

Marriage of an Aboriginal 2018

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Biography

Dr. Kim Snepvangers is an Associate Professor and Director: Professional Experience & Engagement Projects at UNSW Sydney in the Faculty of Art & Design. Recently she won a national Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning from Universities Australia. She is a Senior Fellow with the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA) and within UNSW a Scientia Education Academy Fellow (SEA). As the recipient of a UNSW Strategic Educational Fellowship: New Approaches to the Development of Professional Identity through Independent Critical Reflection, her research interweaves creative and professional industry contexts. Working with Indigenous collaborators and Cultural Mentors on exhibition projects engages her history with dissensus to challenge dominance of progress/discovery narratives. Her research engages visualisation with creative ecologies, critically reflective frameworks and embodied pedagogies. She has extensive research and publishing experience in developing transitional educative spaces between academic, creative and professional practice.

Abstract

My artwork investigates key questions of storying as research using the 1848 marriage of my paternal Great Great Grandfather (GGF) as a catalyst. A key question that arises in the Australian settler colonial context, is ‘Where do you belong?’ particularly if your paternal ancestry is shrouded in darkness, with little information available about the history of intermarriage and Aborigi-

nal ancestry. Using arts-based A/r/tographic research my artworks comprise lightbox's, aprons, documents, embroidery and a performance. Alongside the visual components of the artwork, I sit, sew and stitch, staging a "visual encounter" to embody my ancestry in contemporary form. The artworks bring previous entanglements and being into current receptivity. Re-examining lived conditions and moralities of early colonial Australia, when my ancestor as an Aboriginal black stood alongside his white marriage partner brings new assemblages and wordly sensibilities into view. The marriage was one of only a handful of reported intermarriages in the early days of colonial Australia. Text about my GGF from an 1848 Sydney Morning Herald (*SMH) article reports on the "Marriage of an Aboriginal". Hence the name of my artwork highlights the disembodied way that my ancestor was spoken about. The psychological metaphor relating to the exhibition theme of Dark Days/White Nights engages text and interrogates colour bineries to powerfully highlight how cultural divides and quasi acceptance of diversity as 'novelty' and 'industriousness' can be reconsidered and disclosed as micronarratives of colonisation with resonance today.

Keywords

Micronarrative, visual encounter, storying, belonging.

My artwork anticipates new frameworks of cultural change using micronarratives of colour, placing text alongside image making to address a historical fact through artistic reflection. This interest in narrative entanglement alongside visual and performative assemblage discloses my

use of artistic research methodologies and the significance of working with a key Cultural Mentor, Tracey Bunda and the artistic collective 'SISTAS Holding Space' (Bunda et al, 2019). Working within a 'Storying as Research' (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) lens with Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators brings previously invisible, latent stories into the light. Slim portable lightboxes as used in my artwork, utilised the materiality of light as a way to think about contemporary becoming and luminescence. Phillips and Bunda note using the work of hooks (1995) that "...to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" (p.158). My artwork therefore responds to a deeply felt embodied need - wanting to understand where I belong, through gently recovering and reuniting the past when there is little or no recorded information available about my Aboriginal ancestry. My paternal ancestry is shrouded in darkness, so looking for clues since the recent uncovering of a familial marriage certificate and related newspaper coverage has become a key focus of my arts based research. I am gradually coming to understand through serendipitous 'encounters' with people, family histories, documents and research how this darkness descended within the settler colonial history of Australia.

A recent publication with high resonance for my localised context, is the book *Hidden in Plain View: The Aboriginal People of Coastal Sydney* (Irish, 2017). The premise of the book gives new life to views of Aboriginal displacement upon colonisation from 1788 by writing Aboriginal people back into history. Citing examples from consultation with Aboriginal communities, successful exhibitions and other evidence, artefacts and documentation, Irish makes observations to fill gaps in the historical record. He starts 'by challenging an enduring myth that Aboriginal culture has never changed and cannot change without ceasing to be 'authentic'' (p.7). Perceived adaptations of a relatively small Aboriginal population in order to remain safe and descriptions of some of the types of interactions with settlers: provide a challenge to doc-

umented histories of Australian settler colonialism, particularly discovery and social progress narratives. Irish describes how Aboriginal histories have endured, yet, these entangled histories have only just started to emerge. My work forms part of this alternative history of becoming, highlighting entanglement, invisibility, being in between, liminality and ambiguity. What I am now doing is reflectively thinking about how I might reclaim, re-territorialise and re-imagine my ancestry. Although, I am not just filling a void as for a start, completing traditional records like those found on typically western genealogy sites and family trees is not possible, as these types of record do not exist in my paternal family. Rather, through experimental research I am interested in challenging existing narratives around the historical record regarding Aboriginal marriage and identity formation. By creating artworks and staging “visual encounters” (Image 1) I am creating a visual and performative response to speak back and uncover the mechanics of formal histories that disembodied my ancestors. The staging and re-staging of “visual encounters” as artworks provides a counterpoint to the ‘encounters’ that I am having in the process of uncovering my personal ancestry as hidden history. Phillips & Bunda explain the process of re-imagining through creating artworks, performances and stories thus:

When storying is organic, embodied – through seeing, hearing and feeling – in becoming and known, recited, remembered and recalled – emergent conditions coalesce, to form in thought, to speak anew the colonial texts that would make our ancestors disembodied, as if separate from the times and ideologies that would place them as less than human. We re-story their lives, by tearing up the archival scripts, drawing from our theoretical baskets, imagining a differing humanity for those from which we come (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, 19).

As well as embodied storying I am interested in arts-based A/r/tographic frameworks (Rousell, Lasczik & Irwin, 2018; Cutcher, Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2015). These theorists call for a

shift in thinking about how we do research by recognising the centrality of practice (text and image in diverse relation) together with the embodied performativity of research processes (Leavy, 2015; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006). For example, in thinking through an A/r/tographic lens, Rousell, Lasczik & Irwin's collaborative experiments with visual and embodied artworks trace "conceptual and material movements of walking-lines, drawing-lines, writing-lines, and reading-lines as abstract vectors of creative production, intensity, mobilisation and becoming" (p.205). Importantly for my artwork, such an innovative speculative typology using visual texts and images is explored with embodied performance being seen as fundamental for arts-based research.

One of the micronarratives in my artwork refers to the personal, localised and fragmentary selection of key textual material from my ancestry, that speaks back to the authority of journalistic reporting from over a century ago in the early days of white settlement in Australia. Conceived as a catalyst for entertaining awkward conversations the artwork contrasts the perceived darkness of night and the lightness of day to re-imagine images and text in suites of relations as "visual encounters". The appropriateness and resonance of the term, 'encounter' that I use, most typically describes an event, often historically couched, to be unexpectedly be faced with or to have an experience, which can be something hostile or difficult. These sensibilities reflecting environmental complexity have high salience with Aboriginal Knowledge and histories. For example, in some recorded white settler colonial histories of Australia, discovery narratives depicting white settler 'encounters' with Aboriginal people have only recently been called into question. Exhibitions, such as *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum* (2015) use the term 'encounter' to map diverse relationships of collected, European owned artefacts with lived and shared histories of First Peoples in Australia. However, once the exhibition finished, after exploring some of the impact of colonial settlements, missions and collections since colonial settlement in 1770, the

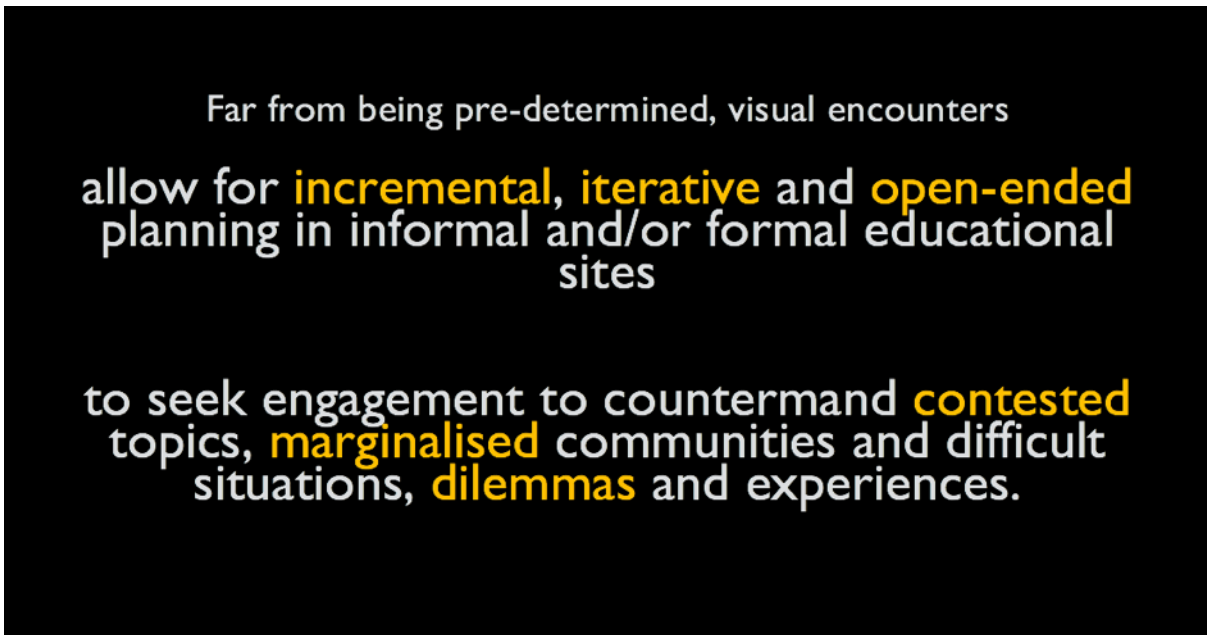


Figure 1: Highlighting the concept of “Visual Encounters” – Kim Snepvangers, 2018

Aboriginal objects and artefacts in the British Museum collection returned to Europe.

Encounter also has strong relevance in artistic practice as qualities of serendipity, chance meetings and unexpected encounters with artefacts, events and activities imply risk-taking and experimental outcomes. Rather than pre-determining outcomes, encounters are iterative, open-ended and incremental (Image 1).

Within neo-liberal education in the Australian context, the term ‘encounter’ has been used by Connell (2013) (Image 2) when writing about the significance of alternative educative spaces and tension rather than simply including diverse voices. Although beyond the scope of this article problems with the reproduction of non-critical privilege of dominant social groups and a lack of a critical lens when discussing “inclusivity” (Brookfield, 2002) has relevance for my artwork. Importantly, Brookfield identified the area of “aesthetic education as one in which critical practice can be located” . . . to countermand reproduction of dominant ideas in society. Brookfield then uses Marcuse to suggest that, “He challenged the self-evident truth that a tol-

Connell (2013) signals the significance of “the creative development of social practice through time” (p.104) whilst simultaneously highlighting concepts of encounter. For Connell, an emphasis on ‘encounter’ actively involves intervention and interruption in educational contexts to **countermand linear social process narratives**. Significantly Connell recognises the concept of **care** in this at times unsettling process of engaging complex issues and tensions. Rather than disparagement and maintenance of existing structures and routines, Connell advocates engaging with new educative spaces and diverse changing communities.

Connells qualities of encounter include respect, reciprocity, trust, the capacity to shape relationships, discovery as well as the crucial aspect of engagement.

Figure 2: Highlighting “Connell’s” (2013) concept of the significance of social practice through time – Kim Snepvangers, 2018

erant embrace of diverse views is inherently humanistic and democratic and confronted us with the uncomfortable proposition that an apparent engagement with diversity can be manipulated to reinforce dominant ideology” (p.279). A critical lens is therefore significant in selecting text and images for artwork, which must have a certain tension in order to move beyond reproduction as a mode of representation.

For Connell (2013) prioritising historical reconstruction and setting up ‘encounters’ conceives of educational transformation as social labour and process, involving care (p. 104). One of the key aspects of setting up an encounter then is the condition that people require autonomy to explore power relations for diagnosis and contestation (Connell, 2013, 104-105). These conditions of ‘encountering’ inform the theoretical impulse for my work to unsettle complex issues of perceived linear social progress. Through my artwork aspects of reciprocity and trust, shape the capacity to build new relationships and engage audiences with storytelling that has perhaps

has resonance with their own lives, ancestries and histories.

In crossing artistic and pedagogical borders in synthesis with the curatorial premise of the exhibition, using the term “visual encounters” seek to also double-code the artistic sensibility of the artworks as “practice encounters” (Snepvangers & Mathewson Mitchell, 2018). Encounter in this sense is combined with the concept of practice to create “practice encounters” which provides the opportunity for “insider-practitioners” to actively plan transitional possibilities through creation of non-fixed meaning states opening possibilities of transformation. The “visual encounter” that I have created in my artwork therefore has a certain amount of in-built tension and contradiction, such as the selection of key terms for illumination and display, contemplation and reflection.

The artworks in “Marriage of an Aboriginal” are set up as an encounter within the alternative educative exhibition space, betaspace, Aalto University in Finland, within the International Society of Education Through Art (InSEA) Regional Congress. Designed to be mobile, easily transportable and manouverable, including myself as intervention/performer placed on a chair in the exhibition space near the lightboxes, the artworks comprise:

- six slim flurescent white lightbox panels that can be placed on a plinth, the wall, the floor, on a window with selected text from a 1848 SMH article about my (GGF). No electricity is needed as they are portable lightboxes;
- coloured digital film (white and red with black selected text) that can be slid in and out of each lightbox;
- a brown antique wood shelf – acting as a domestic type shelf for a photoframe containing the full text of the 1848 SMH newspaper article;
- actual and a re-created version of one of my Great Great Granmother (GGM) Irish ancestors black Victorian mourning aprons, I physically sew, touch and embody matter using

the 1848 text from the SMH article about my GGF;

- my performative intervention allows me to ‘industriously’ stitch the SMH reported text from my GGF marriage into a mourning apron simultaneously touching and re-shaping the materiality of data.

Alongside other reportable events, the text from the 1848 SMH article regarding “News from the Interior” about my GGF reads:

MARRIAGE OF AN ABORIGINAL – A rather novel marriage was solemnised last week at Sutton Forest, being no less than that of an aboriginal black to a white woman. The blackfellow was some time previously baptised, but in what name we know not. He is commonly called Black Harry, and earns his livelihood as a horse-breaker. He is very intelligent and industrious (SMH, 1848, p.2).

With the assistance of my Cultural Mentor, Tess Allas, Director of Indigenous Programs at UNSW Art & Design, we selected text from the SMH article for use in the artworks as follows:

A rather novel marriage
an aboriginal black to a white woman.
commonly called Black Harry
He is very intelligent and industrious.

These four lines were selected for display in the artwork as we thought that they efficiently conveyed key points of tension with resonance with contemporary audiences – as micronarratives of colour, in this case red, white and black. Calling someones marriage ‘rather novel’ for example implies otherness and difference from mainstream society, yet in 1848 this was an acceptable term. In other words, my GGF’s key life event, getting married contained a qualification, his marriage was reported as a novelty, alongside quasi biosocial measures such as ‘intelligence’ and ‘industriousness’ applied as metaphors for inclusion.



Figure 3: *Marriage of an Aboriginal 2018* – Sample sentence and slim lightbox on white background – Photograph by Kim Snepvangers, 2018

Preparation for an exhibition of my artwork as a “visual encounter”, involved testing the lightboxes for their capacity to illuminate and bring key micronarratives into the light. Both Images 3 and 4 use the one first line from the selected text in two different background environments. I wanted to have a sense of the wordly sensibility that best portrayed deep contrast between the whiteness of a contemporary kitchen (Image 3) juxtaposed with an historical brown antique chiffoier (Image 4). Whilst the two images work well as photographs, these prototypes needed to be extended further, beyond the domestic context of singular artworks. This involved thinking through the staging of a kind of diorama, to anticipate “visual encounters” as an event, using the four lines of selected text within an exhibition environment.

Subsequently, I presented my premise to the curators of the 2018 InSEA Curated Exhibition



Figure 4: *Marriage of an Aboriginal 2018* - Sample sentence and lightbox on brown antique chiffonier – Photograph by Kim Snepvangers, 2018

Dark Days//White Nights, titled “Marriage of an Aboriginal” (2018). The “visual encounter” that I staged comprised a series of artworks in the form of slim lightboxes, an antique wooden shelf with a photo frame, a Victorian mourning apron and a recreated apron. The artwork also has visual and a stitching/speaking performance element to tell the story in an aesthetic form. The performative aspects of the work were concentrated on the opening night of the exhibition – 18 June 2018 in betaspace, Aalto University, Finland. The exhibition was curated by Minna Suoniemi, Lecturer in Media Pedagogy, Media Artist and Miia Rinne, University Lecturer, Media Artist, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Finland. As one of eighteen artists selected to exhibit work in the curated group exhibition: “Dark Days, White Nights”, we were issued with the provocation - How do we experience cultural changes

locally and globally? The call was for contemporary artistic approaches which engage with the exhibition theme, cultural diversity, post-humanism, new materialism and eco-justice.

Coming from the Asia Pacific region, in my response to the curatorial premise I highlighted how cultural displacement and change in Europe in the early 19th century included diasporas from Europe to the Great South Land, Terra Australis, now known as Australia. A recreation of my maternal Irish Great, Great Grandmother's (GGM) Victorian Mourning Apron – (Image 5) was used as a second catalyst to re-unite and re-imagine my European (maternal) and Indigenous (paternal) heritage through my research as stitching practice. Re-unification through re-creating a domestic artefact is important, allowing for a re-telling and an invitation to my GGF to come back to family, into my personal everyday life. I wanted to address the public disembodiment of the newspaper article title: "Marriage of an Aboriginal", which implies that the Aboriginal person being reported on had no name. Future artistic research will interrogate names and naming more systematically than I have been able to do here, as the name "Black Harry" displaces and disembodies my ancestor. Black Harry as a micronarrative of colour signals a lack of familial connection and a type of generalised ordering and othering that was commonly bestowed upon Aboriginal people. The use of the words "an Aboriginal" also presented the idea that reporting on this marriage in this way was to be seen as an example to others, regarding intermarriage whilst simultaneously clearly describing otherness through novelty, beyond the mainstream. This marriage was clearly a reportable event.

My GGM brought the mourning apron with her on the 100 day voyage to Australia from Europe in 1853, when she was 20 years of age. The 1848 marriage (paternal GGF) and the 1853 funeral apron and voyage (maternal GGM) were closely aligned in this colonial timeframe and even though I am unsure if they ever met, I wanted to reconnect my family history through these two artefacts that variously engaged key events in both their lives. Through seeing, hearing, feeling and becoming known (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) the colonial texts of my Aboriginal

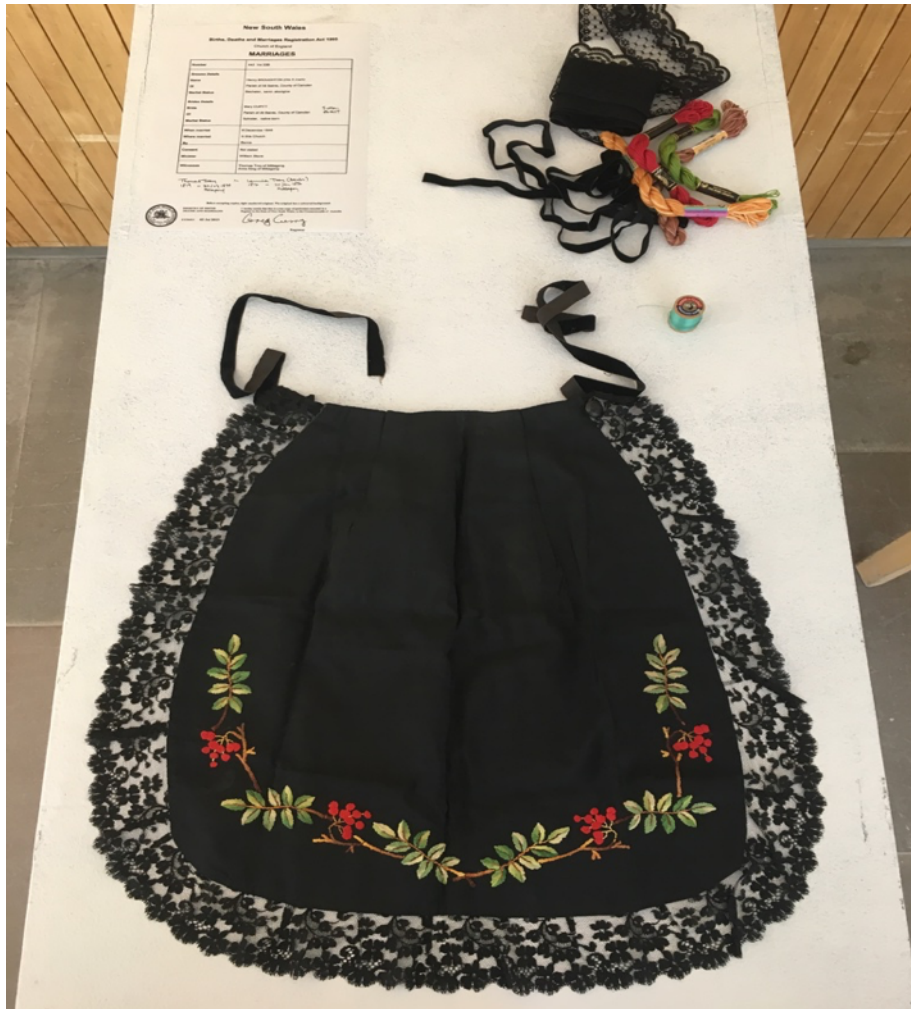


Figure 5: My GGM Victorian Mourning Apron 1853 arrived in Sydney from Wexford, Ireland and stitching paraphernalia for performance, in *Dark Days//White Nights*. betaspace, Aalto University, Finland. Photograph by Kim Snepvangers, 2018.

GGF can be reintwined, embodied once again and re-storied. I wanted to convey “a differing humanity for those from which we come” (p.19).

During the exhibition at mutually convenient times I sat and stitched the words from the SMH article into a newly created black mourning apron. The blackness/darkness of the mourning apron is double coded. My GGM would never see her European family again and so the aprons whilst domestic and not used everyday, indicated a sadness, an inevitability tinged with

decorum in the voyage to a new land. From my contemporary perspective the darkness of the aprons also laments a lack of true acceptance of Aboriginal people into Australian society.

In conclusion, through sitting, stitching and sharing stories as a performative act in the gallery space, my two ancestral histories from Europe (1853) and Australia (1848) can metaphorically reignite through an exploration of diverse scientific and artistic worldviews. My 'industriousness' in sewing the selected text into a newly created yet familial object, moves beyond representation to inculcate more than representational gestures of longing, naming and belonging. The encounter includes the unfinished apron, with stitching still to be completed to invoke both a sensibility of reunion and a kind of release (hooks, 1995, p.158), with an implication that there is more industry to come. The apron as a micronarrative on the one hand is filled with the promise of improved lived experiences in a new land yet, the black mourning funeral attire also latently alludes to death and sorrow far from home. The micronarrative of a novel marriage as a metaphor for the perceived pristineness and potentiality of white wedding nights has been given contemporary resonance through the everyday practice of sewing, stitching and talking/telling/showing my GGF's story. The novelty of his marriage as an intelligent, industrious yet displaced person has been brought back together within my family, enfolding new resemblances and belongings. This "visual encounter" has replaced novelty with resonance and meaning to show how the early dark days of colonial Australia can be juxtaposed with contentious new world views.



Figure 6: Snepvangers, K. (2018). *Marriage of an Aboriginal in Dark Days//White Nights*. betaspace, Aalto University, Finland. Photograph by Kim Snepvangers, 2018

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