

Generative and Transformative Feminist Narratives of Women Knowing Otherwise

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ABSTRACT

*More-than-rational ways of knowing, in modern times, have been located as feminine processes. This has resulted in the systematic devaluing of intuitive, affective, embodied and relational ways of knowing through the privileging of the socially constructed masculine counterparts: objective rationality, logic and reason. In critical response, I draw on feminist narratives to recover the social value of more-than-rational ways of knowing. Using the Russian tale of Vasalisa the Wise from Clarissa Pinkola Estés' (1) feminist tome *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, I explore how knowing otherwise—other: as in more-than-rational, and wise: as in wisdom—shapes the lives of six women living on Awabakal and Worimi Country in Newcastle, Australia. A feminist narrative approach to knowing otherwise recovers strategies that local women draw on in critical, reflexive and intuitive ways. I conclude that knowing otherwise is generative and potentially transformative.*

Keywords: *Feminist, more-than-rational, intuition, women-centred, patriarchy, epistemology, storying*

INTRODUCTION

Coming to knowing otherwise

Growing up in a small coastal village on Dughutti Country¹ on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, Australia birthed a lifelong habit of nature-based reflection. I spent much of my childhood scaling cliffs to find the perfect crevice to wedge my small body into so I could sit for hours staring at the sea. These expeditions generated some of my earliest experiences of knowing otherwise. I had to be instinctual about which rocky paths to take. I learnt to listen to my body and anticipate its limits while cultivating visceral and emotional connections with the environment. As I grew up, I observed that these intuitive, instinctual, embodied, emotional, affective and connected ways of knowing were not widely valued. From a feminist socio-political perspective and through engaging with Estés' (1) tome *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (hereafter

WWRWW), I came to understand that knowing otherwise is a politicised act that recovers the social value of more-than-rational ways of knowing.

The locating of more-than-rational ways of knowing in modern times, as feminine processes has contributed significantly to the systematic devaluing of intuitive, affective, embodied and relational ways of knowing (4–10). In critical response, this paper privileges subjugated knowledges (and ways of knowing) through the telling of women's stories with the aim of decentring patriarchal epistemologies. Using the Russian tale of Vasalisa the Wise from WWRWW, I explore how knowing otherwise—other: as in more-than-rational, and wise: as in wisdom—shapes the lives of six women living on Awabakal Country in Newcastle, Australia. The integration of the tale is a novel embodiment of my methodological commitment to storying. I argue that knowing otherwise cultivates generative, and potentially transformative, strategies that local women draw on in critical, reflexive and intuitive ways to challenge a global patriarchy.²

¹Country is vital, living and dynamic. It is both a place and a living entity (2,3). I use the term Country to pay respect to the traditional custodians of the stolen lands where I work and live, and to honour Country itself.

²Positioning patriarchy as a global phenomenon does not reduce it to a singular, universal form, nor does it mean that patriarchy is evident in all societies.

I begin by situating myself within the research, acknowledging the influences and motivations for investigating women's experiences of knowing otherwise. I then, provide a concise discussion about the contributions and need for more-than-rational ways of knowing and being in the world. Following this, I introduce the story of Vasalisa to set up the substantive discussion of how the nine tasks undertaken by Vasalisa map out how local woman take up critical, reflexive and intuitive ways of knowing and being. I conclude that knowing otherwise, when used intentionally, is generative and potentially transformative.

I AM ALWAYS HERE

There is a growing awareness of the importance of acknowledging and unpacking researcher's epistemological assumptions in reflexive and open ways (12–14). I bring to the research an inter subjective world informed by my perceptions and experiences. In this way, I am always present. Feminist scholars like Stanley and Wise (10) stress that reflexive praxis is needed through all stages of a project: from design, through inquiry and in writing up.

Research' is a process which occurs through the medium of a person—the researcher is always and inevitably present in the research. This exists whether openly stated or not; and feminist research ought to make this an open presence (10).

Embracing the feminist strategy of researcher reflexivity, I aim to further decentre patriarchal epistemologies (10). Who I am, where I come from and what motivates me, shapes the work I do and is critically formed through my woman-ness. In this context, woman-ness refers to the complex layering of experiences, knowings, emotions and histories that encompass what it means for me to be a woman, at this time and in this place.³ This is distinct from womanhood, which implies a singular semi-fixed identity. My woman-ness is

Rather, I use the term to point to the pervasive reach and manifold tools and strategies of patriarchy that are socially and culturally contextual and require localised responses (11).

³I evoke expanded social constructionist understandings of the terms 'woman' and 'women' that are not wedded to biology or gendered stereotypes and use the terms to refer to all self-identifying women. In addition, discussions in this paper of 'feminine' and 'masculine' are also understood in social constructionist terms (see 15).

geographically, genealogically and spiritually situated.

I was born on Yanaguana Country (San Antonio, Texas, USA), home of the Payaya clan of the Coahuiltecan peoples. I currently live on Awabakal Country in Muloobinba, named by colonisers as Newcastle, Australia. I was born on and live on stolen/colonised lands. My father's family is of English/Celtic heritage, while my mother has Romani, Irish, Scottish and Nordic origins. I associate my attraction to knowing otherwise with these ancestral roots and their influence on my woman-ness are embodied through my spiritual practices and connections with place and above all, my love of stories. As a librarian, my mother ensured that stories and books were ever-present throughout my childhood. Stories have always helped me make sense of the world and my places in it. In acknowledging and making apparent these influences, I move toward an understanding of knowing otherwise through critical engagement with my lived experiences and ways of knowing and being.

LOCATING THE WILD WOMAN

More than a quarter of a century on and WWRWW (1) still sparks important conversations. Drawing on her Native American/Mexican Spanish/Hungarian heritage, Estés retells myth-based stories to locate what she calls the Wild Woman archetype. WWRWW (1) is popularity and accessibility⁴ is part of what makes the book both celebrated and criticised. It is arguably Estés' (1) most influential and well-known work. The author's intention was to create a piece that speaks to all woman about their power and struggles as a remedy to the pervasiveness of patriarchal forces (17,18). However, in doing so, she has come under criticism for generalising women's experiences and for retelling cultural stories out of context (19). Importantly, Estés is aware of the potentially problematic nature of this criticism and takes care to situate and acknowledge the origins of the stories told in WWRWW as a way of attending to issues of knowledge and power.

Bringing to light the circular relationship of knowledge and power, Foucault shows that the political conditions from which knowledge are produced, are imbued with power, through claims

⁴ It made the New York Times bestsellers list in 1992 staying there for a then record-breaking 145 weeks and has been since published in 37 different languages (16).

to truth (21,22). Put simply, specific discourses are used to privilege specific knowledges and ways of knowing (see 22). In late modern neoliberal societies, patriarchal discourses privilege rational ways of knowing over other ways. Building on this understanding, Stanley and Wise, argue that the persistent dominance of objective rationality discourses since the Enlightenment period reflects a cultural internalisation of a masculine Cartesian worldview (10). They conclude that masculine ontologies, like Descartes' (one of the founding fathers of rational thought), favour the "masculine, rational, thinking, mind" above the "feminine, intuiting, feeling, body" and significantly, that this internalised epistemological hierarchy influences social life (10).

In an act of critical resistance, WWRWW (1) offers up generative strategies of transformation aimed at recovering the social value of knowing otherwise. The book is intended to be both informative and instructive. Each chapter begins with a woman-centred myth-based story followed by an explanation of the symbolism and potential application for connecting with and embodying the Wild Woman archetype. Through engaging with WWRWW (1), readers are invited into relationship with knowing otherwise. The research drawn on in this paper centres on chapter three, which explores the story of Vasalisa the Wise and the nurturing of intuition.

NOSING OUT THE BABA YAGA

Vasalisa the Wise is a Russian version of an ancient tale told across Eastern Europe and Baltic regions with origins that predate ancient Greek culture (1). This women's story is handed down to new generations to instruct how to be an instinctual and intuitive woman. The story begins with the words "once there was and once there was not" to let us know that this tale is not bounded by time or place (1). What follows is an abridged version adapted from the story told by Estés (1).

The Doll in Her Pocket: Vasalisa the Wise

"Once there was and once there was not" a young girl called Vasalisa (1). One morning, she is called to her dying mother's bedside. The kindly mother gives her a small doll dressed in Vasalisa's likeness with red boots, a white apron and black skirt. The mother tells Vasalisa to keep the doll with her always. She explains that

the little doll will help guide her if she is ever unsure, and that the doll needs to be fed. And with this gift and blessing, the good and kindly mother dies.

After some time, the father remarries a widow with two daughters who are cruel to Vasalisa behind his back. They conspire to get rid of her. One night, they "make the hearth fire go out... [and] send Vasalisa into the forest to Baba Yaga, the witch, to beg for fire... [knowing that the old] Yaga will kill and eat her" (1).

As Vasalisa navigates the forest looking for Baba Yaga, she reaches into her pocket and consults the doll about which way to go and the doll indicates "this way" or "that" (1). Soon, she passes three men on horseback dressed in red, white and black; who bring the dawn, day and night.

Eventually, the doll leads Vasalisa to Baba Yaga who is indeed a very "fearsome looking creature... [with an even stranger house that sits] atop huge, scaly yellow chicken legs" (1). Vasalisa asks for some fire.

The Yaga will not simply give Vasalisa the fire, first she has to perform a number of tasks: cooking, cleaning and separating this from that (mildewed corn from good corn, poppy seeds from dirt). Only if these tasks are done well will Vasalisa be given the flame. And with the help of the doll, they complete every task.

When "the Yaga returns...[and finds] nothing undone, she is pleased... but not pleased because she can find no fault" (1). Baba Yaga takes "a skull with fiery eyes from her fence and put[s] it on a stick" (1). She gives it to Vasalisa and pushes her out into the night.

Vasalisa runs home through the forest asking the doll which way to go. At one point, Vasalisa becomes fearful of the "skull's fiery weight and thinks to throw it away" (1). But she listens to the skull, who "speaks to her and urges her to calm herself and to continue toward home. And so she does" (1).

As the stepfamily sees Vasalisa approaching, "they [run] to her, saying they have been without fire since she left" (1). Vasalisa feels proud that she successfully navigated the forest and negotiated with the Baba Yaga to bring home the fire. Yet, the fiery skull on the stick knows all and "watches the stepsisters' and the stepmother's every move and burns into them,

and by morning it has burnt the wicked trio to cinders” (1).

And with that the story ends abruptly, thrusting us back into the present to look at the world with new understandings of what it means to know otherwise.

RESTORING THE MORE-THAN-RATIONAL TO KNOW OTHERWISE

As the fiery light shines out of the skull’s ears, eyes, nose and mouth, we are reminded that Vasalisa can now “hear, see, smell, and taste things out” too (1). The nine tasks undertaken illuminate how to know otherwise. Vasalisa’s initiatory journey acts as an entry point for my research, which seeks to understand how stories like this resonate and connect with local women’s lives and sense of agency. The small sample and specific location of my study offers a snapshot. The insights from the six self-identifying feminist-activist women participants demonstrate how the story reveals generative strategies of resistance and transformation. Through a series of reflective journal entries (completed both before and after reading the chapter on Vasalisa) and a four-hour narrative-based focus group discussion, participants were invited to share stories about how knowing otherwise shapes their lives. Borrowing from LeBaron and Alexander’s definition of generative stories as fostering and representing “compassion, hope, strength and resilience” (23), I demonstrate how the more-than-rational ways of knowing represented in this myth-based women’s story are functionalised, felt and embodied in daily life.

As I explore the nine tasks, I will introduce you to the participants using self-chosen pseudonyms and drawing from self-descriptions. I note that what follows are specific readings and interpretations of the text that do not take away from, nor diminish, the myriad other ways of seeing, experiencing or reading the story. The personal stories selected not only demonstrate points of connection but also highlight the challenges and disconnections with knowing otherwise.

Task 1. Letting the Too-Good-Mother Die

Estés explains that letting the too-good-mother die is about letting go of being “too nice” or “too good” (1). Despite feminist interventions, in contemporary neoliberal societies, women are still encouraged—explicitly and implicitly—to be compliant, accommodating and sweet (1). For Jane, letting

the too-good-mother die resonates personally and professionally. Jane is an European Australian with strong cross-cultural influences having grown up in Thailand and the Philippines, as well as in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. She work with social enterprises fostering community development and sustainability initiatives.

I really connected with the experience of letting the too-good-mother die: learning to be true to myself, my feelings, thoughts and opinions, and not being overly concerned with pleasing others. This transition took place for me during my late teens/mid 20s. And looking back, I feel quite different now from my too-sweet self... For me most of the lessons this chapter talks about I learnt from activism: learning to be true to what I believe and to act on that without being concerned with being too ‘nice’ or ‘normal’. I let the wild come out in action for justice and the planet (Jane, Journal entry).

Task 2. Exposing the Crude Shadow

The second task is about noticing the shadow aspects or inner critics that can manifest as negative self-talk. The crude shadow is represented by the stepfamily in the story. Despite Vasalisa’s efforts to be compliant and sweet, she remains unappreciated and chastised. Estés suggests that our harshest critics are often ourselves (1992, p. 82). Aurora reflected that even when doing work that requires strong leadership, the crude shadow lingers. She grew up feeling deeply connected to the land and has spent most of her adult life working to reduce the environmental impact of capitalist/colonial systems, primarily through campaigns against fossil fuel expansion.

Reading about exposing the crude shadow resonated strongly with me and my experiences. Like many people, I’ve long battled with inner demons and critics. It’s an ongoing, probably daily, challenge to find the confidence I need in my work as a leader in community/environmental campaigns (Aurora, Journal entry).

Task 3. Navigating in the Dark

As Vasalisa leaves the familiarity of the house and ventures into the forest she remembers the doll in her pocket. The doll is a personification of her intuition. Away from all she knows, Vasalisa learns to navigate in the dark by attuning her senses and trusting her instinctual

self (1). Stepping into the forest—the dark—marks a turning point, a further letting go of the too-sweet self. For Jane, navigating in the dark is an embodied process.

I realised a lot of my experience of intuition is very bodily. I sense it in my body. So when I'm out of touch with my body, I feel it less. So to feel it more, I need to be feeling integrated and attuned within my body. Things like dance, yoga, meditation, rock-climbing, bike riding all help me feel integrated and dynamic. My body is what helps me navigate in the dark (Jane, Journal entry).

Task 4. Facing the Wild Hag

Facing the wild hag (Baba Yaga) requires courage to accept and value all aspects of ourselves. When Vasalisa finds Baba Yaga and her strange house, she stands tall to “face the fearsome Wild Goddess without wavering” (1). The world of the Yaga is ugly, strange and odd. It is intended to be a reminder to break free of hyper-normalcy, to live fully and freely, and to embrace all aspects of ourselves. Melanie is a community activist and health worker who supports people to establish and build upon meaning in their lives. She reflects:

Facing the wild hag means to be accepted warts and all. It can take a while for me to be this raw in front of anyone—even my partner. I worry that if I show my full range of emotions I won't be accepted. My previous partner had a problem with anger. He didn't believe it was necessary to get angry, ever. We should always be calm. It changed me and it took a long time to feel okay with getting angry again—being wild! (Melanie, Journal entry).

Task 5. Serving the Non-Rational

Melanie also reflected on how the fifth task feeds her wild spirit and encourages her to follow her passions. She understands that serving the non-rational is about the power that comes from and with clarity, and the conditions needed to see with clear vision (Estés, 1992, p.93). In the story, this is represented by the chores of cooking, cleaning and sorting that Vasalisa undertakes.

When I have a clear space, my wild nature can better thrive. When men 'mess' with my space it really gets to me, both metaphorically (as in mess with my head) and literally! When we tend to our uncommon ideas, our mystical, soulful and uncanny selves, like tending to a house, we nourish the wild. And ordering and having a

space to think, means these can thrive. It makes me feel at ease and that it's okay to prioritise these things (Melanie, Journal entry).

Task 6. Separating this from that

The sixth task is understood through Vasalisa separating the good corn from the mildewed corn and the poppy seeds from dirt (Estés, 1992, p. 95). In doing so, she learns to discern good from bad, right from wrong, and to identify the small, often undetected detail of things. Dawn is a single mother of two boys with Murri heritage⁵ as well as Scottish, Irish, Indian and Chinese. She privileges her Aboriginal ancestry because she is nourished by the ancient ways of knowing her land. For Dawn, separating this from that is about discernment and reading the signs of Country.

Paying attention to my intuition is about me paying attention to my Country and the signs. Those moments of knowing come at me from Country and they're either immediate, and I feel them and I know, or it just constantly replays in my head until the dots are joined, and then I see the big picture...It's getting more frequent because my stories are starting to map and so I can read things now, I feel it more (Dawn, Focus Group Discussion).

However, Dawn explains that the process is fraught because of colonial realities, which she refers to as the ‘apocalypse’.

But then part of that process is that the more moments of awareness I have the more heartache and despair I feel as well, because I woke up in the apocalypse. I'll never be able to live in the world in the right way. So, it's knowing that you're on the other side of it but seeing the moments through that apocalyptic consciousness; the dreaming still exists. So, I'm more attuned to it, my intuition, but it's also really despairing as well (Dawn, Focus Group Discussion).

Task 7. Asking the Mysteries

One of the key aspects of asking the mysteries is about honouring the life/death/life cycles (Estés, 1992, p. 97). The three men on horseback that bring the dawn, day and night represent these

⁵Murri is a self-identifying term used by Aboriginal people to indicate that they are from areas in the North West of New South Wales.

cycles. This holds profound meaning for Aurora.

In this task there's a lot of discussion about letting live and letting die, recognising, facing and embracing the cycles. In terms of my own life, I've had a lot of death and loss to process: my love and my baby. Both times, it was a genuine, deep acceptance of the cycles of life that allowed me to process and integrates these realities in a way that spares me from bitterness or ongoing raw trauma. Connected to these experiences and my acceptance of them, is a thorough acknowledgement and peace with my own mortality. Bring me back to the dust, the decay and the new growth. I love the beauty of the life/death/life cycle (Aurora, Journal entry).

Task 8. Standing on all Fours

Vasalisa stands on all fours the moment she is charged with the fiery skull (1). There is a sense that she now understands her ability to affect herself and others. She uses the fire to see her situation in new light. Nora is a passionate advocate of environmental and social justice. She holds a powerful love for the earth and humanity. She describes what it means to step into her power along with some of the challenges of the task.

I'm quite fearful of my own power, the potential I have and what I feel. I'm afraid. Since reading the chapter, I'm so much more aware of the wild hag part of myself. I can feel her but I'm still not ready to stand on all fours yet. I want to stay in my comfort zone. I feel this inner sickness, tension and rage in me. It's like what the task talks about, as the old you and new you build pressure, that this tension and rage is needed for new parts to be born (Nora, Journal entry).

Task 9. Recasting the Shadow

Having learnt to stand on all fours, Vasalisa is no longer the too-sweet girl who started this journey. She has emerged an intuitive knowing woman walking in her power (1). The final task, recasting the shadow, is the manifestation of personal power and transformation. The crude shadow, which was exposed in task two, is transformed as the stepfamily burns to cinders. For Nora, this final task arms her with the ability to discard what no longer serves her.

I realised that the stepfamily critic within—my shadow aspects—will lose power if I hold them,

carry them and keep them in the light (Nora, Journal entry).

Reordering the Tasks

Importantly, the lived experiences of the participants demonstrate that the tasks outlined in the story are not necessarily linear in nature. This was particularly remarkable for Pearl, a biracial, writer, poet and musician who self-identifies as lesbian and an eco feminist. For Pearl, reflecting on her lived realities alongside the story of Vasalisa evoked feelings of disappointment and frustration as she realised that she was still learning how to let the too-good-mother die.

The facts are: I did not trust or go with my early intuition where my marriage was concerned... I read the chapter and reflected on that. The other thing is that I feel so much of my early trust of my own intuition was driven out of me during my marriage. It became a thing that I would not listen to because it was unsafe for me to have differing opinions to my ex-husband. His judgment was the only knowledge that counted. I had to suppress so much of my true self in order to 'fit' into his worldview. It took me many years to learn that no matter how hard I tried to 'fit', it would never be enough because his worldview was an illusion. I would always be a square peg in his round hole. So, reading this chapter made me realise that there are stages in this initiation process that simply did not happen for me. I was, and maybe still am, stuck in the 'too good mother/person/daughter' (Pearl, Journal entry).

CONCLUSION: THE GIFTS OF GENERATIVE STORIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE NARRATIVES

Stories are life. The telling and sharing of stories puts flesh on our bones. Stories are how we make sense of the world. By using a feminist narrative approach, I have shown how the tale of Vasalisa connects with and is integrated in the lives of the research participants in generative and transformative ways. Understanding generative stories as fostering and representing “compassion, hope, strength and resilience” (23), it is apparent that Vasalisa’s story itself is a generative intervention. It is a story of women’s knowing and power. Moreover, how these generous and insightful women use critical, reflexive and resisting strategies to challenge dominant patriarchal epistemologies by valuing and exploring what it means to know otherwise are also important generative interventions. While Vasalisa’s initiatory journey and related

tasks are set out in a linear fashion, participant's lived experiences demonstrate the complexities, nuances and multiple trajectories for connecting with and embodying more-than-rational ways of knowing. The story of Vasalisa and participant's lived experiences is transformative in that they open up new social realities and epistemological possibilities in unexpected and hopeful ways.

Furthermore, Vasalisa's tale connects with my own generative journey. My young self was searching for a place to belong because the crude shadow made me feel alienated and being 'too-sweet' resulted in a sense of separation rather than a sense of belonging. Those moments spent scaling rocky sea-cliffs taught me to navigate in the dark by attuning my senses. When I realised that the things I valued were not necessarily shared, I stood and faced the wild hag. By refusing to give up my practices of nature-based reflection, I continue to serve the non-rational. I am still honing the art of discernment, and like Aurora, I have learnt to see the beauty in the life/death/life cycles. In the doing of this research, I stood on all fours, recasting the shadow of lingering doubts. Vasalisa's story and the stories of Jane, Aurora, Melanie, Dawn, Pearl and Nora, along with my personal reflections, illustrate the generative and transformative power of knowing otherwise.

I hope you will go out and let stories, that is life, happen to you, and that you will work with these stories from your life—your life—not someone else's life—water them with your blood and tears and your laughter till they bloom, till you yourself burst into bloom. That is the work. The only work (1).

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