

unpacking epistemic violence through a narrative inquiry of contact period rock art motifs on the Canning Stock Route (CSR)

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Introduction

The Canning Stock Route (CSR) is well known for Indigenous and colonial interactions in addition to being a colonial infrastructure project. Moments of conflict, coercion, and adaptation are vividly documented in the rock art along the path, particularly from the contact period (late 19th–early 20th centuries). Rock Art studies at the CSR have generally focused on more traditional subject matter (cultural-historical perspectives) and formal (westernised/scientific) analysis. This is due in part to the perception of 'friendly' relations between Europeans and Aboriginal communities. Clandestine violence (poisonings, forced removals, sexual exploitation, and segregation) and structural violence (the compartmentalisation of Aboriginal people through systems of race, government, and labour) were in fact a daily routine on the CSR. Power systems, inequality, dispossession, and racism all contributed to these developments. Some of the rock art exhibited along the Canning Stock Route has been classified as resistance rock art. This is rock art created by the Aboriginal communities as a form of resistance towards colonialism and a depiction of their experiences.

The Missing Link (Research Gap)

How Indigenous knowledge systems, memory practices, and artistic expressions were disturbed, appropriated, or silenced has not received as much attention in prior research as typology or chronology. There has recently been an increasing focus on Indigenous ontological and epistemological approaches to rock art especially from decolonial scholarship. This study uses a narrative inquiry technique to examine how epistemic violence is represented in rock art from the contact period, giving Indigenous perspectives, interpretations, and memory frameworks priority.

Why the Martu?

Due to their strong ancestry, culture, and history with the area, as well as the fact that their experiences reflect larger trends of colonial encounter and Indigenous tenacity in the Australian desert, the Martu people offer a crucial and captivating case study for analyzing epistemic violence through contact-period rock art along the CSR. Much of the central CSR, particularly the area between Wells 12 and 40, which includes the settlements of *Kunawarritji*, *Punmu*, and *Parnngurr*, is included in Martu Country.

Research Questions

- What memories of colonial contact and epistemic violence are reflected in the motifs found in rock art from the contact period along the CSR?
- What themes of colonial interruptions of knowledge are met with emotions and resistance in Martu narratives?
- How may Indigenous visual histories be understood using narrative inquiry as a decolonial approach?
- What moral and ethical guidelines are required to guarantee that Martu people own the narratives and interpretations that are created?

Research Objectives

- To locate and record contact-period motifs along certain CSR locations, such as European figures, camels, firearms, horses, etc.
- To compile Martu narratives, recollections, and interpretations on these themes and the places that are connected to them.
- To examine how rock art reflects disruption, resistance, and adaptation and functions as a visual narrative of epistemic violence.
- To investigate how narrative and material evidence intersect when reconstructing colonial encounters.
- To emphasize Indigenous epistemologies in interpretation and administration in order to support decolonial heritage praxis.

Epistemic Violence and Contact-Period Rock Art

According to Spivak (1988), the term "epistemic violence" describes how colonial systems systematically silence, erase, and distort Indigenous knowledge. A fascinating location to study these dynamics is contact-period rock art along the Canning Stock Route (CSR), which passes through Martu and the larger Western Desert Country. In addition to reflecting the material realities of colonial incursion, the motifs—which include Europeans, camels, horses, weapons, and wells also show how Indigenous epistemologies, such as songlines, Dreaming knowledge, and relational understandings of Country, were disrupted.

Indigenous spatial knowledge was frequently displaced and superimposed by a linear, utilitarian geography imposed by colonial infrastructure like wells and droving tracks. These dynamics were also maintained by early rock art documentation, which marginalized the cultural meanings ingrained by Martu makers by frequently interpreting motifs through Western aesthetic or anthropological frames.

Additionally, these pieces of art serve as locations for counter-memory and resistance. Aboriginal painters maintained relational knowledge of Country and reclaimed narrative authority by fusing colonial imagery into traditional visual frameworks. From a decolonial standpoint, Indigenous meaning-making can be recovered through narrative inquiry based on Aboriginal epistemologies, such as recording oral histories, following songlines, and listening to elders. In this approach, rock art along the CSR reaffirms Indigenous knowledge sovereignty and resilience in the face of colonial disruption by both bearing testimony to epistemic aggression and mediating routes for epistemic restoration.

Point to note – Epistemic violence is reproduced when non-Indigenous scholars impose foreign ideas, aesthetic judgments, or typologies without community interpretation.

Aim

Through the lenses of the Martu people and the decolonial theory, the research aims to understand how contact-period rock art motifs along the Canning Stock Route embody and defy epistemic violence.

Country Background

The Martu are the traditional custodians of a large area of the Western Desert, covering parts of the Great Sandy, Little Sandy, and Gibson Deserts. Their Country extends across sections of the Canning Stock Route. Songlines, Dreaming trails, and water springs that predate the stock route by thousands of years are examples of the Martu's longstanding ancestral, ceremonial, and foraging links with the region.

During its construction (1906–1910), the CSR crossed Martu Country, frequently upsetting religious places and movement patterns. Many Martu people were forced or enlisted as laborers and guides for camel work, well digging, and droving; these activities are documented in the rock art imagery and oral narratives that have survived to this day. As the Martu people reunited with their homelands during the 1980s, the CSR became a place of encounter and conflict, but it also became a path of return.

To this day, important portions of the Canning Stock Route, particularly its central and northern sections, are inhabited by and maintained by the Martu people. The environment of the CSR and its oral and visual histories are inextricably linked to their nation, culture, and stories.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a multi-layered conceptual lens that combines cultural landscape theory, coloniality of knowledge, and decolonial and polyvocal techniques. The study views the rock art as a living archive in which memory, identity, and history are inscribed in the landscape via Martu narratives. The approach acknowledges that landscapes are not passive natural formations, but rather dynamic cultural texts influenced by social meanings, belief systems, and lived experiences. This study critically analyzes how rock art from the CSR colonialism shows a landscape that bears the visual remnants of colonial intrusion and Indigenous tenacity, rather than only as an archaeological record. The study is focused on reclaiming Indigenous epistemic control over their own visual histories; these patterns are reinterpreted as acts of counter memory through Martu tales narratives.

Theoretical arguments

- Colonialism is not only political or economic, it is rather epistemic, producing hierarchies of knowledge that privilege Western rationality and silence Indigenous epistemologies.
- The CSR itself can be seen as an epistemic structure, it is a colonial mapping of Country that overwrote Indigenous routes, songlines, and other knowledges.
- Decolonial theory frames this research as a process of "epistemic delinking", a process of re-centering Martu and Western Desert knowledge systems as valid, sovereign ways of knowing and interpreting rock art.
- Above all the research frames the Martu as a legitimate archive with interpretations and affect that tell their experiences with colonialism.

Research Paradigm and Methodology

This research is rooted within the constructivist decolonial research paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge, truth, and meaning are socially and culturally produced rather than objectively given. The constructivist paradigm draws from the study's emphasis on understanding how the Martu interpret and inscribe meaning on contact period rock art. This viewpoint regards reality as multifaceted, subjective, and context-bound, moulded by human experience, memory, and social interaction. This research will employ narrative inquiry to "undiscover archaeology." Globally, archaeology is conducted as a Western science that conflicts with local narratives. Narratives serve as the primary means of documenting Indigenous history, constituting the essence of Indigenous culture (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The history of First Nations, instructional narratives, and the tales of creation, tradition, and nation have been conveyed across generations for millennia (Rodgers, 2019). Narrative inquiry is predicated on the understanding that individuals employ tales to comprehend their identities, experiences, and landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Taylor (2003) contends that narratives are perceived as dynamic processes of meaning-making that intertwine memory, geography, and identity, rather than merely serving as historical records. Myths, folklore, oral traditions, songs, and place names are all significant methods through which communities in the uDP imprint their histories and values into the terrain.

undisciplined archaeology

"Undisciplined" archaeology refers to the use of narratives passed down through forms of memorisation, which involves incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems into historical discussions. Such archaeology is unstructured because it is unwanted and ignored in the mainstream archaeological world (western/scientific). Archaeology has historically been defined by strict, colonial, and Eurocentric borders. Undisciplined Archaeology is a theoretical and scientific approach that questions these limitations. Rethinking what constitutes archaeological knowledge, who generates it, and how it is verified is necessary. It is a product of decolonial scholarship and aims to challenge the disciplinary authority of archaeology, which has frequently given preference to Western scientific paradigms over Indigenous epistemologies, spiritual ties to place, and oral traditions. Method and rigor are not negated by being "undisciplined." Instead, it entails reducing disciplinary authority to allow for multiple epistemologies, including Indigenous traditions of understanding, sensing, and recalling environments. Archaeologists are encouraged to work together, co-create, and listen instead of interpreting or extracting from outside sources.

An "undisciplined" archaeology of the CSR would prioritize the narrative authority of the Martu and other desert peoples, emphasizing how communities understand rock art from the contact period, what memories are incorporated into motifs, and how these relate to actual experiences of colonial intrusion, resistance, and survival. It would also critically examine the ways in which the archaeological gaze itself perpetuates epistemic violence, with the goal of co-producing knowledge that respects Indigenous sovereignty over meaning and legacy. Therefore, Undisciplined Archaeology is a practice for implementing decolonial ethics as well as a critique of archaeology's colonial legacy, transforming archaeological activity into a forum for communication, reciprocity, and healing.

"Undisciplined" Archaeology is a decolonial response to the legacy of colonialism, it questions the disciplinary authority of archaeology, which has traditionally given preference to Western empiricism and material evidence over Indigenous epistemologies. Archaeology recognizes Indigenous stories, oral histories, and spiritual ties to Country as equally legitimate modes of knowledge production by going "undisciplined." As a result, this paradigm advocates for a relational, dialogical approach that values Indigenous knowledge custodianship, shared interpretation, and co-creation.

"Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land and from our minds" - Frantz Fanon

Conclusion

This research will make suggestions to praxis, analysing the practical consequences of a decolonial approach and, more importantly, uses narrative inquiry to interpret contact period rock art along the Canning Stock Route as an example of innovative heritage management methods.