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Short Communication: Geographic Insight in Brief

Storying as Repair: Indigenous-led Geography Education on Wiradjuri Country

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Abstract: Geography education seeks to encourage an appreciation of the diverse ways people relate to, value and understand place. Indigenous-led geography education offers multiple ways of relating to and learning about place that centres care and repair. Storytelling, in its diverse narrative and creative forms, is a core element of Indigenous ways of knowing and a powerful mode of learning. This commentary introduces, and offers reflections on, an ongoing project aiming to develop Country-led pedagogy in a highly valued water place within settler colonial Australia. Country-led pedagogy is a form of Indigenous-led geography education which invites people, in this case high school classes and a youth group, to learn from being on Country. While curriculum objectives are accommodated in the process, learning from Country is the priority, via storying and approaching repair in water places. As a collaboration between Country, local Aboriginal people, young people, natural resource managers, educators and researchers, we document how Indigenous-led geography education can contribute to transitions to more sustainable futures.

Keywords: Storying; repairing; Country-led pedagogy; water places; Indigenous-led learning; Aboriginal knowledge

Highlights:

- Country is an active teacher that shapes how students think, feel and learn.
- Repairing relationships with Country occurs through relational and care-oriented, storying.
- Students engage with a culturally significant water place under threat via reflective storying
- Students cultivate more hopeful, caring and reparative relationships with Country.
- On-Country Learning is grounded in respectful partnerships with Aboriginal communities.

1. Introduction

To effectively develop strategies that facilitate teaching for a world in transition, that aim to support sustainable transformations of place and that contribute to the repair of harmed places in so-called Australia, centring Country and Indigenous knowledges is key. This commentary outlines a project that centres Country and Indigenous knowledges to enable connections to water places to build more sustainable futures.

Country is a term used by Indigenous people in Australia to 'describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity' (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2025). For this project, 'on-Country Learning' refers to field trips to a highly valued water place called 'The Drip' on Wiradjuri Country within the Goulburn River National Park, a stunning sandstone cliff that drips water into the river below. The Drip is known to local Aboriginal people as a sacred women's place and is partly protected from surrounding coal mining

activity by Western conservation practices and healed through story and ceremony by local Aboriginal people (McLean, Hammersley & Sullivan, 2025).

We seek to describe efforts to support storying and repairing water places on Wiradjuri Country as an example of grounded, generative and responsive pedagogy that navigates complexity through on-Country Learning. In this context, storying refers to the sharing of stories of a particular place and relations with that place in diverse narrative and creative forms, including oral stories, art making and photography. Storying is the main practice of repair, in the sense that it centres knowledge and values of Aboriginal ways of caring for, protecting, and nurturing Country. Repair is understood here as relational care for places and communities, both human and non-human, who have experienced harm in order to sustain present and future life (De La Bellacasa, 2017; Carr, 2023; Osborne, 2023). As geographers, who variously identify as Aboriginal (Corrinne) and non-Indigenous settlers (Laura, Jessica and Fiona), we bring an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach (Miles, 2023) together with Aboriginal collaborators to the on-Country Learning experiences. The on-Country Learning experiences have emerged from a long-term collaboration between academics and local Aboriginal knowledge holders. Storying and repairing water places on Country are ambitious goals for a research project. We therefore offer the qualification that the collaboration invites Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people to spend time on-Country at The Drip to deepen their potential attachment to this highly valued water place, as well as expand their understanding of Aboriginal practices of care and repair, while acknowledging that the outcome of this project will emerge over time and may never be fully known.

A relational approach to learning, place and Country (Tynan, 2021) underpins this work, as does a collaborative approach to imagining and managing transitions. This approach is enacted through relationships with place, local Aboriginal people, a conservation government agency, high schools and youth services, and universities to facilitate on-Country Learning that contributes to just transitions away from harmful relations with place. We share initial insights on this process here as a contribution to this Special Issue on teaching geography for a world in transition.

2. The Drip and on-Country Learning

The On-Country Learning experience immerses students in a place that is situated within a culturally significant national park co-managed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations. The Drip is an ancient water place and sacred women's site, located on Wiradjuri Country, near Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia. Water percolates through a large sandstone escarpment that drips into the Goulburn River below, creating a cool sheltered environment that has nourished humans and more-than-humans for millennia. Guided by Indigenous Elders and artists, students and youth groups gain insights into the connections and interrelationships between water, people, place and living things by having the chance to walk and spend time at The Drip. Reflecting on these experiences, young people create meaningful artworks inspired by their learning, choosing how and with what materials, such as pencils, paint, brushes or their fingers, and photographs to express emerging understandings of this water place. Through the opportunity to hear, share and create stories through their art making, the young people can learn from and engage with Country.

This project is a collaboration between Mudgee Local Aboriginal Land Council (Mudgee LALC), National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS), two local high schools in Mudgee (Mudgee High School and St Matthews Central School), a youth group (funded by the local council), and Indigenous and non-Indigenous geographers at Macquarie, Western Sydney and Wollongong Universities. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council and started in mid-2023, building on prior long-term research relationships. In this time, the collaboration has facilitated four visits to The Drip, led by Aleshia Lonsdale who is a Wiradjuri artist, curator, knowledge-holder and Director of the Mudgee LALC, for students across different study areas. So far, students in the areas of Art (middle High School students), Aboriginal Studies (middle High School students), and the Support Unit (across lower and middle High School) have participated in the on-Country learning, with plans to work with early High School Geography and senior High School Photography in 2026.

Being at The Drip requires students to confront the realities of socio-ecological change and transformation. They step into a landscape shaped by ongoing conservation efforts and persistent undermining (McLean, Hammersley & Sullivan, 2025). The Drip is sustained by an aquifer increasingly affected by nearby coal mining, where decades of extraction and ongoing expansion continue to encroach upon and threaten groundwater and surface water systems, as well as box gum woodland and koala habitat (Figure 1). Water is routinely drawn from the Goulburn River and surrounding groundwater for mining activities and then returned with contaminants and varied water temperature, reducing the water quality. Despite the ongoing impacts of settler colonial and environmental pressures, The Drip continues to be a

place of care, culture, and connection for those who maintain enduring relationships with its waters and Country more broadly - it always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

These dynamics make The Drip a rich site for learning how extractive pressures sit alongside diverse water values in an important Aboriginal place. Here, students grapple with uncertainty, whilst cultivating hopeful relations of care and repair through narrative and creative storytelling and relational engagement.

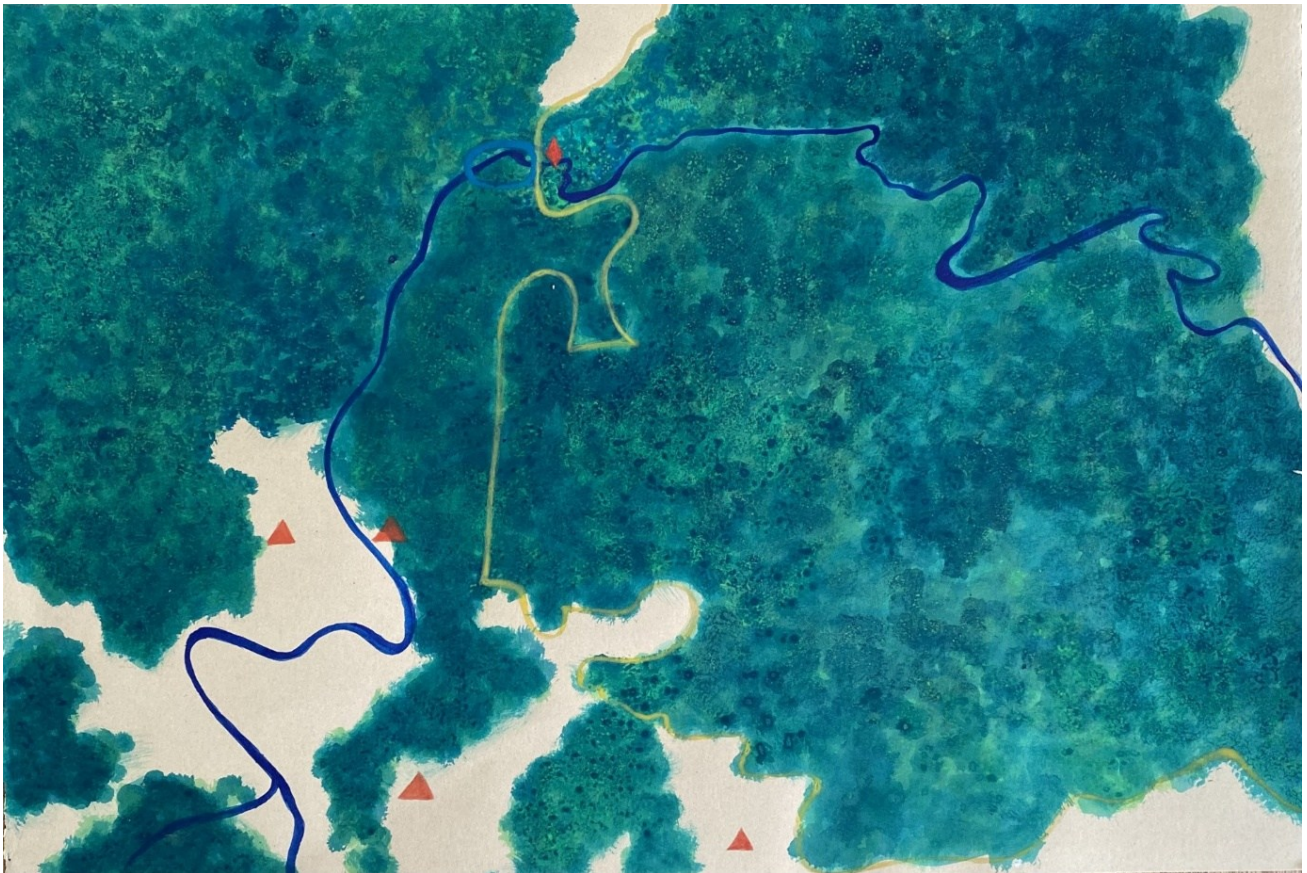


Figure 1. Map of The Drip, Wiradjuri Country, with surrounding mines marked by red triangles. By Jessica Leffley, Wiradjuri artist.

3. Storying: an Indigenous-led methodology

This collaborative project centres Aboriginal knowledges to story, care for, and repair Wiradjuri Country. Storytelling as a method, and means of research and knowledge sharing, drives this project, alongside artistic practices for cross-cultural collaboration (Cameron, 2012; De Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017). The on-Country Learning provides opportunities for custodians to reflect on their ongoing connections with Country and to share representations of these as appropriate.

Country is understood as kin, connecting and building relationships between itself with humans, animals, plants, water, sky, and even the air (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Tynan, 2021). Country is the original storyteller and also an active teacher. Communicating within these polysymbiotic relationships, and knowing and engaging with its stories, requires an understanding that Country is more than land (Bawaka et al., 2013). Yet, to ‘hear’ and learn from Country’s stories, becoming aware of ‘how to listen, sense and feel’, must be introduced and hopefully engaged with (Harrison et al., 2017, p.504). At the start and throughout the time at The Drip, young people, and by extension their teachers and carers, are being guided by Aleshia and Country through storying to draw awareness and connection to the environment (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020). This guidance is essential for students and young people to immerse themselves, to sense, explore, and begin their own dialogues with Country. In so doing, students can begin to relate to Country as sentient, as valued and as more than (land) resources (Arnold, Atchison & McKnight, 2021; Karukiyalu Country, Gordon, & Spillman, 2021).

Storying of Country is a powerful Indigenous method of curating and sharing knowledge and information about place (Somerville et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2012). Storying embodies deep connections to Country, people and ancestral wisdom manifesting in the weaving together of cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and philosophies of place. Storying is an ancient cultural method enacted to sustain, educate and impart knowledge that Indigenous peoples have practiced since the beginning of time (Sommerville et al., 2023). In this way, Country is both teacher and classroom, creating space for learning. In our case students and young people learn from and with Country rather than about it. Reshaping how students and young people understand themselves in relation to Country provides an opportunity to repair personal relations with the more-than-human world (Arnold, Atchison & McKnight, 2021).

4. Repair as a relational pedagogy

We also seek to contribute to an ongoing process of pedagogical repair. We suggest that geography, with its interdisciplinary openness and ethical responsibility, is well placed to lead efforts to decolonise teaching practice, acknowledging the discipline's complicity in the colonial project (Barker & Pickerill, 2024). Bruno et al. (2024) invite geographers to reflect on how to do the material work of decolonisation and repair. Drawing on their insights, and on the understanding that Country itself is pedagogy, we conceptualise this work of repairing as a process that begins to heal disciplinary and institutional wounds, while also intentionally bringing diverse knowledges and pedagogies together across disciplines and curricula. Vasudevan et al. (2023) have also emphasised the value of storytelling as 'anti-colonial praxis' in addressing environmental crises; they see storytelling as a way by which people can imagine otherwise, thereby opening "a space of possibility". Repair is deeply contextual, grounded in local histories and futures, where stories and storytelling can only be understood in relation to place (Bruno et al., 2024).

This focus on repair opens space for seemingly unconventional connections. For example, it allows the integration of on-Country Learning with study areas that may initially seem unrelated, an explicit intention expressed by the Mudgee LALC. For instance, thinking about how care for one special water place, The Drip, can inform relations of care with other water places that people are more familiar with that have experienced harm due to extractive and polluting practices. In doing so, our work aligns with Yuin Knowledge holder and educational scholar Anthony McKnight's (2016, p.20) approach to building meaningful knowledge-based connections, in which invites teachers to find 'points of connectivity' that 'parallel or work alongside their own knowledge production sites.' It also resonates with research by Kim and Muhič (2022) that shows how young people are able to share hidden geographies of valued places when invited to produce their own representations of these.

Repairing also involves a physical disengagement from the traditional classroom. Through embodied learning, we consciously avoid rigid teaching expectations and prescriptive learning outcomes, although remain supportive of the need for curriculum alignment. Instead of directing the learning, we support an experience that is generative and guided by Country, Indigenous Knowledge holders, and students. This approach supports pedagogical agency by giving students the freedom to engage with, and connect to, Country in their own ways. Here, teachers need to sit with the 'indeterminacy and uncertainty' of the learning experience (Harrison et al., 2017, p.508) as well as shift from the classical hierarchical role of teacher toward one that is more relational, responsive, and oriented to attentive engagement with Country (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020). Giving space for storying relies on embracing the unpredictable, slow, unfolding moments and movements, where learning emerges through sensorial engagement with Country, and knowledge is received and reflected upon, rather than extracted.

Across the four excursions so far, we have observed seasonal and temporal engagement at The Drip with each trip offering its own moments of learning. In winter, for example, students touched icicles hanging from the moss on The Drip, some enjoyed climbing across rocks to keep warm, while others removed their shoes and could not resist wading through, and drinking from, the cold water of the Goulburn River. On other occasions, we have been greeted by lyre birds, lizards, monitors and other curious creatures, who rely on the diverse ecological niches present in this ancient river valley. This type of embodied, sensorial and responsive learning supports students' capacities to actively look, listen, and feel, aligning with the understanding that 'Country becomes a teacher when we listen, observe, feel and respond' (Harrison et al., 2017, p.509).

After we have walked through the on-Country Learning, students and young people are then invited to reflect and create an art piece based on their own learning of The Drip. Here students and young people can explore, express and document their learning and understanding of this place. These artworks then become part of the story and by extension Country. The bringing together of embodied learning on Country, with reflective artmaking, photography, stories

and Indigenous knowledges, also provides a non-extractive way for students to reflect on place and further develop a practice of attentiveness and repair. The art that students generate at the end of their walk to and from The Drip evokes relational connections and a sense of the power of Country. For instance, this painting (Figure 2) by a student from the art class who visited The Drip in June 2024, shows how they have connected to this water place, positioning themselves within the lush colours of the landscape, and looking outward to engage with what the path offers.



Figure 2. Image of artwork by student from June 2025 (shared with permission)

5. Hopeful repair with Country

Repairing speaks to the ongoing work of cultivating relationships with Country and with each other. Repair, in this sense, emerges through situated and responsive engagement with a highly valued water place that invites learners to slow down, listen, and be attentive to what is around them. It is hoped that they develop a deeper attachment, appreciation, and sense of responsibility to this place. The work of repair in the context of this project also extends beyond individual relations and is also enacted structurally through the collaborative partnerships underlying this project between the LALC, NPWS, local high schools, youth services, and University researchers.

We use the term repair to conceptualise a two-fold approach that invites reconnection with Country while intentionally bringing into relationship different ways of knowing and being. In this framing, the work of repairing pedagogical relationships becomes inseparable from the work of pairing learners with diverse ways of knowing, including relational, embodied and Country-led knowledges. Pedagogical repair is enacted through relations of care, involving pairing learner and Country, storying with place, and bringing together diverse knowledges and ways of learning.

6. Indigenous-led geography education for more sustainable futures

Our disciplinary commitment to place-based pedagogy aligns with the relational and care-oriented focus of on-Country learning as a form of Indigenous-led geography education. We see this as a way of connecting students to local and global realities and complexities that reveal social-ecological processes of harm and identify ongoing threats to special places. Yet, by centring Indigenous knowledges and storytelling practices focused on repair, the possibility of

other ways of relating to place provides a source of hope for young people. Place-based pedagogy in settler colonial contexts such as Australia that do not acknowledge or engage with Indigenous knowledge has the potential to further perpetuate colonial harm and extractive relations with place. In contrast, On-Country learning in this context seeks to contribute to improved understandings of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations with Country and water, as well as facilitate inter-generational learning of Aboriginal knowledges and other approaches to ensure sustainability into the future through narrative and creative forms of storytelling. Our aim here is to teach students to be grounded and attentive to place. And to build new relations that might support weathering of potentially difficult transitions.

Future-oriented pedagogies in this Country, in this place, must therefore be built on helping students access knowledge of the past and present, rather than thinking of pathways to alternative realities in a linear manner. In other words, deeply acknowledging that land and waters always were, and always will be, Aboriginal land and waters, can potentially help ground just transitions that think of the future as intertwined with the past and present. Centring Country and enabling it to teach those wanting to learn, while simultaneously inviting multiple points of connection across curriculum with a geographic lens, is core to achieving more sustainable futures in settler colonial Australia.

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Contribution to the Special Issue Topics: This work contributes to the Special Issue themes of decolonising geography education and pedagogies of complexity. By centring Indigenous ways of knowing and Country-led pedagogies, we bring relational epistemologies into place-based learning. Our approach to storying and repairing a highly valued but contested water place demonstrates how Indigenous-led education can support more caring and sustainable futures in settler colonial contexts.

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