignored the complex realities of young people's lived experiences in the study area. It could be argued that the ethics committee was just observing established protocols and that enforcing

ethical standards such as the Working with Children permit are ways of protecting and promoting the safety and well-being of vulnerable populations like minors. However, the point is not the safety of minors, which the researcher could have ensured, but the failure to acknowledge the diversity of research contexts and ethical perspectives. As scholars like Simpson (2007) and Smith (2021) contend, imposing external ethical standards on Indigenous or local communities diminishes their agency and perpetuates a kind of epistemic violence. Non-Western ways of knowing and being are silenced and subsumed under Western epistemological frameworks. Compared with Mills' white ignorance, epistemic violence is more concerned with marginalized knowledge and the structural impacts of exclusion, as exemplified in this storywork. Yet both concepts demonstrate how power influences what is known, valued, or dismissed in order to validate and continue social injustices and marginalization. From these concepts, we realize the necessity of critical reflexivity, in which knowledge systems become inclusive and are critically aware of the power structures within knowledge production and its dissemination.

The committee's decision exemplifies white ignorance because it fails to register that adulthood norms vary across cultures. In a variety of Indigenous societies, individuals under eighteen years of age can take on family and community responsibilities that deviate from the Western norms regulating childhood dependency. For example, in many non-Western societies, individuals as young as fourteen or fifteen can engage in economic activities and care for their siblings. These engagements grant them agency and maturity, which are enabled by distinctively Indigenous norms and expectations along with economic necessity (Bucholtz 2002; Nieuwenhuys 1996; Thorsen 2010). This is especially clear in migration contexts, where these young people play a vital role in supporting their families and contributing to local economies through remittances (Thorsen 2010). Blind adherence to the Australian norms upheld by the ethics committee leads researchers to overlook the lived realities of these young people. This blind adherence, therefore, causes what Mills describes as "non-knowing." Mills' concept of white ignorance involves not just a lack of awareness but also an active denial or unwillingness to engage with perspectives that challenge or differ from Western frameworks, typically because Western frameworks are perceived as superior to the frameworks used by racialized groups. The ethics committee's insistence that Australian standards should take precedence over local contexts is a clear example of this kind of racializing and hierarchy-based ignorance.

Storywork 2 reflects a broader pattern in academia where research ethics developed in the Global North may override local cultural norms in the Global South. This perpetuates epistemic hierarchies that marginalize non-Western knowledge. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) contends that this type of ethical imposition is a form of epistemic colonialism, reinforcing Western control over knowledge production and prioritizing Western perspectives over local voices. Addressing white ignorance in an academic setting would require reflexive and flexible approaches in ethical considerations, as well as ensuring that local realities and voices are respected and not marginalized within cross-cultural research contexts.

In Storywork 3, white ignorance is evidenced by the Western senior researcher's exclusion of publications from African journals by the supervisor. That exclusionary decision implies that only knowledge from Western institutions is worthy of recognition in funding applications. Although it could be argued that the decision was made to improve the chances of winning the grant given its competitiveness. That sort of decision, however, undermines the contributions of African researchers and reflects systemic epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007), wherein biases discredit certain voices, particularly from the Global South. Consequently, African scholarship is marginalized—first by being excluded from prestigious Western journals and, second, by being excluded from funding applications. This is a net loss of knowledge because it dismisses valuable local perspectives and insights crucial for understanding African contexts and issues.

The supervisor's exclusion of African-published papers highlights how epistemic hierarchies contribute to global knowledge inequality. In academia, Western journals are often seen as the ultimate standard (and are ranked as such by publication platforms such as Scimago Journal and Country Rank, https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php). This view has been shaped by persistent colonial attitudes that

regard Western knowledge as universal while diminishing non-Western scholarship as anecdotal or marginal. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), this reflects epistemic coloniality, where colonial power structures influence the valuation of knowledge, undermining contributions from other regions. This bias restricts the inclusivity of global scholarship, creating intellectual blind spots that hinder a fuller understanding of various disciplines and social phenomena.

Mills' concept of white ignorance is helpful to illustrate how academic publishing often prioritizes Western perspectives, sidelining contributions from non-Western regions. By favoring Western journals, academia encourages scholars from the Global South to seek legitimacy through these outlets, which can diminish the perceived value of African journals and reduce academic diversity. Indigenous knowledge, particularly from African societies and developing regions, can however provide insights that challenge dominant Western narratives. Neglecting research produced through African expertise and fosters a narrow viewpoint that ignores the rich cultural and economic diversity present worldwide (Ludwig et al. 2021).

The exclusionary approach to publishing described in Storywork 3 significantly affects whose knowledge is valued in academia. In the famous work on epistemic imperialism, "Can the subaltern speak?", Spivak (1988) questions whether marginalized groups, such as African and Global South researchers, can participate on equal terms when their platforms are undervalued. After more than thirty years, the same question lingers in the minds of researchers from many disciplines (Lackey 2022; Rayne et al. 2023; Santos 2016; Walker 2006). The experience shared in Storywork 3 highlights the need for an epistemic shift that acknowledges diverse cultural and geographic contributions. The supervisor's decision exemplifies white ignorance and reinforces Western intellectual dominance while silencing local and non-Western publishers and denying the global academic community valuable knowledge.

To address the problem posed by exclusionary approaches to publishing, institutions must dismantle deep-rooted biases, promote equity in publishing, and value diverse knowledge systems. Instead of perceiving publishers from the Global South as inferior, academic environments should recognize that regional journals offer essential insights, delivering context-specific perspectives on complex issues. Workshops, seminars, and training focused on truth-telling and epistemic justice could play a crucial role in cultivating a culture of awareness in academic environments. Dotson (2014) emphasizes that promoting institutional reflection on epistemic privilege prompts scholars to scrutinize their own biases. By implementing these initiatives, institutions can tackle the epistemic harms identified by Fricker (2007) and work toward dismantling white ignorance.

4. The Impact of White Ignorance on Mental Health

Researchers have noted the transgenerational effects of the trauma trails caused by colonization and dispossession on Indigenous peoples (Atkinson 2002, 2015; Ninomiya et al. 2023). In this section, we report a fourth piece of storywork, which is an act of Anga truth-telling exemplifying how white ignorance has caused psychological and cultural trauma to members of the Anga community of Papua New Guinea. The Anga is one of the many tribes in Papua New Guinea. The tribe's region is on the border of the Eastern Highlands, Morobe, and Gulf Provinces—for more information, see Whitehead (2004).

4.1. Storywork 4: Two Fires

To contribute to Anga truth-telling, I wish to report the mental anguish and moral dilemma I experienced from inquiring into the way Baptist missionary Bonny Cruz—known at the time as "Master Bonny"—and his associates treated the sacred material culture of the T'navqa clan in the highlands of Morobe Province in Papua New Guinea. The T'navqa clan, located in the upper part of Tauri River, is one of the twelve clans of the Anga Tribe. This story was recounted to me by my cousin brothers, who witnessed the event as children. They were initially reluctant in sharing because of social pressure caused by white ignorance. Bonny arrived in Hanjuah village in the early 1980s, and his actions triggered significant shifts in the cultural history of our clan. First, Bonny found a way to have himself accepted in the community. Next, he succeeded in converting clan elders, such as the fathers of my two cousin brothers, to Baptist Christianity. With these new Indigenous converts, Bonny succeeded in spreading Christianity and non-Indigenous values across the T'navqa clan. Bonny also obtained assistance in the building of an airstrip from people of the clan.

The event I wish to recount involves the *haus man* of Wawoka village. Wawoka was one of the three foundational villages of the T'navqa clan, which now comprises sixteen villages. In Tok Pisin, the creole language of Papua New Guinea, the word *haus man* denotes a sacred house typically built by each clan of a tribe. In the Anga tribe, the *haus man* is a large round house where mostly male rituals and initiations take place. Young novices live in this house with other male warriors until they have become fully initiated, eligible to build a hut, and get married. One day, Bonny and the new Indigenous converts collected all the sacred artifacts of the sun available in Wawoka and dismantled the *haus man*. The artifacts that were piled in disarray at the center of Wawoka village included *hika* (clubs), *yuaka* (bows), *yipeyaga* (necklaces), *zandqa* (cassowary bone dagger), and *zingqaja* (Anga Jew's harp).

The high cultural significance of the artifacts piled in a heap by Bonny and his aides stemmed from their association with distinctive Anga artistic, defensive, and ritualistic skills. For example, the zandqa bone dagger was crafted from the thigh bone of a cassowary, with zigzag lines and bands carved in relief, and a piercing in the upper section (for insertion of a carrying strap). The zandqa was typically painted in black or red to symbolize its importance in a clan of the Anga tribe. Hika clubs are distinctive because Anga is one of the rare highlands tribes to use wooden clubs. Whereas most highlanders have set battles with bows and arrows, the Anga preferred raiding tactics in warfare. Yuaka (bows) and yii (arrows) were nonetheless important to Anga warriors, who were expected to start training at a very early age in the use of bows and arrows to protect their land, children, and wives. The yipeyaga necklaces were used for spiritual defense; in Angan language, yipeyaga means "to ward off." The tassels were made of human hair braided over with traditional bilum (bag) string with yellow orchid vine fiber; the center ornament is usually a dried sack of a possum scrotum. The yipeyaga was worn by women and children to ward off evil spirits. Lastly, the zingqaja was a musical instrument played using the lips to produce distinctively Angan tunes, which were sorrowful when in mourning and joyful during feasts. It was crafted from strong bamboo gathered near streams or rivers. Each clan has its own zingqaja design, and the chosen design typically symbolized the clan's totem.

What Bonny and his accomplices did next is still filling my mind with dread and moral anguish. They set ablaze the heap made of all the collected artifacts in front of the bereft villagers; and all the sacred artifacts were reduced to a bonfire and, eventually, ashes. Sounds of mourning and weeping could be heard fading along with the dispersion by the wind of the sacred ashes. Bonny and the new Indigenous converts used the bonfire to denounce traditional Anga artifacts and rituals as satanic forms of idol worship. Around the same time, they banned a variety of cultural practices, such as manhood rituals. In addition, they attempted—but failed—to disturb our sacred smoked mummified bodies (*amiqa dinga*) in the *Yaruqui Hike* cave. Smoked mummies are traditionally located in a sacred cave located in the jungle or the *haus man* owned by each clan (Beckett 2021; Beckett and Nelson 2015). Each clan has a sacred place in which they smoke and preserve dead warriors or elders deemed important to their clan. *Amiqa dinga*, the name of our smoked mummies, literally means "warrior spirit" in Angan language. The site of our amiqa dinga is sacred, and women are not allowed to enter

the cave or see the mummies. Novices who have gone through the nose-piercing rituals, elders, and warriors are the only people in the clan who can enter these caves. Since the incidents I recounted, the roof of the Yaruqui Hike cave has caved in, and the site has remained inaccessible to the world.

The bonfire in Wawoka village and similar acts caused the loss of ancestral heritage and entrenched a long-lasting conflict between Indigenous beliefs and missionary zeal. The knowledge and skills for making a hika are lost. The yipeyaga necklace is no longer seen or worn in my clan because the skills to craft it have faded with the passing of elderly women in the clan. The zingqaza harp is rarely heard being played in my clan, and its tunes have been replaced by Western music. Arguably, the combined impact of colonial endeavors, missionary influence, and white ignorance on Anga culture have causally contributed to these cultural extinctions.

In 2019, the devastating fire at the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral elicited grief across the entire world and yet hope for restoration. I wish that the bonfire of Anga artifacts and cultural losses of the T'navqa clan were grieved in the same way. If that loss were grieved by the entire world, our anguish could become a source of hope for a restoration of Anga culture.

Personally, I call for accountability in the Christian Church for the past acts of destruction of Anga artifacts. What is needed is the entrenchment of cross-cultural philosophical practices that can end racialization and white ignorance. However, I am facing a moral dilemma. Although I want the perpetrators to be held accountable, I do not want to foster divisions in my clan and the tribe. So, holding people accountable may not be a practicable course of action. Following this line of thinking, several Anga people and my clan members with whom I had discussions feel that nothing can be done to right the wrongs of the past. This grievous dilemma was imposed on me by colonial circumstances and white ignorance.

4.2. Exegesis

Focused on one example, Storywork 4 identifies biases that are indicators of two types of injustice. The first injustice is the destruction of Anga artifacts (along with similar injustices committed in other Indigenous tribes in Papua New Guinea), which racializes Anga people by vilifying their material culture and, ultimately, by perpetrating the willful destruction of their sacred artifacts. This is consistent with other evidence indicating that the Anga tribe has routinely been racialized in pre-independence Papua New Guinea. Examples of racism abound in the literature about Papua New Guinea and the Anga tribe published by Australian officials and reporters. For example, Simpson (1953) reports the racist opinion of W. R. Humphries as follows: "Humphries had a low opinion of the 'wild, hostile Kukukuku [*derogatory name of the Anga tribe*],' who were, he said, 'fierce and untamable as the wind' and not unlike gorillas—'with the exception in the gorilla's favor, he doesn't eat man." He added: "*They appear to me to be at a very low stage of evolution.*" (Simpson 1953, 16; emphasis in the original). Simpson attempts to correct Humphries by stating: "At a low stage of social development, yes; but not of man's evolution. The Kukukuku is *homo sapiens* like you and me" (16). Simpson's rectification, however, exemplifies white ignorance regarding Anga social organization and Anga sovereignty.

The second injustice is that the primary injustice—the vilification and cultural destruction—is worsened by global white ignorance consisting of the global public's indifference to the primary injustice committed by Bonny, the Baptist missionary in Anga tribe, as well as the unjust actions committed in other Indigenous tribes. The Anga narrator contrasted this indifference to willful cultural destruction to the worldwide outrage at the accidental fire of Notre-Dame de Paris. Nobody has ever cared to mention this testimonial injustice until the writing of the present text.

5. Non-Indigenous Encounters with White Ignorance

Racializing institutions and social practices will only be transformed through a collective effort involving people from multiple cultural backgrounds learning how to understand one another and contribute together to the changes that need to be made. Learning how to understand one another involves the communication of epistemically valuable narratives. In the spirit of developing shared understandings, there would be something missing if the two non-Indigenous authors did not also share narratives about their experiences with white ignorance. The non-Indigenous authors acknowledge the possibility that these narratives will disclose elements of white ignorance of which the narrators themselves are not yet aware.

5.1. Storywork 5: A Palace for the Encrustation of French-Styled White Ignorance

Growing up as a child in the capital of France meant errancy among a labyrinth of bone grey pavements, polluted streets, and dirty white architectures. Right at the edge of the *Bois de Vincennes* in the twelfth *arrondissement*, one building haunted my errands. The building—an Art Deco palace—was unique among surrounding Haussmann-style edifices. The monumental bas-reliefs encrusted on its façade depicted workers and animals from Africa and Asia. The depictions and their style—a heavy mixture of muscular expressionism and colonial realism—radiated a nightmarish atmosphere of abuse. At the time of my visits as a child, the palace hosted a mystifying collection of artifacts from remote lands combined with Art Deco furniture and frescoes. It also harbored an aging tropical aquarium in which a crocodile pit and aquatic creatures—including a mesmerizing electric eel—both enchanted and distressed my weekends. While immersed in the inner labyrinth of the palace, I recall the lingering feeling that something there was amiss. Each artifact oozed the sadness of a stolen child. The bas-reliefs allegorized remote African and Asian peoples in some "happy" state of labor. But that characteristic felt ludicrous in the context of the political violences that were the historical backdrops of my errands—conflicts in New Caledonia, riots in migrant suburbs, and a Jihadist bombing witnessed by a friend of mine. Inside the palace, spooky silences, dusty frescoes, and weird labels made little sense to my besieged mind. The place felt like the agonizing trace of a colossal mishap, a disaster that nobody was able—or willing—to explain to a juvenile.

Only through my examinations and critiques of French colonialism did I, as an adult, find resources to explain the unease I felt as a child visitor. The palace, currently known as the *Palais de la Porte-Dorée*[1] (Palace of the Golden Gate), is a byproduct of both unjust colonial conquests and collective denial of colonial injustices (Aldrich 2005, 35–49; Daughton 2006). It was one of the edifices built on the occasion of the 1931 *Exposition coloniale internationale* (International Colonial Exhibition). Its initial purpose was to host the *Musée des Colonies* (Museum of the [French] Colonies). The 1931 *Exposition* was a monumental multiformat and multisite work of memorialization aimed at celebrating the French Colonial Empire and propagating the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) theorized by economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu (1874) in his book, *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes* (*On the Colonization of Modern Peoples*)—for an analysis, see Daughton (2006). The 1931 *Exposition* was the epitome of French white ignorance because the dominant discourses surrounding it failed to engage in truth-telling about the injustices perpetrated by French colonialists. These injustices included the deployment of racializing hierarchies by the French elite (for an analysis, see Aldrich 1996, 200–204; for examples of racist statements, see Leroy-Beaulieu 1874), the brutal coercion of Indigenous populations in the French empire (see, for example, Daughton [2021] on the tragic conditions of Indigenous labor used for building the Congo-Océan railroad), the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources, and the theft or vandalization of sacred Indigenous artifacts and sites.

To understand what is at stake in the silence and collective denial surrounding the *Palais* and the *Exposition*, I needed to undertake a stratigraphic social epistemology in the tradition of Mills' philosophy. I needed to

investigate the layers of racialized French ignorance that have been deposited in the infrastructure of the *Palais* and the cultural histories of its surroundings. Although the *Palais* is lauded as a landmark of Art Deco architecture, it ought to be known as a work of colonial memorialization, one that crystallizes French-style white ignorance magnified by Art Deco hubris.

5.2. Storywork 6: Growing Up Unawares in a Settler-Colony

I grew up in Darwin, in the Northern Territory of Australia, having been born to immigrant parents from Colombia, a country in the Global South with its own history of violently subjugating local Indigenous communities—a violent subjugation that is ongoing (Ruette-Orihuela et al. 2023). Despite growing up in a region with a high percentage of Indigenous inhabitants relative to other parts of Australia (Northern Territory Government 2024), I did not, throughout my childhood or teenage years, have much contact with Indigenous people, nor learn about the true history of Australia. Reflecting on my upbringing now, the multicultural communities in which my family spent time typically did not challenge their role in upholding the racial contract (Mills 1997; Moreton-Robinson 2015) as newly arrived migrants on stolen Indigenous lands. I remember a lot of casual anti-Indigenous racism ("the government gives them everything") that Australians who were otherwise dubiously tolerant of multicultural communities ("hard workers, you Colombians") tended to exhibit, and which migrants from the Global South intent on trying to fit into their new polity uncritically adopted. So, I understand when Mills says that white ignorance is not a phenomenon exhibited exclusively by white people. This ignorance is rather a lens through which the world is experienced, a lens that reinforces "white delusions" (Mills 2007, 34). At university in Melbourne, I finally became aware of the deep structural violence at the heart of the Australian nation (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Reynolds 2021). The legacy of *terra nullius* is clear for all to see in the myriad lasting traumas of colonization. As a philosopher, I believe in truth and justice. I believe it is my duty to help unmask the extent to which Australian society and institutions are steeped in white ignorance.

5.3. Exegesis

Storyworks 5 and 6 attempt to describe aspects of the experience of having one's early cognitive development surrounded by white ignorance. Storywork 6 illustrates how growing up surrounded by white ignorance in Australia produces feelings of belonging that mask the true history of the continent. Quandamooka philosopher Aileen Moreton-Robinson problematizes white Australian and non-white migrant feelings of belonging to Australia because those feelings are based on Indigenous dispossession: "The non-Indigenous sense of belonging is inextricably tied to this original theft" (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 5). When the feeling of belonging arises from unexamined white ignorance, it involves a "denial of the racialized structural power relations that have produced the legal conditions in which this sentiment is possible, enabled, and inscribed" (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 7). Part of the challenge is dismantling the culturally entrenched scaffoldings that enable and uphold white supremacy. Acts of truth-telling are needed to erode white ignorance, forge mutual understandings, and establish dispositions to engage in collective action toward constructing more just political arrangements. The future paths that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia might take to co-construct a sense of belonging to place require overcoming white ignorance.

In line with recent contributions to social archaeology (Burke and Smith 2010; Mizoguchi and Smith 2019; Smith, Ralph, and Pollard 2017), Storywork 5 is an invitation to engage in truth-telling about the management of colonial heritage. Rudiments of anticolonial truth-telling existed at the time of the 1931 *Exposition coloniale internationale*. There were, for example, French opponents to French colonialism in 1931 (Daughton 2011); and one notable artistic act of truth-telling against the 1931 *Exposition* was an anticolonial exhibition by a group of surrealist artists (Siepe 2015). However, this resistance has been dominated by layers of white ignorance encrusted in the numerous traces the *Exposition* left and in the administrative management of these traces by

French authorities. For example, white ignorance is literally sculpted in colonial buildings. The bas-reliefs covering the street-facing façade of the *Palais de la Porte-Dorée*, which were sculpted by Alfred Janniot,[2] and the interior frescoes of the *Palais de la Porte-Dorée*, are artistic imaginings of idealized life in colonized territories by non-Indigenous artists. Such representations are part of the network of representations that have maintained collective silencing about the colonial injustices perpetrated by the French colonial empire and its army (Aldrich 1996, 6; Daughton 2006, 2021). For example, neither colonial explorers nor explicit acts of colonial coercion are depicted in Janniot's bas-reliefs. The only reference to colonial conquest is a sailing ship, which alludes to, and perhaps heroizes, one of the early technologies for deploying colonial conquests.

Another line of evidence lies in the attempts by French authorities to de-emphasize the shameful colonial heritage of the *Palais* without engaging in good-faith truth-telling. The palace was first called *Musée des Colonies* from 1931 to 1935. Next, it was renamed *Musée de la France d'outre-mer* (Museum of Overseas France) in 1935, the *Musée des arts africains et océaniens* (Museum of African and Oceanian Arts) in 1960, and the *Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* (Museum of Arts from Africa and Oceania) in 1990 (until 2003). Eventually, the *Palais* was emptied of its colonial collections, which were relocated to the *Musée du quai Branly* (inaugurated in 2006). In 2012, the *Palais* started to host the *Musée national de l'histoire et des cultures de l'immigration* (National Museum of the History and Cultures of Immigration) (Blanc-Chaléard 2006), which might be interpreted as the first official attempt to instigate truth-telling about the colonial past and the problematic origins of the site. Such a naming volatility—when unaccompanied by authentic truth-telling about colonial injustice—illustrates the self-erasing nature of white ignorance, which strives toward the collective denial of past injustices.

In addition to white ignorance encrusted in colonial architecture, we need to account for white ignorance concerning the collected Indigenous artifacts, their histories, and their possible restitution. White ignorance is manifested in the ways artifacts acquired during colonial expeditions were exhibited in the *Palais*. First, typically, the unjust acts accompanying acquisition were not explained to the visitors of the *Palais*. Second, the artifacts were severed from the communities that created and used them. The relocation of several colonial collections to the *Musée du quai Branly* might have been an attempt to disconnect the artifacts themselves from colonial methods of exhibiting artifacts. It can be argued, however, that the curatorial decisions regarding the exhibition of Indigenous artifacts and artworks at the *Musée du quai Branly* fail to disclose the truth about their colonial history. Dias (2008) argues this point persuasively in a discussion of the double erasure of the past of these artifacts. According to Dias, "[a]lthough many of Branly's collections came from former French colonies, it is hard to find in the permanent gallery any hint about French colonial history. On the one hand, there is no historical information about the collections themselves, how they were acquired and collected.... On the other hand, colonial history is subsumed under the term 'contact between our country and non-Western cultures' . . . " (Dias 2008, 308). Dias concludes that "the colonial past is elusively erased at the Musée du quai Branly" (Dias 2008, 308). This analysis suggests that contemporary institutions such as the *Musée du quai Branly* have thus far failed to deliver effective and distributed truth-telling about French colonialism, the *Palais*, and the 1931 *Exposition*.

6. Conclusion

While it may be thought that the concept of white ignorance as developed by an African-American philosopher is not conducive to understanding the distinctive experiences of Indigenous people from Timor-Leste, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea, the narratives disclosed here demonstrate that the concept did resonate with the Indigenous doctoral students who participated in the workshop. It helped them understand and make sense of experiences they had been subjected to in their personal and professional lives. White ignorance emerged as a suitable concept for thinking about the marginalization of Indigenous voices and solutions within tertiary education, but also more generally for understanding the history and legacy of colonial acts of violence, disrespect, and misrecognition relevant to archaeology and the social sciences. The narratives shared by the non-Indigenous coauthors also contributed to increasing understanding of the nature and effect of this concept.

Dislodging white ignorance requires that we develop cogent understandings of the social mechanisms that contribute to the cultural entrenchment of such epistemic malpractices. The account proposed by Mills can be strengthened by using the theory of cultural learning and cultural scaffolding. Arguably, using a well-known insight from the philosophy of science, a better understanding of the social mechanism of white ignorance is needed to devise social interventions aimed at eroding or ending white ignorance. The narratives presented here help to increase understanding of how white ignorance functions. The narratives demonstrate the importance of decolonizing methodologies to ensure that research methods are sensitive to local contexts and priorities and contribute to ensuring that researchers attempt to do research with, by, and for Indigenous communities.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1   At the time of writing, an official documentation about the *Palais* can be found on the internet at https://www.palais-portedoree.fr/.

2   At the time of writing, online documentation on the bas-reliefs is available on the internet at https://monument.palais-portedoree.fr/en/the-decors/janniot-s-bas-relief.