

Dreaming Emu:
**Indigenous cultural empowerment through art as
therapy –**
Men & healing from the violence of colonisation

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents,

family and extended families:

Grace Kennedy and the late John Kennedy

Jonna, David, Dennis, Daniel, and the late Joanna Kennedy,

Randolph, Kay, Donna, Lisa and

their children, Darren, Jason, Matthew, Sophie, Kolby, Phoebe,

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I also dedicated this work to my

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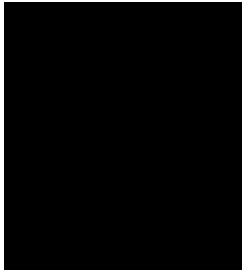
Abstract

This study investigates an Aboriginal Australian Indigenous epistemology through narrative analysis by contextualising colonial history within a contemporary Aboriginal standpoint approach. This work seeks to understand the place of identity among Aboriginal people with an emphasis on the experience of Indigenous men. Aboriginal male identity is explored as a place of fracture, disintegration, healing and empowerment. The practice of Indigenous epistemology and knowing or research is facilitated by the use of postcolonial narrative analysis, (auto)-ethnography, and Aboriginal arts-speak through the sharing of analysis-as-story. The central metaphor of the study is the Dreaming Emu artwork that provides a visual and epistemic meeting place for the critical work of deconstructing colonial narratives while acknowledging how art-as-process assists in generating new forms of identity among Aboriginal men. Three Aboriginal male artists are discussed, and their experiences of confronting colonial narratives are explored. The work provides an example of pathways that Aboriginal men may follow while they are engaged in the revision of identity and place within the practice of art as culture and spirituality.

Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Signature

List of Figures

<u>Contents</u>	<u>Page</u>
Figure 1: Dreaming Emu, Acrylic on Canvas	28

Table of Contents

Contents	Page
Title Page	1
Acknowledgments	2
Dedication	6
Abstract	7
Certification	8
List of Figures	9
Table of Contents	10
Preface	13
Introduction	17
Chapter One:	
Exploring an Indigenous Epistemology	25
The Colonial Theme Park	29
Exercising the Post-colonial Narrative	30
The Personal is Political	31
The Centrality of PLACE	32
Art and Discourse of Identity	34
Violence, Trauma and Healing	36
Hegemonic Masculinity	38
Contemporary Research Methods	40
Conclusion	44
Chapter Two:	
The Complex History of Colonisation and the Impact on Aboriginal Australia	45
Legacies of Violence	48
A History of Race Relations	50
Violence and Indigenous Identity	53
Violence and Indigenous Communities	59
Many Forms of Disadvantage	60
Aboriginal People are Bi-cultural	71
Circle Sentencing and the Justice System	73
Removal of Children and Cultural Survival	77
Abuse of Aboriginal People in Institutions	81

The Massive Costs of Oppression for Australia	84
Minority Psychic Trauma	87
Conclusion	98

Chapter Three:

Male Indigenous Gender Identity: Two Centuries of Colonisation

	99
Understanding the Patriarchal System	101
White Australian Masculinities	105
Casting the Other as Inferior	110
White Hegemonic Masculinity	118
Reproducing the Manly Man: Eurocentric Schooling	121
Aboriginality Lost in the White Norm	131
Conclusion	139

Chapter Four:

Aboriginal Art-Speak and (Auto)-Ethnographic Narrative Analysis – A Journey Toward a Post-Colonial Methodology

	141
Art Practice and Cultural Safety	142
The Journey of Regeneration through Art	151
Place, Artwork and Therapy	153
Art Helps the Recovery Process	157
Identity through Art	163
Indigenous Ethnography	171
The Narrative Journey	180
(Auto)-Ethnography	188
Limitations or Strengths	192
Conclusion	196

Chapter Five:

Dreaming Elders: Narrative Analysis of Albert Namatjira's Life

	198
Recognising the Past: Assimilation	200
Caught Between Two Worlds	207
Masculinity and Art	209
Alien in His Own Country	212
Conforming to White Society	217
Indigenous Art and the Environment	225
White Fella Dreaming?	234
Conclusion	243

Chapter Six:	
Dreaming Young Men:	
Canadian Indian and Australian Aboriginal narratives	247
Canadian Indigenous Scholar	249
Postcolonial Practice and Art	257
Wider Social and Health Contexts	262
Postcolonial Reconnection to Culture	270
Cultural Competence	273
Cultural Competence in Art Practice	278
Australian Indigenous Artist	284
Conclusion	300
Postscript: Stand In Shoes of The Other Person	304
References	305

Preface

This preface is added to the work to assist the reader to understand the nature of this project. This thesis is written in a way that is intended to challenge the reader. Not so much to think in a different way, but to perhaps appreciate that Aboriginal people come to the English language and to the academic process from different perspectives. This is why the reader will find that the style of writing will paint not only a cognitive picture but also an emotional and social picture. To many, the use of expressive and emotionally based language may appear difficult to understand in the western Cartesian way of thinking. However, to the Aboriginal person who is a bit more traditional in their approach, the mind is more fluid and connected to the soul.

What this means is that to write from an Aboriginal understanding of the interconnections between each other and the environment requires a non-linear way of thinking and writing. What the Cartesian cognitive and material mind wants to box into separate parts of existence, is one and part of the whole for Indigenous people. This is why there is a unique flow in the prose of this thesis that will appear to be unusual and the less enlightened members of the academe may presume that this style of writing is

even ‘non-academic.’ However, from a non-western point of view, the world is much larger than many within the western academe would care to admit.

Throughout the thesis the use of ‘we’ comes straight from our ‘mob,’ to paraphrase my mother. This way of speaking comes directly from our culture. The purpose of ‘we’ is to express the connection within ourselves and with one another. The ‘we’ speaks of inclusiveness, agreement, and does not separate between individual and collective understanding. It is also a more humble and respectful way of speaking and writing. Not only this but the philosophy behind this manner of speaking and writing suggests an honouring of Indigenous cultural ways. It is who *we* are. This rather simple but profound approach is the cornerstone of an Aboriginal Australian way of knowing, our epistemology.

This thesis is about a non-western, Aboriginal Australian way of knowing – therefore it sits comfortably within the international emergence of Indigenous scholarship that comes from what may be seen as the margins of the western academe. In many respects readers may see this work as an evocative ethnography, however, this too would be a western way of thinking. If we can agree on only one thing, it might be that the western academe demands that everyone fits into one way of writing and knowing. Even though we have gained many degrees and respect within the traditional academe, we do not agree that a PhD has to appear in only one style of language. To try and fit everyone into ‘one style to fit all’ we might only be bowing to the western pomposity that appears to dominate the academe in Australia.

This work expresses the way that one particular Aboriginal person thinks. While the thesis must speak to many huge issues that effect many people, the work does not assume to claim the only truth on any one issue. In fact, there are many truths. And indeed, the non-linear style accommodates a more big-picture way of knowing.

This work stands in the middle. As an Aboriginal man, the author has grown up within the process of cultural change. After over two hundred years of change, there is no 'pure' Aboriginal way of knowing, nor is there any 'pure' western way of knowing. My and our experience is based in the blend of cultures. This is expressed in many ways throughout this work, and ought to be understood as a continual journey of learning.

We also wish to note that while this thesis was completed within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, in the School of Humanities, a PhD thesis has merit irrespective of whether the project uses approaches that may be considered outside mainstream established research paradigms. Even though we feel this work does indeed parallel and expand upon many established research approaches, it is very clear that the thesis also challenges both western and Indigenous ways of knowing. It may be helpful to realise that the academe gains strength through an *actual* cultural diversity – and instead of remaining within a rhetoric of diversity, this thesis represents a great accomplishment on the part of the university system to allow and support a non-western/western expression of scholarship.

We also highlight the fact that culture is an evolving phenomenon. This thesis, rather than expressing any definitive view, ought to be viewed instead as a cultural (auto)ethnography that provides a window on contemporary views *at the crossroads between cultures*.

Introduction

Welcome. Let me introduce you to a journey that is open to self-exploration within cultural spaces. This work is about learning how to walk in another man's shoes, while at the same time, engaging in self-analysis and re-creation. As a qualitative learning and research process, this project utilises an Aboriginal art-speak and an (auto)-ethnographic approach that explores the experience of Aboriginal men in the process of healing of identity through Indigenous art.

Healing is understood as an experience that follows the trans-generational trauma and harm caused by colonisation in Australia. As the thesis suggests, coming to terms with the issues of understanding Indigenous Australian epistemology arises first from deconstructing and critiquing the colonial experience. Part of this is understanding how mainstream cultures have constructed the 'Aboriginal' in colonial nation states such as Australia.

From this process of re-learning, which follows deconstruction of the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people, the work proposes a generative perspective on an Aboriginal epistemology that evolves through our postcolonial narrative and ethnographic analysis. The central metaphor for this project suggests a wholistic Indigenous sensibility. In understanding how an Indigenous epistemology emerges from our reflective and creative cultural spaces we engender a sense of culturally based spirituality. This traditional cultural view aligns with ecological connection within our environment. This

sensibility is embodied within the Dreaming and cultural teaching that comprises the heart and soul of Aboriginal Australian ways of knowing.

This metaphor of the Dreaming Emu helps us to explore our own way of knowing by showing us the meanings associated with issues of harm, growth, hope, and learning that are in one sense unique to Indigenous men's lives but are also universal to human experience. The Emu Spirit symbolises the life of Indigenous people and how the impact of colonisation changed the lives of Indigenous people by sustaining systematic harm over the past two hundred years. While the symbol of the Emu is not directly discussed throughout the work, the underlying meanings of this metaphor sing their way throughout the study in culturally significant and spiritual ways.

For example, the first chapter sets the foundation by exploring Indigenous epistemology in light of the Dreaming Emu 'theme' which we can look at as a form of 'meta-narrative' analysis from a cultural space. In this sense, all Aboriginal stories are meta-teaching-narratives, with rich symbolic and metaphorical meanings, that form the 'underworld' of the story being shared. Often these undercurrents have more symbolic power than the 'surface' story and as such provide the listener (or reader) with a deep-ecology of meaning. The main purpose in this work of this meta-narrative arises when we consider the importance of deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, which itself is like the

Dreaming Emu, seeking a way out from eons of oppression and being caged within a way of life that is restrictive and harmful.

The study gives the reader the opportunity to be able to enter into an Indigenous way of understanding, learning and suspending judgment while learning as we go. The Dreaming Emu invites you as the reader to stand back, and reflect on your own experiences of cultural knowing, and to deconstruct past learning while also engaging in a creative self-awareness ‘training.’ Rarely do we actually openly learn while engaging in reading, as much writing that exists does not necessarily challenge the underlying ways that we believe, value and hold meaning. This thesis breaks apart this process of learning by coming from different assumptions based in cultural ways of knowing, and as such, asks the reader to participate in the very process that the Spirit of the Dreaming Emu wishes to convey to consider how we can each in our own ways break out of the assumptions, bias, prejudices and limitations of our existing ways of knowing. This is the invitation, and the challenge.

One of the strengths of this study is to help white Australians and other mainstream citizens of this great country to be able to understand an Indigenous perspective. This is not only important for the sake of just knowing another cultural stance, but is vital and critically important because the Indigenous perspective can assist all people to gain skills in cultural competence. This may lead to greater flexibility in cognitive and socio-psychological functioning by

opening up the mono-cultural assumptions of white Australia to new ways of being.

Just the acknowledgement of the very notion that an Indigenous epistemology exists outside of the colonial assumptions of white Australia is itself a huge step forward. Until recently it was assumed that Aboriginal Australian people had nothing to contribute to culture, ways of knowing, or higher education (McConaghy 2003). Not only does this work acknowledge the extremely rich repository of cultural knowledge and wisdom, this thesis also brings forward a contemporary Aboriginal perspective that speaks to our Way of Being and how we individually and collectively have survived to respond to the modern world at this time in history. In so doing, this thesis comes literally from the blood, sweat, and tears of my Grandparents' and parents' generations whose tenacity, commitment, and integrity combined with their hard yakka to allow me, in my generation, to give voice to the perspectives in this research.

Coming out of the cages, prisons, and glass bottles that have sustained the limitations and self-harming of our People, the Dreaming Emu tells of a way forward, a way out, and a path toward understanding the complex issues of Indigenous empowerment. These perspectives combine with the deep social, political and spiritual insights that govern our cultural heritage and that contribute to Indigenous ways of being.

The Indigenous life of the Dreaming Emu will be explored in an expansive way. In a sense, we are engaging in the shift *from an oncology* of colonial spaces *to an ontology* of wholistic and ecological balance. In a very real way the sickness that colonisation renders is a form of social and emotional cancer. This post-colonial post-trauma can only be transformed into a living and sustainable way of being through processes as explored in this work.

This leads us to examine art-as-practice in the lives of Aboriginal men as one path to wellness. Intuitively we support a traditional epistemology to heal the violence of colonial invasion and trauma. This way of knowing encompasses the wholeness of the Indigenous experience as expressed in our approaches to art, science, humanities, economy, and the beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices that govern these learning pathways. This summarises our journey into Indigenous epistemology, but also suggests the complexity of the nature of this study.

Reflecting on these broad themes, it is noted that this thesis is focused on the issues of (male) violence within the broadly understood colonial history of Australia and also by the need to contextualise Indigenous Australian (male) violence. Violence itself is understood as an unfortunate addition to Aboriginal (male) identity, in as much as violence is a part of the emerging identity of Aboriginal people due to the colonial influences of hegemonic masculinity. As we move forward through the thesis, the circular method employed by an

Indigenous approach to teaching and learning returns to strategic points that reflect the symbolic meaning of the artwork Dreaming Emu.

With clear purpose, this Indigenous approach to circular narrative reflection opens up a ‘visual story,’ a ‘journey of life’ in parallel. We together are invited into this challenging reflection. But also, this is the very journey that Indigenous men and women face every day. Each of us then is invited into the Totemic Energy of the Dreaming Emu. In these ways we can then reflect on being trapped like the Emu, used for monetary gain, manipulated for other people’s agendas, subject to assumptions and prejudice, and restricted from movement and freedom. This is a deep process of respecting the Emu and how the painting represents the survival of Indigenous society, family, and how it also represents the imprisonment of the ongoing colonial impact on Indigenous Australia. But also more widely, this story speaks to the liberation project that all people can somehow relate to at varying degrees.

This project arose initially from an invitation to engage in an Australian Research Council Grant funded to investigate Aboriginal men’s experience of violence. During the early stages of that process, the differences of opinion between the largely Marxist materialism of the supervisors verses the wholistic cultural and Aboriginal philosophy of the researcher came head to head. After a parting of company, and engagement of new supervision, the team proceeded to explore the purpose of the study based on cultural and spiritual values. The

importance of this perspective gave rise to more respectful and ethical approaches to research after being subjected to the hegemony and privileged perspectives of white professors who believed that they knew everything about Aboriginal people, simply because they had ‘studied’ Aboriginal people, making them the ‘experts’ when in fact they were silencing one cultural knowledge for another.

In contrast, after the doctoral scholarship was taken away from this project, much like my Grandparents were subjected to the same white privileging perspectives that presumed to take away land and cultural knowledge, and also much like the Dreaming Emu was taken away from its natural freedom and exercise of self-determination, the new team understood immediately the importance and timely relevance of foregrounding Aboriginal arts-speak and engaging in a postcolonial discourse that sought to open up fresh perspectives on colonial history, culture and practice. Not only did this perspective open up analysis of mainstream discourses but also cleared a pathway for respecting Indigenous cultural knowledge by giving this epistemology a place, a context that is safe, and an empowering voice.

It was then that we began to reflect more deeply on Aboriginal men’s experiences. At the time my dad was quite ill, and he was quite sad that the scholarship was taken away, and he felt the opportunity of teaching at university was taken away as well. The cultural voice was being silenced, in the context of

higher education. He still encouraged me to complete this project in spite of the lack of support from the university. Not too long after my dad passed away. We as Aboriginal people need to stand firm and be heard. In this way then, the process of deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and colonial attitudes and beliefs can be reframed.

These experiences led me towards another deeper learning spiral that opened up the notion of reflecting on the narrative life-histories of certain Aboriginal male artists, which in turn influenced the writing of the final chapters of the thesis. From this journey the Dreaming Emu allowed me to face the passing of my dad while also keeping hope through contributing this valuable project to my People and to Australia.