TROUBLED TRACES: PAINTING AND DISPLAYING INTERCULTURAL TRAUMAS OF ABORIGINALITY
Heather Kamarra Shearer

Abstract
Behind the pointillism of dot paintings or ‘naïve’ techniques, Aboriginal artists stridently critique histories of injustice, incarceration, racism, colonialism and dispossession. This personal testimony from Heather Kamarra Shearer, one of the ‘stolen generation’ of Aboriginal Australians, reflects on her life story and her present vocation in the field of legal rights and as an artist.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australians, Aranda people, Australia, National Stolen Generations Alliance, art, reparation, healing, intercultural, trauma
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Biographical note
At the time of writing, Heather Kamarra Shearer served as an Aboriginal Justice Officer for the South Australian Courts Authority. She has previously held positions of Field Officer for Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement and Senior Caseworker of the Central Australian Stolen Generations and Families Aboriginal Corporation. As an Aboriginal artist she has presented work at seventeen exhibitions, and was employed as the Indigenous Arts Officer with Arts South Australia, and was Arts Coordinator for Jukurrpa Artists, as has participated in numerous community projects. Heather was recently nominated for a National DEADLY award in 2012, other awards include: NAIDOC Artist of the Year for Alice Springs (1992); Emerging Artists Award (SA 1993) and the Artist in Residency program in Limoges/Paris (The Jam Factory 1997). Heather’s involvement in a range of committees include: the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust Foundation (2001); National Sorry Day Committee (1998 - 2001) and Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute (1997). She has appeared as a witness in the SA Parliamentary Committee for the SA Stolen Generations Reparations Tribunal Bill and contributed to the Senate Inquiry Report into Past Forced Adoption (2012) in her position as Truth Portfolio Convenor of the National Stolen Generations Alliance. Between 2012 and 2014 Heather worked as the National Project Officer with the National Stolen Generations Alliance. Heather’s homeland is Ntaria (Hermannsburg).
An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference ‘Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity’ (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna). To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link: http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaa/content/disturbing-pasts-memories-controversies-and-creativity-conference-0

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TROUBLED TRACES: PAINTING AND DISPLAYING INTERCULTURAL TRAUMAS OF ABORIGINALITY

Heather Shearer

My name is Heather Kamarra Shearer, and I am an Aboriginal woman from Australia. My homeland is Ntaria (Hermannsburg, 120 kilometres West of Alice Springs). My language group is that of the Aranda People of Central Australia.1

It is generally known that when the agenda of one people was to colonise new lands, the Aboriginal/Indigenous people of those 'new' lands became a problem. With the continent now known as Australia being the last to be 'discovered' and claimed by the British in 1778, the colonisers had much experience from previous land grabs to know how to deal with the 'natives'. The history of Australia is not a pretty one.

The movement of explorers, anthropologists and missionaries in their respective searches for useable lands for settlement, agriculture and precious minerals, for scientific and historical knowledge, or to preach the word of their God to the Godless throughout the land, provided windows into the past like no other. Their records, photographs and writings whether showing disdain, contempt, irreverence or admiration to the Aboriginal People, nevertheless has left a tangible legacy that cannot be ignored any longer.

Aboriginal People and Aboriginal Culture are internationally recognised as the oldest living peoples and culture on this planet. Modern methodologies have confirmed a minimum of 60,000 years, however, Aboriginal People believe it is much longer. Our culture is as diverse and complex as the land it honours. It has survived the passing of time, the ravages of nature and the onslaught of colonial invasion. It continues to survive the legacy of marginalisation in the modern world, and faces the future with regeneration, while as an oppressed People, we suffer horrendous health problems, substance abuse and social dilapidation, through poverty and a lack of self-determination, and endure a Government manufactured, micro-managed, paternalistic experiment.

Yes, there are positives, and there are wins for Aboriginal People within the development of the country Australia. But do not for one moment believe that those positives and wins have been handed on a silver platter. They have been fought in the courts, the United Nations, with the blood, sweat and tears of amazing leaders within our community over the last two hundred years, and in more recent times, with the support of organisations such as Amnesty International and the World Health Organisation.

The Disturbing Pasts conference is one of several that I have chosen to participate in as an Aboriginal woman, and whether it assists the ongoing struggle for Truth, Justice and Healing in our Aboriginal Community, I do not know. In saying this, I urge you to consider that I believe most profoundly in the benefits of sharing

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1 I thank my colleague, Professor Fiona Magowan of Queens University, Belfast, and Dr Leon Wainwright of the UK Open University, London, for the invitation and support that enabled me to participate in the Disturbing Pasts conference in Vienna, and the National Stolen Generations Alliance (Australians for Truth, Justice and Healing) back home in Australia for its support.
and caring. Let it be understood that I care about what has happened in the past to all the other participants who are bearing their souls, their pain and their hopes for their people’s future in these few days that we are together.

We Aboriginal People learn about what happens in other countries for ourselves. We do not rely on newspapers, television or the internet. We accept the hand of friendship and support from others from all over the world. We visit their communities, speak to the People, see and work within their organisations and listen to their stories. We share our knowledge, experiences and stories, and we look for commonalities in how we have survived, and with every new encounter, connect in a spiritual way that unites us as Human Beings in our shared, diverse and amazing world.

Aboriginal Art is an expression of our Culture – nothing more, nothing less. However, what it encompasses is vast. We can express our Creation, Land, Food, Resources, Technology, Knowledge, Language, Dance, Story, Song-lines, Dreaming, Acknowledgement, Tradition, Education, Survival and Responsibility. Our Art is premised in our Tjukurrpa which is made up of three worlds: (1) The Human World, (2) The Physical World and (3) The Sacred World. Our art practices are expressions of our Culture. Culture is not something that is given to us from the outside. Culture is an intrinsic essence within us that nurtures our identity – giving us an understanding of who we are. Culture is part of our genetic makeup, it is the life-force that guides our spirit, and subsequently the foundation of the voice we present outwardly.

As an ancient Culture, our Art is and should be respected as among the world’s unique treasures.

Capturing the delicate beauty of the MacDonnell Ranges and my homeland areas around Hermannsburg (Ntaria) in watercolour, Albert Namatjira first tantalised the taste buds of the art world some eighty years ago. Since then, interest in Aboriginal Art has become apparent to the mainstream.

With the emergence of the majestic bark paintings from the Top End and soon after, the Traditional imagery in paintings from Papunya (Northern Territory) in the early 1970s, known as Western Desert Art, the world got a brief glimpse of the mysteries that Aboriginal culture possesses.

When viewing a lot of Western Desert Art, you imagine that you are a bird in the sky, looking down
Figure 3.5.3: Kamarra’s Journey, HS/1992
This painting represents my journey to reconnect with my family, and my position within my mother’s and father’s families.

Figure 3.5.4: Kamarra’s Dreaming, HS/1992
This painting represents my journey and aspirations as I moved through my reconnection to my mother and father and extended family. The central part reflects my thoughts and dreams of ‘what could have been’ had I not been removed from my family.
over land, looking down over the painting. It is from this perspective that you can often recognise the contours of the land, paths of the rivers, the growth and changes of the vegetation and the earthy colours of the land, the tracks of the People and the animals that have passed by. Other images presented relate to the huge sand paintings prepared for traditional ceremonies which incorporate body painting designs relating to the status and responsibility of the participants. Iconography can be understood through legend.

I was born in Alice Springs in 1959, three months after the passing of the legendary Albert Namatjira. He was my mother’s Uncle, which in the context of our extended family network he is one of my grandfathers. I have read much about him and heard stories from people who knew him. I have seen many of his paintings hanging in galleries, and prints for sale, and I have read books about his life. I am in awe of his talent, his strength, his wisdom and his stamina, in all that he went through due to his fame. Recently I finished a book published in 1963 about his life Namatjira: Wanderer between Two Worlds by Joyce D. Batty, and it brought tears to my eyes and sorrow to my heart. I encourage all of you to find out more about this amazing human being – if anything, you will truly understand the realities of living in and between two worlds in all its hypocritical glory, and gain a better understanding of the battle of two cultures, laws, traditions and People, that continues today.

My story
I was born Tanya Kamarra Fly in Alice Springs in 1959. My mother gave birth to me in the Alice Springs Hospital, and I was taken immediately from her. At ten days old, I was taken to the Alice Springs Receiving Home and later transported 1,500 kilometres South to Adelaide (the capital of South Australia) and placed in the Kate Cocks Baby Home for Adoption.

I was taken not because my mother had given me up for a better life (as recorded in information given...
Figure 3.5.6: Family Portrait, HS/1999
This painting is a template for lead-light windows. It represents my partner and me, our relationship and connections to our children and combined family.

Figure 3.5.7: The Spirit Within, HS/1998/001
The message of this painting is to trust your gut feelings – intuition. Our spirit is within. When a person is aware and centred, he or she may at times shine like a beacon and attract those who are still unsure and searching. The star representing the strength of spirit reaches out to family members and community elders who continue to give encouragement. The background colours are those of the earth and vegetation, reflecting the movement of sand and time.
to my adoptive parents), but as a result of Government Policies and Legislation. This was publically exposed by the Bringing Them Home Report released in 1997, the final report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

I have been involved with this history, as a child removed, and – since 1978 – as a worker, activist and advocate in what is known as the Stolen Generations Movement.

In 1990, when Secretary of SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care), I attended the United Nations Working Group on the Development of the Draft Convention for the World’s Indigenous Peoples. During this trip, I travelled in Europe for three months seeking international support for a national inquiry into past removals of Aboriginal children. I also developed links for Aboriginal people who had been adopted overseas – predominantly in Europe, and met with Margaret

Figure 3.5.8: Josh’s Painting, HS/2001/001
This is a painting I did for my son, Joshua, to explain his relationship to his brother and sister and our relationships to their fathers, and my current partner who has raised him since he was three years old.

Figure 3.5.9: Family Resolution/Family Portrait under the Seven Sisters, HS/2002/001
This is a family tree that shows me bringing and protecting my children as I reunite them with both my mother and father’s sides. It relates to the Seven Sisters Dreaming which is a major Dreaming story that connects Aboriginal People across Australia.
Humphries who began the Child Migrant Trust. This work was instrumental in what became the National Inquiry that produced the Bringing Them Home Report.

As a result of this trip, I was targeted by those who did not want this history to be made public. After much anguish and disbelief, I retreated to the bush community of the man who claimed me as his daughter, in order to (as he put it) ‘forget the politics of town and white men, come home and learn your culture,’ which I did.

**My art**

In 1991, I moved to Atitjere (known on maps as Harts Range, but changed recently to Arltarpita following their successful land claim). There I began painting.

My art is culturally appropriate to being an Aranda woman. It details my life experiences and interpretations of my inherent Dreaming Stories, as taught to me by my family elders. I am a strong advocate of copyright protection, cultural respect and integrity, and have been involved in numerous aspects

Figure 3.5.10: Ntaria Star Campfire, HS/2009/012.
This painting shows me near a campfire – out bush – beside a majestic Ghost Gum Tree, under the stars with the Ntaria Star standing out like a beacon.

Figure 3.5.11: Tanya to Heather, HS/2010/007.
This is the pivotal painting, made to introduce my first solo exhibition planned for the next year or so. It tells my story from my birth as Tanya Fly through to my adoption in 1960 and my name change to Heather Shearer.
of the ‘Australian Indigenous Arts Industry’ over the past twenty-one years.

My first painting, which relates to my children, remains my private piece.

My second painting, and officially what I call the First painting that I showed to anyone, was entitled Two Families. It was done so that my family could understand what had happened to me, and the search I undertook for my family. The Art I create is my voice and expression as an Aranda Woman: an Aboriginal Australian, a Human Being.

**Art in healing**

At times, my work can be specific, and may represent:

- turning points in my life
- specific events that have impacted me throughout my journey
- activities I have been involved in
- thoughts, feelings and problems I have identified that I need to address
- exploring ideas and aspirations

My art is not ‘art for art’s sake’. Every piece of art I produce is a real story that is in my head, heart, mind and soul. I reinterpret what I see – what I can capture in a work of art. It is something tangible I can look at, put away, get back out and think about, analyse. That process assists me to work through what I am dealing with at that time.

I do no paint to sell (unless I have been specifically commissioned). I do sell when asked, only when I am ready to let that particular painting go.

Rather, I paint to tell my story. I cannot speak using language; painting is my voice and it comes from my soul, my spirit, my culture, my ancestors, my Tjukurrpa.

I have been conducting Art in Healing workshops for years, and so know that the strength of this art is its direct relation and relevance to the People I present and work with. My personal journey may be different to theirs, but the issues, the feelings and the grief and loss is the same. I have an understanding, and work with them in a safe place where they can engage in personal discussions that are conceptually developed into a painting. Here there is access to counselling (if traumatic experiences bring on emotional responses) and there is an agreed code of conduct, respect and confidentiality between participants, mentors and support people. For many, it is the first time that they have been able to express innermost thoughts, memories, country and identity as Aboriginal People.

To make Art from Trauma is a revolution in itself. What I have learned throughout my schooling about the history of European art is that it has evolved from the vision of one person, and been elevated to heights that represent the voice of the people, and been the premise for revolution.

If I share my experiences and my art with others to give them a creative option for them to face their fears, understand their trauma and give them a new vision of themselves and their future, then I have done some good, and honoured the talent of my art practice in line with the social responsibility that goes with being an Aboriginal Artist.

My art is born of the Traditional Culture I belong to. I have Irish and Italian heritage, but it is not those cultures that have nurtured me. They may be entrenched in my genetic makeup, and subsequently influence what I think and how I react, but they do not influence how I live.

I am not an educated woman. I only went to 4th Year in High School, and then on to Business College to learn typing, bookkeeping and stenography. I even attempted university, but had to withdraw for personal reasons. But I am educated in life.

My art reflects my on-going life story of living in and between two worlds. It is truthful and it is an educational process and tool that I use as part of my responsibility as an Artist, to heal my wounds of the past, teach my children and grandchildren their heritage, and choose at times to share with the wider community, and with the world. Whether it is fine art, naive art, pointillism, contemporary, or any other term you choose, it does not particularly bother me. I know what my art is, my family knows what my art is, my fellow Aboriginal People recognise my art (even though many of them do not know me personally). As far as I am concerned, this is what matters to me. The ‘Aesthetic’ of any individual piece of Aboriginal Art determines an opinion, an interpretation, a like or dislike, by the viewer, and that is fine. What I share with you is that what has been presented in that Artwork: an expression of Culture. Whether it has a detailed story by that Artwork to assist you in the message of the painting is up to the Artist. Just know that it is a story that the Artist has allowed to be shared, and that should be received with respect and evoke an openness that has allowed you a window into our world, that survives within a world that mostly does not know anything about us.

I continue to work for Truth, Justice and Healing for Stolen Generations People, Families and our Communities, assisting with the shellshock of a
traumatised People subjected to genocidal practices that they thought would make us die out quickly and quietly.

As Australia takes its place on the United Nations Security Council, like so many Aboriginal People, I will be monitoring their participation, input and presentations about Human Rights issues relevant to us, while we continue to fight for Reparations for the past injustices that Aboriginal People today continue to suffer from.

**Bibliography**