

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Arnell Etherington

**Art Therapy in Australia: Taking a Postcolonial, Aesthetic Turn
Andrea Gilroy, Sheridan Linnell, Tarquam McKenna and Jill Westwood (Eds)**

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This book is a story using colour, form, words, with art: photos, collages, paintings, drawings, and sculpture providing content that is so much greater than its 425 pages. There is a sense of people and planning within fonts of different hues on pages of varying shades and brightness. The art reflects the content and the presentation is a message in itself:

‘Tenses change, voices morph and formality gives way to informality. This bricolage or melange in a narrative style is intentional. We ask that you gambol with the pictures, savour them, and wander through the text in any way you please – knowing that you may have the whole book or merely a chapter or two in your hands – letting the voices, art and self-hoods of the writers emerge.’ (p. 31).

In doing such, this volume remains strong in its academic pursuits, integrity of purpose, sensitivity in conversation and thought put into content, flow, and audiencing.

Where the book leads is to a beginning of art therapy in Australia, what form it has taken within a history of colonialism, with outliers who have always been seen to proceed with a humble and insightful appreciation of the Aboriginal people for the breadth of beings that they are and the context within which they live. Hence the title’s focus of postcolonialism which is defined as the ‘...theoretical approach concerned with the impact of colonisation and human consequences of external control and exploitation of native people and their lands.’ (p. 14). Art, aesthetics and art therapy work are one presentation of the editors/authors choice to foreground the visual. It is their belief that in so doing, this factor ‘...embodies the potential of art therapy to open up alterity, illuminate possibilities and bear witness to the intra-psychic, relational and social realms.’ (p. 10).

It is difficult to summate this book because the topics are expansive and still growing. It is just a turn...but a very important one. The Introduction and beginning chapters lay down a path, where possible, into the heart of the Australian experiences of the art therapist educators and practitioners who look back at their history, the history of art and therapy and significantly the history of the Aboriginal people. They then write, perform, and create this volume. There are boats and bridges, colonisers and refugees.

A picture is drawn of these events and this is followed by chapters of the creative work of Australian art therapists.

There is a conversation that the First Peoples of Australia have been separated from their country and culture. Chapter 1, *Taking a turn*, records this in a series of postcards of words and pictures sent among authors Allen, Rumbold, Schnaedelback, Woodford, and Tann – Creative Arts educators and practitioners in Melbourne. This transgenerational grief of the Aboriginal peoples is held and turned about to see where or how art therapy might make a fit for healing.

Chapter 2, *Toward indigenous Australian knowing*, Lawson, Woods, and McKenna take up the 'knowing', the knowing of another's heart, the knowing of another's loss.

'I don't want to spend a lot of effort attempting to use art to diagnose what is 'wrong' but I want to use art to 're-create' ways that belong with the art-makers so that the Australian Aboriginal people can return to themselves as individuals and communities.' (p. 97).

The spirit inside and out of alive worlds are touched upon in Pretorius' Chapter 3, *Desire and the desert*. In speaking of the inner deep listening of the Aboriginal way, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, An Aboriginal elder states:

'We call on it and it calls to us.' 'Our Aboriginal Culture has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun...We own our own grief and allow it to heal slowly.' (pp. 108-109).

Pretorius points out here how our Western culture is impoverished by this separation from the profound interconnectedness of nature held in the Aboriginal Culture.

The beginnings in art psychotherapy and psychiatry with its use of various art therapy assessments, Chapter 4, *Psyche nullius*, mix tenets of other disciplines and other

countries cultures to be Australian art therapy. Imagining and imaginations in one mix assist Henzell in Chapter 4 to bring clarity to what might have been confusion. Henzell weaves historical events of colonization and the movements of art therapy together.

Edwards in Chapter 5, *Crossing bridges, sowing seeds*, describes her life of immigrating to Australia in 1989 from Britain and her beginning work in art therapy. 'For indigenous people everywhere the land is of spiritual and cultural importance in a way that migrants may never completely understand or experience.' (p.143). She continues:

'Misguided past actions and fatal 'mistakes' by governments and charitable organizations such as the development of missions; racist notions of 'assimilation' and the so-called 'White Australian policy' which encouraged migration by White English speaking people; the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, referred to as the "Stolen Generation" as well as the rapid transition from hunter-gatherer to urban dweller, have all had huge impacts on the identity of Aboriginal Australians.' (p.143).

Edwards belief is that Australian art therapy can be built on local and imported art therapists using both local and imported material. The uniqueness of Australian art therapy for her is the freedom to make anew.

In Chapter 6, Westwood's *Hybrid creatures* lead her story of an art therapy educator in Australia – coming as an immigrant, researching the roots of Australian art therapy for herself and for her work. Along with this came the insights into past pathways and the truly hybrid creatures that creative arts interpreters and practitioners had and still become. The creatures appear in full form across the pages as the information about them and their influences is rendered. This is a remarkable journey where art making and imaging shifted her understanding away from dominating psychological discourse, opening up a postcolonial view of art therapy education, enabling '...the excavation of long lost, buried bones which reinvigorate this specialized and complex field.' (p. 210).

Through Perry's perceptive exploration and haunting images, Chapter 7, *Abject creatures* connects art psychotherapy and modern art, especially abject art handled through her own art pieces. At once we wander to our own experiences where

'...constructed meaning collapses as we encounter such feelings as horror, misery, repulsion, humiliation and desire...' (p. 214). Once again reinforcing that our most abject thoughts and feelings can be explored in this transitional space of creativity, a place to play out unspeakable fears and fantasies.

In *The work of art therapy*, Chapter 8, Thomson's research with cancer patients' art therapists with what she terms 'immersive visual analysis' is explored. Researching with experienced therapist-participants she views the potential of image making within a dialogue about the stories of their work. Her goal, to '...explore the potential of art making to go beyond and at times fold back into dialogue, as a powerful way to access knowledge lying outside conscious thought.' (p. 232). The visual art making in her research along with the undulating brush marks on the pages themselves, provides a more nuanced view of what is central to the art therapists-participants at their tasks.

In Chapter 9 Linnell, Perry, Pretorius, and Westwood consider the intersubjective areas within the space of art making, wordsmithing, and social engagement. The way in which communication may occur, the boundaries intentionally extended in the process of creative arts is offered through their exhibition of *Where knowing and not knowing touch*, a project over several years that '...generates a space for questioning binaries and researching relationships – between artist and audience, aesthetics and (inter)subjectivity, the psychic and the social.' (p. 254). Working with remembrances of lives and those forgotten, these educators came to be who they are... stretching and questioning on pages set with backgrounds of old photographs, collages, drawings, and sculptures from their exhibition.

Moss, in Chapter 10, *From broken circles to different identities*, working with Australian Aboriginal, Torres Strait, Southsea Islander children takes up the metaphor of the circle. She quotes Malcom Walter, Indigenous Elder: 'You're in the clan, it's like a circle, if you take one piece out of it the circle breaks.' (p. 284). From several generations of colonization, identities and self-esteem may be quite thin. Broken circles and healing circles become an alive metaphor to researching how these children in care negotiate cultural identity and race, arriving at different, perhaps richer, identities. The chapter is held with open and closed circles across the pages.

In Chapter 11, *Talking you talking me talking Aborigine*, Johnson looks at the misunderstandings that colonialization 'education' has asserted over the Aboriginals comprehension of themselves. Statistics of historical data and the impact of prejudice where who are and what constitutes Aboriginals has been a matter of 'mis-information':

'Education's power then is embedded in its ability to make Aboriginal history invisible to 'knowledge' and in the process it makes Aboriginal life, Aboriginal day to day experiences, invisible to Aboriginal people as they are living it. Their lives are Aboriginal, yet 'education' does not tell them so. They are *Aboriginal* which lives internally and is experienced externally as a conflict a confusion.' (p. 328).

The late Pam Johnson speaks passionately, in this chapter, about these topics and her work in the Australian correctional system.

In Chapter 12 entitled *Inter-Mission*, Linnell provides an insightful play or 'ethnographic drama' written by the author from sorted communications over three years of team work at a non-government organization for youth in outer Western Sydney. The drama uses colours as characters. The drama presents to the team an imagined dialog between the differing frameworks of art psychotherapy and narrative therapy. These two modalities were brought together creatively, exploring and theorizing how this work might be a woven fabric for practice. The power of the work, the thoughts and feelings of those who may practice it, rather than the youth at hand, is the focus. The dramatic presentation is printed on the art piece made by the team.

Eisdell in *A conversational model of art therapy*, Chapter 13, reflects on her post graduate training in psychotherapy with Russell Meares, an Australian psychiatrist who developed the Conversational Model along with British psychiatrist and Jungian analyst Robert Hobson. Making use of a single line, two participants work back and forth to develop images that hold a 'feeling language'. In this resonance, the conversation between two has a transformative effect. Eisdell tells of the Australian development of using art within the psychotherapeutic or analytic space and the place this model fits in the history of art psychotherapy. The meaning, use, and extensive research on this model is reviewed with case material.

Chapter 14, entitled *Material Sensibility*, looks in depth at the meaning of the space wherein art psychotherapy occurs, the attachment it can engender as a part of the work and the materials that provide the 'matter' within the psychological space of psychotherapeutic work. Fenner's words are enhanced by photos of art therapy rooms, materials, and individuals' art work. The value these elements hold in the therapeutic endeavour becomes the focus.

Chapter 14, the last chapter, becomes a metaphor for appreciating the whole volume, and that being a profound sense of place: Australia. As Robert Lawlor suggests in Chapter 2, the Aboriginal sense of the "Dreaming" is the potency of place and that forms the sacredness of the earth. (p.80).

The Epilogue by Kapitan: *A letter to Art Therapists of the future* is likened to a dream. Her collage, *Dreaming Art Therapy into the future* holds the vision of the perfect yet complex world wherein we might work and find our sources, our resources, our selves, and all that interconnects us in the realms of art, psychotherapy, and art therapy, holding both the pain and wisdom of history, '...to sit with the unknown and follow its shadows.' (p. 423).

Like the terrain and life in the Outback unfolds, this volume is an unfolding of a tough adapting live plant. It is made of growing art therapy by art therapists/art therapy educators that remains true to itself, perceives the nuances of its environment, and evolves with life.

The book is beautifully crafted with thoughtful intention. In sequencing the topics, you are led in the Introduction and early chapters into a heightened awareness, not unlike the 'Dreaming'. There is the historical background of how these contributors found themselves as art therapists in Australia and their journeys. What turnings did they encounter in facing the trauma and grief held in multiple generations of Aboriginal peoples and their histories? Moving into the final chapters, the creative and researched work of Australian art therapists is finely tuned to continue asking questions and developing answers. This volume can unfold the reader in a profound trans-cultural understanding.

Biography

Arnell Etherington Reader, Ph.D. is an Art Psychotherapist/ Practitioner Psychologist