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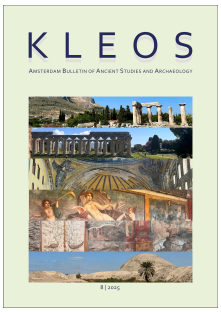

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CONTACT
bulletin.kleos@gmail.com
www.kleos-bulletin.nl

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Silent Voices: Aboriginal Oral Histories and Art as Decolonial Tools in Australia

Lola Stamboulian

Abstract

This article explores the dual role of Aboriginal Australian oral history and art in resisting colonial narratives. By analysing oral testimonies, through the cases of the Bringing Them Home report and the Stolen Generations, as well as Aboriginal artworks, through McKenzie's depiction of the Mistake Creek Massacre, the study demonstrates how Australian Aboriginal voices have continuously been discredited, questioned and mostly ignored by colonial and modern authorities, and consequently dismissed in the public sphere. Drawing from theories such as epistemic injustice and decoloniality, the paper highlights how Aboriginal voices and art can serve as tools of resistance against colonial silencing. While previous studies have mainly analysed one or the other, this article links oral histories and visual art as complementary tools against colonial structures. Based on this multifaceted approach, it offers a new perspective on the ongoing struggle to challenge colonial erasure. In addition, the study advocates for the integration of Indigenous knowledge into Australia's national narrative as a crucial step towards decolonisation, reconciliation, and justice.

Lola Stamboulian is an RMA candidate in Archaeology and Heritage at the University of Amsterdam and holds a BA in Archaeology and Anthropology from University College London (UCL). Her research focuses on the politics of heritage in post-colonial and conflict contexts, emphasising decoloniality and alternative epistemologies. She is interested in both monuments and intangible heritage such as oral history and their intersection with memory studies as alternative ways of preserving identity and collective memory in the face of cultural erasure.
▶ *Profile page*

Introduction

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal communities in Australia have transmitted their history through oral traditions and art.[1] While these histories have long passed down mythological tales and stories of kinships, over the last 200 years, they have also come to include accounts of persecutions by European colonisers, which will be referred to throughout the article as 'settlers' or 'colonial' forces. Such violence included the violent conflicts of the Frontier Wars, which led to the deaths and displacement of Indigenous communities, as well as policies like

1 Hamacher et al. 2023, 14; Matchan et al. 2020, 390; Flood 1996, 9; Morphy 1998, 44.

the Stolen Generations, which consisted of the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families, both of which will be discussed in this article. As of yet, these persecutions have systematically been ignored or denied by colonial authorities and modern Australian governments, leading to a stronger marginalisation of Indigenous Australians and reinforcing colonial dominance.

By exploring Australian Aboriginal art and oral history produced after Australia's European colonisation, this study will examine the systemic denial of Aboriginal knowledge, as well as the importance of bringing out Indigenous historical narratives and integrating them into the official Australian history. Giving authority to Aboriginal accounts of history in particular—which highlight colonial persecutions—is crucial for decolonising Australia's historical narrative. This process could lead to a better understanding and inclusion of these Indigenous communities and ameliorate their relationship with the Australian government and its White Australian population. It is in this context that the present article aims to demonstrate that Aboriginal art and the oral transmission of Native history are essential tools to preserve Indigenous memory while resisting the systematic colonial suppression of Aboriginal narratives.

The article will first analyse the research conducted on Australian Aboriginal traditions and the systemic discredit inflicted by colonial forces. Next, the theoretical framework will be introduced, including concepts such as epistemic injustice and decoloniality. Then, the paper will explore two case studies: the first focuses on oral Aboriginal testimonies in the context of The Stolen Generations. The second examines the Mistake Creek Massacre painting by Queenie McKenzie and its decolonial significance. Finally, the article will discuss how colonial denial has impacted Aboriginal voices, their forces as decolonial tools and the urgency to integrate them into Australia's historical discourse.

History, war, and contested memories

Over the past four decades, the interpretation of Australia's colonisation has been the centre of many heated debates in both the academic and political spheres.[2] In the 1990s, this dispute, encompassing issues such as how the history of colonisation is written and taught, the validity of Aboriginal oral histories or calls for a national apology, was coined as a *History War*: a cultural conflict between historians' obligations to collect genuine information about the past and demands of patriotism from

2 Attwood 2005, 1; Macintyre 2003, 80.

politicians and the media.[3] These various debates peaked during conservative politician John Howard's tenure as Prime Minister from 1996 to 2007. His government promoted a "sanitised" historical narrative that emphasised national unity while often dismissing the violent aspects of Australia's colonisation.[4] This included opposition to the idea of a formal apology and compensation to The Stolen Generations, as well as heavy criticism of academic works that explored European colonialism through the lens of Indigenous suffering.[5]

The dominant settler narrative in Australia has long depicted European colonisation as a progressive mission, where British settlers were portrayed as bringing "civilisation", democracy and the market economy to Australia.[6] British migrants were perceived as pioneers contributing to the development of a better society out of a wilderness.[7] This narrative reinforced their sense of accomplishment and ownership over the land they occupied. In addition, their discourse heavily drew on the Enlightenment trope of the "noble savage", which romanticised Indigenous people as pure and innocent but also simple-minded and primitive people, ultimately destined to disappear and clear the land for progress and civilisation.[8] However, this idea contributed to the systematic erasure of colonial violence experienced by Indigenous communities. The Frontier Wars, a series of violent conflicts between Aboriginal Australian groups and European settlers taking place throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, exemplify this silencing. While European colonists were invading their territories and denying Aboriginal land ownership, Indigenous Australians resisted in vain against British authorities.[9] Despite the deaths of thousands of Indigenous people due to epidemics and massacres, they were long omitted from official histories.[10] This omission shows the extent of denial embedded within the settler narrative.

Multiple historians have tried to challenge this settler narrative by elevating Indigenous perspectives, which tended to be marginalised in the public sphere. Among them, H. Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier* and L. Ryan in *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* emphasised the importance of Indigenous narratives

3 Macintyre 2003, 77; Macintyre/Clark 2004, 45 , 146.

4 Macintyre 2003, 82.

5 Davies 1st of January 2021.

6 Moreton-Robinson 2015, 23.

7 Attwood 2005, 16.

8 Smith 1999, 49; Ellingson 2001, 2; Mazzon 2021, 553; Foster/Nettlebeck 2012, 140-142.

9 Connor 2002, 113; Reynolds 2013, 2.

10 Reynolds 2013, 45-46 ; Foster/Nettelbeck 2012, 8, 144-147; Sharpes/Parkes 2023, 182-183.

by documenting the violent colonisation of their Land.[11] These studies described the history of Aboriginal people who were dispossessed of their land, massacred and displaced by settlers, as well as accounted for their resistance against the invaders, especially during the Frontier Wars. Incorporating these stories revealed some immediate impacts of European colonisation and directly challenged the historical narratives produced by colonial authorities that tend to undermine or justify the violence committed against the Indigenous population.

These few historians challenging the official Australian historical narrative were perceived as wearing a "black armband", i.e., a negative view of Australian history, by conservative public figures such as Australian right-wing columnist and political commentator Gerard Henderson.[12] The term had been popularised by historian G. Blainey in 1993 and aimed to criticise historical perspectives that focused on Australia's colonial violence towards Aboriginal communities rather than its historical achievements as a nation.[13] Another conservative figure in these debates was K. Windschuttle, who argued in his controversial book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, that studies highlighting colonial massacres were exaggerated or fake, based on inaccurate accounts and misrepresenting or inventing sources.[14] His argument raised further questions about the reliability of Indigenous accounts, leading to the further discredit of Indigenous narratives.

During the 21st century, colonial violence, including the dismissal of Indigenous perspectives, persisted. Tony Abbott, who served as Prime Minister from 2013 to 2015, also believed that Australia should focus on its achievements as 'British settlement was a very good thing' rather than 'wallowing in self-criticism.'[15] During his tenure, he cut $500 million from vital Indigenous community service programs in his first budget.[16] He also argued that Australia was "unsettled" before British arrival.[17] Abbott's position echoed colonial efforts to deny Aboriginal people's sufferings and preserve a national history centred on European contributions.[18] Eventually, the controversy was mainly dominated by White historians, politicians and media figures. Although the discussion concerned Aboriginal history and identity, Aboriginal

11 Reynolds 1982; Ryan 1981.

12 Clark 2002; McKenna 1998; Wimmer 2002; Macyntyre/Clark 2004, 4.

13 Blainey 1993, 11.

14 Windschuttle 2003; Windschuttle 2001.

15 Karp 18th of January 2018.

16 Uluru Statement 2023, 5.

17 Davidson 4th of July 2014.

18 Sharpes/Parkes 2023, 193; Bishop 28th of April 2020.

Australians were largely absent from the debate, marginalised in a matter that directly concerned them.[19]

Still, some scholars have attempted to convey the importance of Aboriginal traditions in preserving historical memory as well as highlighting the massacres experienced by Aboriginal people. Historian L. Ryan argued in *Painted Dreams* that Aboriginal art functioned as historical records that resisted colonial erasure.[20] In addition, H. Morphy's book *Aboriginal Art* emphasised how paintings and sculptures—deeply connected to oral traditions—could transmit traumas of colonial violence.[21] Finally, in *Hidden Histories*, anthropologist D. B. Rose delved into how Aboriginal communities have maintained oral records of massacres and displacement despite centuries of colonial suppression and emphasised the responsibility of engaging with them.[22]

Eventually, colonial denial continues because it is deeply rooted in a broader Western view that perceives Indigenous knowledge as illegitimate and unreliable.[23] While scholars like Reynolds, Ryan and Rose believe in the necessity of the integration of Aboriginal perspectives, conservative historians and political figures have sought to maintain a sanitised national narrative.

Epistemic injustice, repressive erasure and decoloniality

To understand how Aboriginal voices have been systematically silenced, it is first necessary to define and describe this process to provide a theoretical framework. To do so, the article draws on the concept of epistemic injustice, P. Connerton's work on forgetting, alongside decolonial perspectives. Together these frameworks aim to reveal how the dominant settler narrative has marginalised Indigenous knowledge and how Aboriginal art and oral histories can resist this silencing.

Epistemic injustice is a concept coined by philosopher M. Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, which refers to the systemic marginalisation of one's knowledge when a hearer gives a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word.[24] This injustice is based on the hearer's prejudices depending on the speaker's gender, sexuality, race, etc. In brief, their identity. This article explores the mechanism that leads to the dismissal of Aboriginal oral histories and art, as they are

19 Attwood 2005, 3.

20 Ryan 1995.

21 Morphy 1998.

22 Rose 1991.

23 McRanor 1997, 80.

24 Fricker 2007, 1.

perceived as unreliable and illegitimate due to colonial biases that prioritise Western historiography, particularly written records.[25]

This pattern of epistemic exclusion reflects what some scholars, such as William E. H. Stanner, have called a 'Great Australian Silence' around Aboriginal histories: a form of historical amnesia that dismisses Indigenous voices from dominant discourses.[26] This deliberate 'amnesia' connects with Connerton's exploration of collective memory and forgetting, which he ties closely to political structures and their roles in shaping historical narratives.[27] His concept of 'repressive erasure', which is a deliberate political act of concealing violence, aligns with Australia's context, where its history of violent colonisation of Indigenous land, and displacement of Indigenous people, was marginalised and repressed in order to provide a sanitised version of settlers' history.[28]

To analyse and actively challenge the colonial discourse and its lasting effects, it is essential to adopt a decolonial framework to examine Australian history effectively. Sociologist A. Quijano, first introduced the term "coloniality" in the context of Latin America.[29] It was further developed by scholars such as W. D. Mignolo and L. T. Smith, who examined how colonial structures of oppression continue to impact colonised groups beyond political decolonisation by being integral parts of modern institutions and knowledge production.[30] They argue that Eurocentric standards have shaped the world's history and historiography, while systematically dismissing Indigenous knowledge, perceived as non-existent, unreliable and illegitimate.[31]

More recently, scholars like C. E. Walsh and R. Vásquez have explored ways to counteract coloniality in practice. In *On Decoloniality*, Walsh and Mignolo look at the "colonial matrix of power", i.e., colonial structures and their power on modern institutions as well as its transformation and manifestations throughout time.[32] They also interlink both theory and active praxis of decoloniality as tools challenging this colonial matrix of power. Vásquez, in *Vistas of Modernity*, examines universal aesthetic norms which are deeply colonial and White. He proposes decolonial aesthesis as a new way of looking at artistic practices

25 Hulan/Eigenbrod 2008, 8.

26 Stanner 1979, 214.

27 Connerton 1989, 16.

28 Connerton 2008, 60.

29 Quijano 2000.

30 Smith 1999, 90-98; Mignolo 2011, 2.

31 Smith 1999, 100; Mignolo 2011, 10.

32 Mignolo/Walsh 2018, 2-8.

and questions Western aesthetic values.[33] Their works have reinforced the need to move beyond merely recognising Indigenous knowledge to rather entirely dismantling epistemic hierarchies.

In the Australian context, decoloniality criticises the marginalisation of Aboriginal knowledge systems and narratives in the national discourse and the dominance of a colonial historiography in the public sphere. It advocates for the recognition of Aboriginal forms of knowledge as essential to Australia's understanding of its past, and the importance of including them within academic, social and overall public structures.[34]

Methodology

The research will be using a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the frameworks of epistemic injustice, decoloniality and Connerton's theory of forgetting to analyse two case studies: The Bringing Them Home report and Queenie McKenzie's painting of the Mistake Creek Massacre.

The Bringing Them Home report documents the process and impact of The Stolen Generations. It will be examined through thematic discourse analysis, which will identify themes of trauma and dispossession and explore how minority narratives can challenge institutional forgetting and reclaim Aboriginal history. The second case study, focusing on Queenie McKenzie's Mistake Creek Massacre painting, will be approached through visual and contextual analysis and will examine the possible reasons behind the painting's delayed display at the National Museum of Australia and the challenge of decolonising public knowledge in a climate with/of enduring colonial ideologies. Together, these case studies offer a comparative exploration of how Aboriginal communities can reclaim agency and resist epistemic erasure.

Case Studies

Oral histories and disentangling voices: Bringing Them Home report

The first case study directly addresses oral history and its significance in recovering Aboriginal testimonies of colonial violence. The Stolen Generations refers to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (mostly those of mixed background) who were removed from their families and communities by state governments. The practice began in 1869 with the Aboriginal Protection Act that emerged in the state of

33 Vásquez 2020, 7-9.

34 Mignolo 2011, 54.

Victoria and lasted until 1969.[35] The Aboriginal Protection Board would visit families to assess if they had Aboriginal or Western ways of living. In most cases, they would take children from their parents for neglect or incompetent guardianship.[36] The children were then placed in White families as unpaid servants or agricultural labourers until their 18th birthday, to assimilate into Western culture.[37] Some of these children, who were taken at a young age, grew up without knowing they were Indigenous. Later on, and even now, many people who were removed from their families experience mental illnesses due to neglect and physical or sexual abuse perpetrated by host families.[38]

The history of the Stolen Generations connects to epistemic injustice by demonstrating how Australian government policies systematically silenced Aboriginal culture and knowledge. Connerton's notion is relevant here as the systematic removal of Aboriginal children was not just a social policy but a deliberate act of repressive erasure, of eradication of Indigenous memory, culture, and identity: a cultural genocide in which violence was hidden under the guise of child protection.[39]

The Bringing Them Home report, published in 1997, is an investigation of The Stolen Generations commissioned by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It was based on the extensive oral testimonies of approximately 600 Indigenous people who were removed from their families as children.[40] The report documents the traumatic impacts of this policy on individuals and communities, highlighting experiences of cultural erasure, physical and sexual abuse, and lasting psychological harm. In addition, the report recommended that Australian parliaments apologise for their actions. In 2008, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd (in office 2007–2010), officially apologised to Aboriginal Australians. In addition, the Australian government established reparation measures, including a payment of damages, a personal apology, support programs, and the possibility of sharing one's story for the victims of The Stolen Generations.

The testimonies documented in the report challenged the repressive erasure and institutional forgetting committed by Australian states and illustrated the lasting impacts of colonial mechanisms. From a decolonial perspective, Aboriginal survivors' oral histories become active forms of epistemic resistance against

35 Healey 2019, 6.

36 Read 2007, 7.

37 The Stolen Generations n.d. 3.

38 The Stolen Generations n.d. 11.

39 Connerton 2008, 60.

40 Human Right and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997.

the silencing of colonial structures. The Bringing Them Home report aimed to ensure that Aboriginal experiences and cultural knowledge were finally recognised. Rudd's speech in response to the report demonstrates the impact and power of bringing to light Aboriginal voices. In particular, the measures put into place after his formal apology highlight the decolonial power of Aboriginal voices.

Art as a tool: The Mistake Creek Massacre

The second case study addresses Aboriginal oral testimonies through the medium of art. Queenie McKenzie was an Aboriginal artist of the 20th century, belonging to the Gija people, located in Northwestern Australia. She is known for her artworks that explore themes such as Aboriginal cosmology and the violence of colonialism in Australia.[41] One of her most significant contributions was her portrayal of the 1915 Mistake Creek massacre (see Figure 1), where several Aboriginal people were killed by settlers according to the Aboriginals' account. This massacre, however, has been repeatedly contested, and the story has two versions. According to the Gija oral accounts, a White former policeman and his two Aboriginal employees killed eight Gija people. The attackers believed that one of the former policeman's cows had been killed and eaten by members of the camp that was attacked. According to the non-Indigenous story, including the opinion of historian Windschuttle, who emphasises the lack of reliability of oral history, however, no White men were involved in the killing.[42]

McKenzie learnt about the event from her people's oral stories. She consequently represented White and Aboriginal men in her painting depicting the massacre.[43] In 2005, the National Museum of Australia bought her artwork, but it was not exhibited until 2020. As of 2025, the painting remains on display at the National Museum of Australia.

The long refusal to exhibit McKenzie's artwork may be explained by various reasons, such as curatorial decisions, other priorities in the museum's schedule or a lack of understanding of the painting's significance. However, while these factors have to be considered, these delays also reflect broader difficulty with incorporating Aboriginal perspectives, especially oral histories, into the public sphere and national narratives.[44] In this case, especially, the different historical accounts of the event

41 Kjellgren, 2001, 11.

42 Windschuttle 2001; Daley 4th of July 2013.

43 Burnside 22nd of April 2020.

44 Whittington 2021, 259; Attwood 2011, 177.

Figure 1.
Painting of the Mistake Creek Massacre by Queenie McKenzie, 1997.

furthermore challenged the reliability of Aboriginal testimonies. Though these oral histories, like the ones McKenzie drew inspiration from, are often questioned for their accuracy as memories can change over time, this scrutiny is rarely applied to other forms of historical representation.[45] Artworks depicting historical events, such as those commonly found in museums, can often carry biases, yet that rarely prevents them from being exhibited. The museum's hesitation and delay can therefore symbolise the broader challenge of integrating Aboriginal historical perspectives into the national consciousness: an institution may seek to go towards decolonisation and inclusion but simultaneously struggle with the pressures of official historical discourse and public reception.

The National Museum of Australia, primarily funded by the government, may be influenced in what it promotes.[46] While museums have more artworks than they can exhibit, the delayed exhibition of the painting could reflect political unwillingness, especially on the government's part, to display colonial violence. As Connerton argued, institutions can selectively choose what to remember or forget, thereby shaping collective memory.[47] In this case, the exclusion of an artwork reflecting an Aboriginal narrative shows the reluctance of a modern institution to be confronted with its colonial past and its power in marginalising Indigenous voices.

McKenzie's piece not only documents the historical trauma of her people but also resists the systemic forgetting and epistemic

45 Smith 2021, 71; Thomson 2011, 79-90.

46 National Museum of Australia, 2023.

47 Connerton 1989, 14.

injustice of Australia's colonial mindset.[48] Her artwork contributes to decolonising Australia's historical consciousness and dismantles the structural denial of Indigenous knowledge. Its eventual exhibition in 2020 can be linked to growing public support for reconciliation, increased visibility of Aboriginal advocacy through NGOs, and increased pressure on institutions to address colonial legacies.[49] For instance, in 2017, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was published, which ensured a truth-telling of Australian colonial history; and in 2020, the destruction of Juukan 2 rockshelter, a 46,000-year-old Aboriginal sacred site, provoked public outrage.[50]

Discussion

Denial as continued colonial violence

The Stolen Generations and the Mistake Creek Massacre demonstrate how the Australian government has historically denied Aboriginal experiences, not only through physical crimes but also through epistemic injustice, emphasising the persistence of colonial persecution.[51] In October 2023, a referendum was called to add an Aboriginal voice to Parliament in order to give Indigenous Australians a significant role on matters affecting their communities. However, the vote resulted in a 'No', which further exemplifies the ongoing colonial mindset within Australia's government.[52] This systemic suppression of Indigenous voices ensures that colonial narratives dominate Australian historical discourse, but also reinforces social inequalities as the narrative of national unity favours settler perspectives.[53]

Aboriginal members of the population receive little support from the country. They face significant disadvantages compared to the rest of the Australian population, such as higher rates of unemployment, poverty, poor housing and infrastructure and health disparities, including higher rates of chronic illnesses, lower life expectancy and mental health issues.[54] Effectively, the government's difficulty in dealing with its colonial past still has a heavy impact on Aboriginal Australians and the nation as a whole today.

Aboriginal art and narratives as forms of resistance

Since the colonisation of Australia, Aboriginal art and oral

48 Mignolo 2011, 176.

49 Whittington 2021; Attwood 2011, 172.

50 ANTAR 2023; Reconciliation Australia, n.d; Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017.

51 Spivak 1998, 25.

52 Biddle et al. 2023, iii.

53 Connerton 2008, 60; Mignolo 2011, 171.

54 Tilbury 2015, 273.

histories have ceased to exist as mere cultural practices: they now act as tools of resistance against colonial erasure. They not only serve to remember past colonial violence but also reshape the common understanding of history for non-Aboriginal people, as these perspectives are systematically suppressed from the main discourse.

Art like McKenzie's turns contested events into powerful statements that confront Australia's colonial violence. Her depiction of events like the Mistake Creek Massacre offers her people's version of events, which destabilises the colonial narrative and forces the public to reconsider the narrative they have been taught. Similarly, Aboriginal oral testimonies, as seen in The Bringing Them Home report, highlight Aboriginal experiences and contest colonial suppression. These testimonies challenge epistemic injustice, preserve Indigenous memory and ensure reparation and transmission through generations.

In both mediums, there is an underlying act of resistance that refuses to accept the colonial version of history and demands that Indigenous voices be heard. These narratives and artworks emphasise Indigenous power and demand a decolonial approach to Australia's history, in which these voices become essential to narrate the past and shape the future.

Need for recognition and action

The suppression of Aboriginal voices and the detached attitude towards the colonisation of their land and culture show that there is an urgent need to highlight Aboriginal narratives. Recognising the historical importance of Aboriginal experiences in academic spaces and within Australian society would allow for a better understanding of Aboriginal people's struggles and initiate reconciliation. More recently, Aboriginal Australian scholars have raised their voices. Some examples include A. Moreton-Robinson and her book *The White Possessive*, where she explores the links between race, sovereignty and property; L. Behrendt, who criticises colonial storytelling and its depiction of Aboriginal people in *Finding Eliza*; and T. Yunkaporta in *Sand Talk*, in which he aims to look at the contemporary world through Indigenous perspectives.[55]

However, the inclusion of Aboriginal voices should go beyond academic work and be implemented within Australian society in government policies and knowledge hubs. It could take place through the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into official histories, school curricula, and public discourse to ensure that new generations receive a more inclusive and multifaceted

55 Moreton-Robinson 2015; Behrendt 2016; Yunkaporta 2019.

understanding of Australia's history.

Without this recognition, Indigenous people will always remain marginalised and continue to face the psychological impacts of erasure as well as the broader social and economic consequences of being written out of the national narrative. Decolonial approaches to history are thus essential to promote justice by highlighting Aboriginal voices and challenging the epistemic and structural violence of Australia's colonial past.

Conclusion

The article has aimed to illustrate the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal Australians, such as physical and psychological violence, the long dismissal of Aboriginal sufferings, as well as the ongoing inequalities Aboriginal communities experience. It has also demonstrated the significance of elevating Aboriginal voices through their oral histories and art. The latter can become a decolonial tool of resistance against repressive colonial erasure and allow the inclusion and reparation of Aboriginal communities. Victims of The Stolen Generations were offered a formal apology and reparations after the publication of The Bringing Them Home report, while McKenzie's painting was finally exhibited after 15 years to offer an Aboriginal decolonial perspective on the past to the public. Finally, the article has emphasised the urgent need for Australia to engage in meaningful structural changes that recognise and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives. A genuine reconciliation between Aboriginal people and Australia's institutions and society can only happen through the decolonisation of knowledge and history for a future grounded in equity and justice.

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