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Turning Dreams into Nightmares and Nightmares into Dreams

Judy Atkinson and Glenn Woods
Southern Cross University

Indigenous peoples of Australia have always had laws, processes and procedures that address, govern and control violent behaviours both at the interpersonal and group levels. In contrast to, and in ignorance of these controls on violence the colonising groups that came to Australia, and subsequently the resident colonial governance structures have continuously and consistently used violence as a tool to both suppress and re-shape Indigenous individuals and societies. These violence enforcing and violence making tools have three components: physical violence; structural—institutional violence; and psycho-social dominance. Sexual violence in particular is prominent in this process and has proved to be a deeply traumatic and wide ranging experience for Indigenous peoples as individuals, families and communities. The violence of Australian colonisation has been underpinned and fuelled by an on-going ideology of racism that allows the coloniser to define and redefine the Indigenous subject, and hence the Indigenous body, around a set of attributes and behaviours that explain and ultimately justify the need for violence or the inevitability of violence. To this end multiple layers of violence have been woven through the very fabric of Indigenous life experience creating huge potential for an ongoing series of life crisis at the individual, family and community level. Today we are witnessing a crisis of trauma and violence borne of colonising processes that are still not being adequately named, recognized, challenged, and most importantly attended to through state supported 'educaring' preventions and interventions. Hence the painful and difficult job of healing remains with Indigenous peoples, generally unsupported by the state, thus continuing its implication in its own violence within the nightmares it has created for its Indigenous subjects.

Introduction

Some weeks after Louis Nowra's book *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children* (2007), was published, Judy Atkinson was invited to review the monograph. She asked Glenn Woods to also contribute, to allow the voice of an Indigenous Australian man to be heard. The time it has taken for our response to be published is an indication of the pressure on us as we work to meet deadlines, both in the academy and on the ground, and the demands of teaching, while we also respond to community requests for help in times of crisis. While we are both academics, we do what Nowra does not do: we respond personally and professionally to the crisis in Indigenous communities.

As Indigenous Australians we experienced such a deep concern when we read *Bad Dreaming* that we chose to combine a short 'review' with an analysis of the violence of the colonising culture, and to take the opportunity to present some community based solutions that we are currently working on in our response to community calls for help. *Bad Dreaming* does not critique the colonial interface, which potentially produces violence, in all its forms—in particular gender violence. Nor does it provide evidence of the extensive work being done by Indigenous Australians themselves as they work to address the distress in their families and communities. In fact we contend that *Bad Dreaming* could potentially contribute to the escalating levels of violence in Indigenous lives by pathologising 'traditional' Aboriginal culture. Further, it provides no sense of 'solutions', or a way forward.

In 1990, while the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was in progress, a group of Aboriginal women (Judy Atkinson organised and led the group) requested a meeting with the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs to talk with him about issues of deep concern. They were granted ten minutes. Two minutes into the meeting, as they told the Minister of the escalating incidence of violence within Indigenous families and communities, the Minister interrupted, 'I know the problem. You tell me some solutions' (Atkinson, 2002: 8-9). It is within this context that we review *Bad Dreaming*. We begin with some comments about *Bad Dreaming*, as we also consider the violence of colonisation: its racism and misogyny, and define their intersection. We argue that this elaboration of colonial violence is missing from *Bad Dreaming* and is essential to critically analysing the issue of violence in Aboriginal families and communities today. Finally this paper outlines an educational way forward. What we refer to as *educaring*: a caring, educational model that offers a way through the very real and painful reality of Aboriginal lives, as Aboriginal people themselves redefine and reconstruct their nightmares into healing action. We take this standpoint because, like the Minister, we know the problems, we have worked with them for too long, and we now seek to focus on solutions.

Bad Dreaming—whose dreams—whose nightmares?

This invited paper provides a reflective, personal and scholarly response to Louis Nowra's *Bad Dreaming*.

Judy writes: The day I read *Bad Dreaming* I put the book down and sat for some considerable time in deep reflection. I was tired and in despair. I was in personal crisis and the book deepened my despair. Glenn and I had walked the corridors of Parliament House, Canberra, for the previous eighteen months, petitioning the Offices of the Federal Australian Ministers of Health, Education, Attorney General and Justice, Family and Community Services and Employment, for a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to the layered violence in Aboriginal lives. In a series of proposals submitted to the commonwealth government called *Building the Future* (Gnibi, 2006-7), we felt we had some solutions to the layered pain, expressed as violence, in Aboriginal lives. In *Bad Dreaming* I saw no evidence that Louis Nowra recognised the many people who had been working for years in response to the needs of our people affected by the violence he so vividly describes.

As I sat reflecting upon *Bad Dreaming*, I asked myself, '*Is there anything in this text I do not know*'? The answer was, No. 'So', I asked myself, '*why do I have such a strong reaction to this ethno-pornographic work called Bad Dreaming*'? Pornographic! Sexually explicit and offensive. '*Is that a harsh assessment*'? No. In chapter after chapter Nowra focuses on Aboriginal male violence, with women and children as victims: graphic, unrelenting, merciless, insistent and explicit. I can only assume that Nowra was driven by some need as he selectively focused on stories he has uncritically parroted from other writings about Aboriginal people, pathologising the sexually violent lives of 'the objectified other'. In my reading of his work, Nowra exhibits an intensity, an unhealthy energy, in his work that brings to my mind words like fascination, obsession, fixation and addiction. There is no analysis, no contemplation, no reflection, no balance and no vision.

In chapter one, beginning with his hospital experience of listening to an Aboriginal male boast about his sexual violence against a young woman, Nowra doesn't say whether he challenged the man's distorted and dishonoring sense of male privilege. Nowra then moves on to describe his own childhood experiences of domestic violence in a housing commission estate, and quickly presents a point of reference: 'I went to university and wrote an article ... it was an impassioned piece ... the article was met with silence ... no one thought it an important topic ... [or] they were embarrassed by it' (2007: 3). If he was serious in his concern this would be the lead in, but nowhere in his book does he attempt to explore the pathology of the great white, male silence, demonstrated by his university class mates. Hence, I suggest, the complicity, which apart from this sensationalist *Bad Dreaming*, belongs to him as well as to the others from his university

years. If he had been willing to explore the great white male silence and violence as complementary to black male violence I would feel he was trying to understand the misogyny in his own gender and the racism in his own culture, which both clash with and compliment each other in the escalation of violence that are forms of abject expression, and oppression. This is what Freire describes as 'the oppressed becoming the oppressors' (Freire, 1968). But perhaps the silence belongs to what he chooses not to explore: the white male sexual violence against Aboriginal women and girls and boys from the first days of invasion to the present (Broome, 1982), and the intersection of misogyny and racism.

Chapter two of *Bad Dreaming* provides the benchmark, the yardstick, against which the book can be assessed. With his investigative skills Nowra could have provided a balance between the 'white male' sexual practices of the colonisers, in particular the sexually violent cultural mores that are integral to coloniser-colonised relationships: the sexual violence of prison colonies and institutions and class inequalities, where the upper class male had full power over the body of his maidservant or slave. Instead he provides page after page of ethno-pornographic descriptions of sexualities, which felt, for me, like voyeurism. All too often, and in the case of *Bad Dreaming*, we focus on the erotized, pathologised *other*, and are unable to look more deeply at our own contribution to the anguish and dysfunction and, more importantly, to the possible development of healthy and healing solutions to human pain and disorder.

I picked the book up again, with a yearning to find something more than the merciless diatribe. I searched again. Chapters three, four, five, six and seven provided nothing more. No respite. No explication. No inspiration. And I asked myself: Will *Bad Dreaming* help the Aboriginal kids who are in crisis? Will it help the young men and the young women who feel lost and dislocated, struggling to find pride in their cultural and spiritual selves? Will it help Aboriginal families and communities attend to the critical and distressing circumstances of Aboriginal lives? And what of the men, whom Nowra strips bare, made less than animal under his pen (and in some cases their own behaviour), like the slave paraded for purchase by the slave traders?

Is this a document that could be used to educate and inspire, to illuminate and transcend the sad and bad places of our individual and collective pain? Will it help those men at whom the finger is pointed to bring meaning and purpose back into their lives; will it help them to look more deeply at who they are and how they have become who they are? Will it encourage them to make the changes that we all must make if we are to create a different future for our children and grandchildren? And is this a document that will inspire the possibility of change at the cultural interface between Aboriginal peoples—victim or perpetrator, and government agencies who have negated their lawful duty to provide healing services to all citizens of this country now called Australia?

No—I don't think so.

And with all good grace, does Nowra acknowledge the many under-resourced and unsupported programs that are being run by Aboriginal women and men in their own response to these very issues?

Nothing!

In 1990, Minister Tickner asked us to return to him with 'solutions'. Fifteen years later, in 2005, when I met with the senior advisor to the then Health Minister, Tony Abbot, I came with a research-developed toolkit of 'solutions' that for over ten years we had embedded in community and tertiary educational and research programs. Some short time into my presentation, I heard an impatient interruption to my request for action: 'You don't have to tell us the problems. We already know them. Can't you people just get over it?' Here again was the great, white, male silence and denial by those who have power.

Nowra has power too: the power of the pen, to defile or to inspire.

Does Bad Dreaming provide a way forward for government, forcing them to take right action in response to the great tragedy described in the book? I could say 'I hoped so', for hope is all that I have left; not a hope generated by this book, but the threadbare hope that sustains me in front of an immense sense of hopelessness and helplessness. No. *Bad Dreaming* does not even provide hope.

I put *Bad Dreaming* aside. Nowhere in this document could I find a sense of the humanity of people seeking solutions. Perpetrators and victims: Aboriginal men and women have been dehumanized under the outraged pen of a playwright. I wondered what it would feel like to be an Aboriginal man and to read *Bad Dreaming*.

Bad Dreaming does not deserve a review. Why should we waste our time? It is fatally flawed, at every level. Colonisation does not enter Nowra's equation.

The violence of colonisation

From the late fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries, large-scale manmade disasters occurred worldwide to Aboriginal societies as European countries practiced colonisation (Giddens, 1989: 52). These activities have reshaped the environmental, social, spiritual and cultural face of the globe (Giddens, 1989: 54-5), with outcomes that were unforeseeable at the time.

European colonialism was a 'brutal age; an age in which swarms of savage invading males slew, raped, plundered and enslaved ... or decimated with exotic diseases, after which they replaced them in some instances by hardier and more complacent slaves' (Price, 1963: 51-2). The ideology that drove such activities was the belief that some

individuals or groups have rights to power over others and that they can establish and maintain this power by force (Giddens, 1989; Baker, 1983). Western scientific racism was used to justify these cultures of colonial violence (Galtung, 1990).

Colonisers came from patriarchal societies in which the stratum of class and hereditary male privilege largely determined whether the coloniser would be commandant of a colonising force or foot soldier, merchant trader or trading clerk, slave-ship owner/trader or blackbirding seaman, military convict overseer or convict. Generally, because of economics and socialisation, women were 'camp followers' (Atkinson, 2007). A study of the impact of colonisation on Indigenous groups in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Price, 1963; Baker, 1983) shows three distinct periods in coloniser/colonised relations. These periods are invasion/frontier violence; the intercession of well meaning but often ethnocentric and paternalistic philanthropic and religious groups; and around the 1930s, the reassessment of government responsibility to Indigenous needs.

Within these three periods, principles of systemic power and control of others prevailed, facilitated by three main types of power, abuse or violence, all justified by the ideology of racism: overt physical violence—invasion, disease, death and destruction; covert structural violence—enforced dependency enacted through legislation, reserves and removals; and psychosocial domination—cultural and spiritual genocide (Baker, 1983; Martin, 2008). Baker calls psychosocial domination, in its various manifestations, cultural genocide, cultural imperialism, thought control or brainwashing (1983: 35). Aboriginal people would call this the greatest violence: the violence that brings the loss of spirit and the destruction of self, of the soul.

Cultural and spiritual genocide occurs when oppressors believe that the oppressed are non-persons (Harr'e, 1993: 106), with no culture or identity as human beings, or have a culture or identity that is inferior. They deny the oppressed the right to a separate identity as a group or as individuals within the group. These beliefs allowed the oppressors to feel justified in their attempts to destroy customary social and cultural processes that work to provide structure and meaning to the lives of peoples. Cultural genocide works not only to destroy the cultures of oppressed peoples, it also eradicates the sense of self and self-worth, and of well-being in individuals and groups so that they are unable to function from either their own cultural relatedness or from the culture of the oppressors. They feel in an in-between world: devalued and devaluing who they are.

Stanner has summarised the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of the Aboriginal people of this land, now called Australia, both in day-to-day living and sacred ceremonial practice as uniting hearts and establishing order (1979: 143) in relationship to both the natural environment and to other humans of the land. Order and

continuity were central components in Aboriginal cultural and spiritual ways of being in the world, mediated by ceremony and ritual in an ongoing regenerative basis. Cultural and spiritual genocide attacks the very heart, the locale, of *who we are* more so than physical violence. Bessel van de Kolk says the essence of psychological trauma is,

the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions and experiences (1987: 2-3).

This is what Duran et. al. refer to as the 'soul wound' (1998), or a core wounding, which separates people from each other and the country from which they come, and results in a fracture in relatedness to self, others and our environment. These corrosive impacts dismantle the spiritual fabric of people. Trauma then is spiritual at its deepest level (van de Kolk, 1987), and it is imperative this is understood about psychosocial dominance, or cultural and spiritual genocide.

Cultural and spiritual genocide causes people to come to believe that they are of no value and their cultural practices and traditions are inferior and hence so are they. Consequently they may 'build their own prison and become simultaneously prisoner and warden' (Baker, 1983: 40), and even executioner. Prisons are places of great violence, including and more particularly sexual violence (Beck, 2008). This factor must be understood in our consideration of the violence described in *Bad Dreaming*. Our violence rates reflect our incarceration rates in institutions of the state—child removals, juvenile detention, and adult prisons, from 1788 continuing to today. Incarcerated peoples disclose layered experiences of sexual assault, prior to, and at all levels of their incarceration.

The violence of racism

Racism is a belief that people of different 'races' have different qualities and abilities, and that some races are inherently superior or inferior (Galtung, 1990; Broome, 1982; Rowley, 1970). The violence in racism is also a dehumanising process. It is a constructed process that has had incredible success in Australia as part of the colonising process. Colonisation could not have occurred without the validation of racism. Racism empowers one person or group to ignore or subjugate the rights of another person or group so that in effect no action needs to be measured against the acceptable standards or morality of the day. This is what enables the many and various abuses to take place whether it is depriving a child of an equitable opportunity for an education or allowing an individual to think that a man, woman or child can be 'used' for a sexual purpose. Indeed the abuses are a necessary part of making racism 'work'. To make it work the target group needs to have their humanity and dignity stripped away so that in a sense they/we become 'available' to be abused. The early stages involve the brutal introduction of the new 'status quo'—

invasions, displacement, murder and rape. Then there is the introduction of the new 'truths' about the target groups—they are stupid, lazy, dirty, promiscuous and so on, and without the depth of emotion that the 'superior' group have.

This is now where we are in Australia BUT the biggest challenge is that the 'target group', to varying degrees, also believes this about themselves and others 'like them'. If this weren't true then the process would not work so effectively.

Proud people with a full sense of their human dignity, who are physically and spiritually safe, will resist very strongly the processes of racism and they will also reject the characteristics and behaviors that are expected of them. This is not currently happening in Australia. Quite the opposite. A huge part of this challenge is sheer numbers. Indigenous Australians rarely get to enjoy a sense of being the majority in Australia. Do not underestimate how overwhelming and disempowering this is. If you have ever been in a situation where you, as a representative of a people, culture or ethnicity (by choice or not), find yourself a tiny minority amongst people who are (or appear to be) at best indifferent or even hostile then you may be able to get a sense of this reality. To have it happen to you in your place, your land, every day with no prospect of change ... *how do you think that feels?* Of course individual people will respond to this differently but it is an irrefutable external pressure point that must be dealt with everyday by most Indigenous Australians, and most other Australians are absolutely blind to it. It is a huge stress. A huge source of anxiety and on any given day a reality that can simply be too much to deal with let alone gain benefit from.

Nowra benefits from the racist status quo in Australia. He is treating Indigenous people, Indigenous men in particular, as both subjects and objects of scrutiny; a colonial construct that he cannot (will not?) see or acknowledge. In a rational critique how could his opinion and expertise possibly be privileged above the many Indigenous Australian voices whose knowledge and experience outweigh his. His armchair analysis of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture is taken onboard by the media without the slightest hint of scrutiny or suspicion. His sources of knowledge—the writings of explorers and anthropologists from yester-year—are so badly flawed on so many levels that they are simply unreliable. These historical 'knowledges' are just a self-perpetuating cycle of mis-information and inaccuracies that are now so distorted and prejudiced that they are poison.

The violence of misogyny

Misogyny is the hatred of women as a sexually defined group. Nowra writes of misogyny as an aspect of Aboriginal culture, focusing on the past treatment of Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men. He ignores the vast work that has been done to counter this opinion. Aboriginal men and women themselves have always been diverse individuals

involved in a tensely creative process of mediating and negotiating their relationships and responsibility to each other. Aboriginal relationships, in particular gender relationships, were (and are) dynamic. While some have described Aboriginal society as patriarchal (McGrath, 1995), Meggitt (1962) uses the word 'egalitarian' which suggests that all members of the social group are seen as having equal status. Sackett writes of the Aboriginal people he observed:

One aspect of the traditional belief system is the notion that there should be no bosses. Ultimately, it is thought, all humans are equal in that they are all less than the Dreamtime-beings whose edicts they have to follow. Humans cannot make or change the law—it is established and laid down for all time in the creative epoch—so there is supposedly no need for leaders. (1978: 42)

None-the-less a more precise term would be 'egalitarian hegemony': a significant masculine stature balanced by woman's sovereignty and authority in the social, economic, and spiritual domains.

Aboriginal women feel the essence of Aboriginal relationships was the management of conflict and the continual mediation and negotiation that occurred between men and women, both within the personal sphere and the political domain (Bell, 1983). In all of this one thing is clear, gender and generational relationships have changed considerably as a result of colonisation (Bell & Ditton 1980; Bell & Nelson, 1989: 403-16).

Aboriginal women had the right to mediate between the corporeal and non-corporeal world through their own ceremonial processes. They themselves were co-creators working with the ancestral beings to ensure life processes continued. In this regard, women had and continue to have power and autonomy, as well as full responsibility. While Aboriginal societies were gendered, women were not victims of men's power but assertively affirmed their place and their role in the whole community. According to Catherine Berndt this provided both independence, yet an essential interdependence between gender groups (1989: 6). Colonialism has fractured and dismantled these relationships.

Can Nowra accept that, ignoring the typically distorted and prejudiced reporting by outsiders, it is fair to say that according to internationally accepted standards 200 years ago just about every human society was 'mistreating' women? Consider the treatment of convict women on the fleets that sailed from Britain, particularly the First Fleet. European women were little more than chattels and sex objects at the time of invasion. Nowra could have juxtaposed the violence that took place during colonial settlement, as the convict women were released from the prison hulks and subject to mass sexual violations, against the writings he cites. And what of the warden colonisers who saw the treatment of convict women as normalized cultural behavior within their own penal society? Instead Europeans pathologised the colonised 'other'. Look also at the age of consent under English

common law over the last 200 years, and more importantly look at the ages that young white women were married off to much older white men. For most of Australia's history there were virtually no effective laws protecting women and children from abuse by men, in particular from their fathers and husbands. Arguably, for a long time rape and child abuse, in all its forms, was basically par for the course amongst Australia's white population. We can never really know the extent and depth of it because *unlike* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples no one was closely scrutinizing, monitoring and reporting on the white people. What we do know is that very soon after invasion white men perpetrated rape and abuse against Indigenous women and children, and it continued for generations (Broome, 1982; Harris, 1994). It could only be described as a common and generally accepted 'cultural practice'. As Nowra points out, and supported by Roth (1984), there was no observation or reporting of child abuse in Indigenous cultures, *but* it was certainly common amongst the colonising culture, particularly child sexual assault. Nowra did not seek to ask or attempt to answer the question: what has changed? Whilst there are clearly incidents of rape and child abuse perpetrated by Indigenous men against colonising populations they are rare. Perhaps this is because those 'traditional men' saw this practice as abhorrent and completely unacceptable?

Due primarily to racism, Indigenous men and women in Australia have been prohibited from being part of the processes of a broader socio-cultural shift—a shift that has empowered some women, and to a lesser extent children, although this clearly has not prevented women and children from experiencing high levels of violence and abuse. Rather the white majority have by-and-large treated the 'natives' as separate by considering that Indigenous people have a primitive and fossilised culture that basically is unable to embrace or even cope with change, and certainly not worthy of being included in the discussion about gender equality and safety. So today we have this huge divide that is so vast and deep that we struggle to find ways to bridge it. The sudden alarmist focus on abuse and violence [1] in 'Aboriginal communities' is simply perpetuating the divide and feeding the racist paradigms that cripple our society. Surely the discussion should be about the levels of abuse and violence in Australian communities and families. It is common knowledge around the world that abuse and violence will be amplified amongst communities and families suffering from the most extreme forms of marginalisation and discrimination, regardless of where they are actually located demographically. This says a lot more about the hostility of non-Indigenous Australian society than it does about the crisis within Aboriginal communities.

Since Nowra wrote *Bad Dreaming*, Indigenous Australian men have apologised to their women for their violence and silence (Ravens, 2008). Saying sorry is an important and essential process in healing relationships between people, and white Australia has much to learn, about themselves as colonisers, from those peoples they have colonised.

Childhood trauma and the power of healing [2]

“Can you help me? I want to do something for myself. I want to be somebody someday”. These were the words of a young Aboriginal man who was coming through a drug-induced psychosis. I was in a remote community that just had twenty-one arrests on child sexual assault charges. As he spoke to me, asking if I could help him get into some form of study program, I could feel the depth of his pain, and his desire to move from the void of a life lived without meaning, filled with drugs and the madness drugs bring.

I was focused however on his will to change: ‘I want to do something for myself’, and the hope of a future with meaning: ‘I want to be somebody someday’. I could equate that statement with the collectively felt sense of Aboriginal Australian people who, in many instances, feel that they are not considered ‘somebody’, which in turn reflects the psycho-social dominance and the cultural and spiritual genocide of past (and present) government policies.

We sat together and talked about what he wanted to do. He was interested in university and studying his own people’s history, stories, songs and music from the place where he lived. A place I will call Everywhere, because it is like many of the communities in which we presently work. Now, having worked with this small community, people can name how the sexual violence and the drugs were introduced by outside others. It was never part of their ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture, but came from within a colonial structure imposed on the community.

Bessel van der Kolk, in his recent research on the developmental impact of childhood trauma, writes: ‘[c]hildhood trauma including abuse and neglect, is probably the single most important public health challenge ... a challenge that has the potential to be largely resolved by appropriate prevention and intervention’ (2007: 224). Van der Kolk lists long-term health and social outcomes of trauma on children:

Violation of the child’s sense of safety and trust, of self worth, with a loss of a coherent sense of self;

- Emotional distress, shame, grief, self and other destructive behaviors;
- Unmodulated aggression, difficulty negotiating relationships with caregivers peers and marital partners;
- Clear link between suicide, alcoholism and other drug misuse, sexual promiscuity, physical inactivity, smoking and obesity;
- More likely to develop heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, skeletal fractures, and liver disease;

- People with childhood histories of trauma make up almost our entire criminal justice population. (2007: 224)

Van der Kolk could be writing about Aboriginal Australia. Over recent years, numerous reports from every state (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Report on Violence, 2000; Gordon, S et. al. 2002; Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, 2006; Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007), highlight the critical situation for Aboriginal children, their families and communities. Nowra does not acknowledge that all these reports were generally researched and written by Aboriginal people. From these reports, it is clear that many Aboriginal children experience extreme forms of violence. We know this and we have been doing something about it. However we have not had the governmental support we need: at the state or the federal level.

During my PhD field work (Atkinson, 2002), which investigated the violence-trauma stories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in central Queensland, I came to understand the different themes that people moved through as they explored their stories of pain and abuse. They would start their story at the point of their most severe pain. All had been sexually abused as children, most by non-Indigenous men who were strangers in positions of power, such as the church or other institutions. All had adult experiences of violence and drug misuse and some had attempted suicide. All had moved, or were moving, on and changing their lives. It was this that was of most interest to me. In circles of listening, sharing and learning they introduced me to the word healing.

An educaring solution

For some the word healing is problematic. However for the group with whom I was working the word had a depth of both yearning and meaning. Healing, for them, acknowledged their layered unexpressed pain, and healing came with an awakening to their unmet inner needs. Hence the word healing (derived from the Old English word *haelen*, 'a return to wholeness'), could be described as the curative process of becoming well, moving from fragmentation and fracturing, as they made sense of the stories that held them prisoner to their pain and their shame. The word healing symbolised their choice to do work that would help them feel and become well. Within the circle of learning, healing was the educational process of learning about the self at a deep level and what made them *who they are*, and then becoming aware of the life choices that emerge as they come to know and accept themselves, opening up possibilities for *who they could become*. In the sharing, listening to and learning from each other, they found a way through their pain, which allowed them to reclaim power over their lives and thus re-conceptualise their stories and create different personal narratives. Such processes are fundamental cultural tools—such as ceremonial relatedness and being-in-the-world of

relationships—that have long been part of Aboriginal Australian (indeed Indigenous people in general) culture.

In light of the critical need to address issues of violence in all its forms, highlighted by the current media saturation and commissioned government reports in Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales, Northern Territory and South Australia, the diagram below provides a re-conceptualisation of the crisis that Aboriginal peoples face today. The centre circle allows us to name this critical time as both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is for Aboriginal people to take the courage to begin to address the fractures in family and community relationships; and it is an opportunity to show Australians, in general, that with help healing can happen. The diagram is built on the assumption that at its most fundamental level healing involves educating people, both as individuals and within family and community circles. These circles are educational or educaring, and should involve early childhood learning, and education for life-long learning and healing.

Circles of sharing, learning and healing

In the diagram below circles one and two are the worlds that were and are. Circles three and four are the work that is being done and that has to be done for healing to happen.

The first circle represents the Aboriginal (Indigenous Australian) world-of-relating before colonisation. There is a need to name the cultural strengths and weaknesses of those times, and bring the valuable cultural strengths into the present.

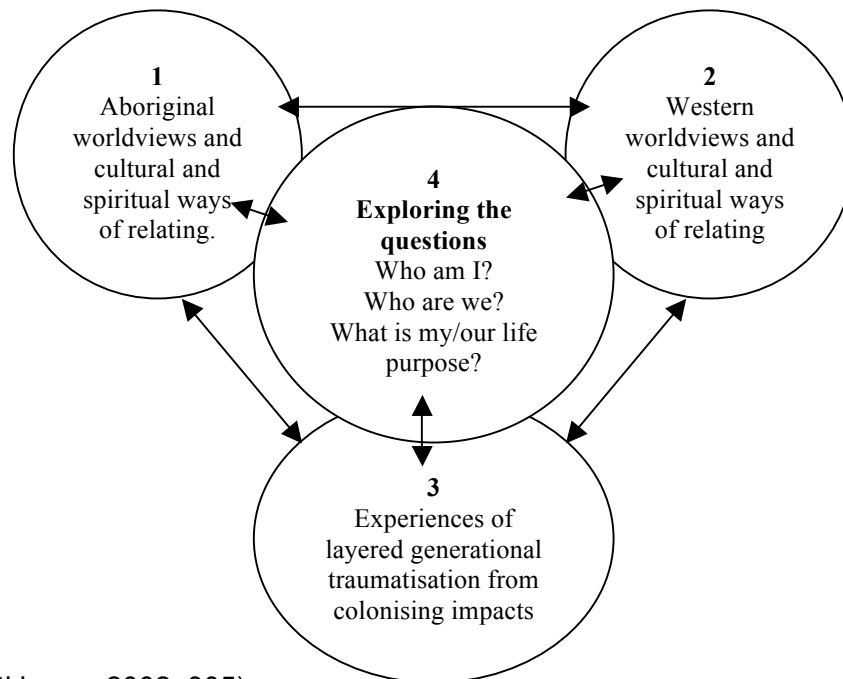
The second circle represents Western world-views and the impacts of colonisation. Colonisers brought both good and bad. From all that the invaders and immigrants have introduced, Aboriginal peoples need to know what to keep and what to discard.

Circle three represents the layered transmission of trauma across generations and the experiences of this traumatising, which has largely formed who we are today. In all our pain, we must give value to these experiences: renaming the knowledges and the strength derived from such experiences as profound learning. In the day-to-day work of engaging with people for educaring, counselling or healing, we find this is the circle where most people start. Unfortunately many people are caught in this circle, which we call the trauma vortex: cycles of painful abuse and self-abuse, conflicts of identity, and devaluing of one's Aboriginal cultural and spiritual heritage and identity.

Circle four represents the educational work that has to be done and the integrity, knowledges and skills that are available to facilitate people moving from victim/perpetrator/survivor to be creators of a future free of violence. The educational work of circle four, which must

be done by all Australians, is to achieve optimal health or well-being which exists,

when a person experiences Self as an integrated whole that encompasses the body, the emotions, the mind and the spirit. This state of health, experienced as a pervasive sense of well-being can only occur through connection with other Selves – 'without you there can be no me'. To become whole the Self needs to be experienced and expressed from the inside and recognised from the outside. Hence the critical context for both health and healing is the interpersonal (Self-Other) relationship. (Fewster 2000: 1-2)



(Atkinson, 2002: 305)

People would sit for some time in the three outer circles, however they would move in and out of the centre circle at will, and this circle became the place of healing: of deepening educaring. Through story-making and story-telling, as people moved from one circle of learning to another, they came to see how violence, experienced as trauma, fragments people's sense of identity, and fractures the loving and enduring connections of family and community that provides structure to human lives. At the same time, it was also clear that in the listening, sharing and learning together, healing was possible.

Is government listening?

Over the period of 2005, 2006 and 2007 Gnibi College went to the Commonwealth Government seeking whole-of-government support for our work. We were responding to specific requests for help from a number of communities in three states. We took a proposal called 'Building the Future' (Gnibi, 2006), a crisis intervention, training, education and applied research model, which supports community

recovery. The work of 'Building the Future' was designed to work through four stages:

Short term response: crisis intervention through ICERT—Indigenous Crisis Educaring Response Team; the Short/Medium Term: Intervention/prevention, community healing work and educational activities including an accredited Diploma in Community Recovery; the Medium Term: Prevention—empowering agents of change including undergraduate and postgraduate course work studies; the Long Term: Sustainable change—practice based evidence—evidence based policy, supported by research (a Professional Doctorate, to document what works, how and why).

Now in 2008, while rejecting our original proposal, the new Federal government is calling for more meetings, and the State governments are asking if we are willing to work with the very same communities who asked for our support three years ago. As if the problem belongs solely to them, these communities are now under intense media attention.

At one stage in our interaction with government officials, I was asked, 'you don't think all this talk about child sexual abuse is just false memory syndrome, do you?' As I walked out of that meeting, and its '*Bad Dreaming*', my reality check was that senior people from my university were present, and had also heard the comment. They were as shocked as I was. As we sat debriefing after the meeting, my Executive Dean said to me: 'To do nothing is tantamount to genocide'.

Instead, as in Nowra's *Bad Dreaming*, we are held hostage to our nightmare. Not only is his book fatally flawed, it also has deep ethical problems. If the government had responded to our original proposals, our call to action, as a people, we would be well down the track to building our future. In working together, we might be able to emerge from our nightmares and be able to dream again.

Summary

The Indigenous Peoples of Australia have always had laws, processes and procedures that address, govern and control violent behaviors, both at the interpersonal and group levels. In contrast to, and in ignorance of these controls on violence, the colonising groups that came to Australia, and subsequently the resident colonial governance structures, have continuously and consistently used violence as a tool to both suppress and re-shape Indigenous individuals and societies. These violence enforcing and violence making tools have three components: physical violence; structural—institutional violence; and psycho-social dominance. Sexual violence in particular is prominent in this process and has proved to be a deeply traumatic and wide ranging experience for Indigenous peoples as individuals, families and communities.

The violence of Australian colonisation has been underpinned and fueled by an on-going racist ideology that allows the coloniser to define and redefine the Indigenous subject as an 'object', and hence the Indigenous body, according to a set of attributes and behaviours that explain and ultimately justify the need for violence or the inevitability of violence. To this end, multiple layers of violence have been woven through the very fabric of Indigenous life experience, which creates a huge potential for an ongoing series of life crisis at the individual, family and community level.

Today we are witnessing a crisis of trauma and violence borne of colonising processes that are still not being adequately named, recognised, challenged and, most importantly, attended to through state supported 'educaring' preventions and interventions (Atkinson 2007). Hence the painful and difficult job of healing remains with Indigenous peoples, and is generally unsupported by the state. Thus the state continues to be implicated in the violence—the nightmares—it has created for its Indigenous subjects.

Nowra's *Bad Dreaming* defines Indigenous subjects who have been objectified through a colonial lens. He uncritically deploys Western perceptions of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture to pathologise Aboriginal violence, without historically contextualizing it with a comparative analysis of the colonial cultures of violence, such as prison colonies, and their own aetiology.

Research shows that traumatic childhood events, such as sexual assault and experiencing /witnessing episodes of physical violence, often leave scars that last until adulthood and can substantially interfere with healthy adult functioning. One of the most consistent scientific research findings is that traumas and adversities in childhood tend to put an individual at risk of a large variety of difficulties later in their lives. While change is inevitable throughout our lives, the changes that occur during childhood are the most dramatic. Interruptions to early cognitive and social development can have profound lifelong effects, which impede the development of a sense of worth, healthy interpersonal relationships and the achievement of independent and productive lives.

This crisis of violence and child abuse is an outcome of Australian cultural practices and Australian values. Australia, particularly at the state and corporate levels and within the media (the *power* levels), must own these issues as their own rather than, one-way or another, pass them off as another problematic 'Indigenous issue'.

In taking our power back, to be human in an inhuman world, we also take the power to transform the worlds in which we live. In this we are all responsible. Louis Nowra's work does not deserve a review.

The final word belongs to an Indigenous man: *Let's help stop the abuse and violence in Australian society—our collective society. Let's*

hold government accountable as a mainstream issue. Let's stop acting like colonised idiots who are so comfortable being racist stereotypes—both black and white.

Professor Judy Atkinson is the Chair of Gnibi the College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, at Southern Cross University, and Director of the Healing Circle—the Collaborative Indigenous Research Centre for Learning and Educare. She introduces herself as a Jiman—Bundjalung women who also has Anglo-Celtic and German heritage.

Glenn Woods is the Head of School of Indigenous Studies at Southern Cross University.

Notes

[1] There is a difference between the sensationalist media focus and Nowra's Bad Dreaming, on violence in Aboriginal lives, and the attempt by some Aboriginal people to critique its aetiology.

[2] This section is written by Judy Atkinson.

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