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Cast All Imaginations: *Umbi* Speak

Thesis submitted by

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in the School of Indigenous Australian
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James Cook University

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Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help

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A professional administration service, Al Rinn Admin Specialists, was engaged to prepare the thesis for submission. Al Rinn's brief was to format and proof-read the document.

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Abstract

Cast All Imaginations speaks from the heart of human experience as a contemporary narrative of Aboriginal women's agency in Australia. It offers a unique opportunity to discover the incredible wellsprings of strength, resilience and hope found among Aboriginal women by examining their potential to live lives of their own choosing and that reflect their own valued ways of knowing, doing and being in the world – their ways of transcending survival, flourishing in life.

While these extraordinary women inhabit lifeworlds unprecedented in a colonised space, their potential and productivity is not always revealed in the demographic portraits of all Aboriginal Australians. Pockets of survival marred by social exclusion and entrenched disadvantage continue to stain the landscape of contemporary Australian society. For Aboriginal people, mere survival, poor quality of life has long been associated with social exclusion - colonisation laid the foundations for it; misguided policy and programs perpetuated and exacerbated those experiences; continual pledges of change for Aboriginal people made by successive governments have generally not come to fruition; and the personal incapacity of many Aboriginal people themselves now consolidates and sustains those experiences. Thus, this research narrative was prompted by the need for Aboriginal people to take up the challenge of change and improve the circumstances of their own lives within the context of oppressive and restrictive policies and social practices. It sought to provide a response to social exclusion by identifying practical applications based on empirically founded knowledge, which aligns with, and holds meaning for, Aboriginal people and their aspirations of living healthy and productive lives and becoming self-determining subjects in a contemporary world.

Methodologically, most research concerning Aboriginal issues overwhelmingly emanates from a deficit model of research which identifies the 'Aboriginal problem' and imposes a White cultural framework of meaning and interpretation to the findings. As a result, this type of research not only views the issue in problematic terms, but also fails to adequately capture the perspective of the Aboriginal research population. In contrast, this study was a strengths-based model of research which let *Umbi* speak, listened carefully and analysed and interpreted the findings through the eyes of an Aboriginal woman. The imperative in this research was to understand how Aboriginal women themselves have developed narratives of agency and navigate the process of change to achieve quality of life so as to know what is required to teach others who have been less fortunate, to become self-directing and ultimately garner the skills to change the circumstances of their existence. Therefore, the study aimed to explore and document the specific strategies orchestrated by a particular cohort of Aboriginal women who have adequately transitioned the process of change within the bounds of patriarchy and colonisation. The purpose of the study was to develop a substantive theory of these phenomena as they evolved in naturalist settings, in the everyday. Critically examined was the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women at the nexus of social discourse, power and personal experience in the contemporary context. The study, grounded in a critical emancipatory imperative, makes use of the tools of feminism and poststructuralism to interrogate the performance

of Aboriginal women as agents in a contemporary narrative of development with a view to identifying the underlying social psychological process.

A constructivist grounded theory was used in the analysis of life-history narrative interviews conducted with twenty Aboriginal women. 'Being Aboriginal' infused the lifeworld of the women, who participated in this study, with meaning and strengthened their life purpose. *Performing Aboriginality* was conceptually identified as the core category and encompassed the women's concern for carving out a fulfilling life and carrying out their perceived responsibilities as Aboriginal women. The analysis also led to the identification of a specific ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment, conceptually identified as *Becoming Empowered*. The subsequent process, represented by a bricolage of four signifying facets, articulated how the participant women developed multiple models of personal and socio-cultural adaptation and growth, which was negotiated through retrospective mechanisms and in interactions between self and others, self and history and self and their environment and which, in turn, led to the exercise of personal agency. The substantive theory of *Becoming Empowered*, while confirming much of the extant literature on empowerment, also offers new insights and makes a unique contribution to theories of empowerment by identifying new dimensions – the process was underpinned by an ethics of care and morality and a spiritual sensibility. The study can be acknowledged as an original endeavour in the area of Aboriginal women's empowerment. Significantly, the findings have practical implications for improving quality of life by informing the development of social and health policies and interventions that resonate with Aboriginal women's ways of knowing, doing and being.

Table of Contents

Statement of Access.....	ii
Statement of Sources Declaration.....	iii
Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
List of Tables.....	x
List of Figures.....	x
Definition of Terms.....	xi
Prelude Coming to the Story.....	1
Chapter 1 Framing the Study.....	16
1.1 Introduction.....	16
1.2 Focus of the research.....	17
1.3 Validating the research direction.....	19
1.4 Relevance of the study.....	23
1.5 Research paradigm.....	24
1.6 Storyline.....	27
Chapter 2 Sensitising Narrative.....	29
2.1 Introduction.....	29
2.2 The utility of literature.....	30
2.3 Gendered representation in Aboriginal oral traditions: creation narratives.....	31
2.4 Pre-contact gender relations in Aboriginal society.....	34
2.5 Colonial ethnographic constructions of Aboriginal women.....	37
2.6 Aboriginal women's role and agency in colonial Australia.....	42
2.7 Aboriginal women's role and agency in the twentieth century.....	45
2.8 The contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal women: a snapshot.....	53
2.9 Summary.....	59
Chapter 3 Research Design.....	62
3.1 Introduction.....	62
3.2 Averting the western gaze.....	63
3.3 Rationale for a qualitative approach.....	68
3.4 Research substructure.....	81
3.5 Positioning the researcher: establishing trustworthiness and authenticity from the outset.....	87
3.6 Theoretical bricolagé.....	92
3.7 The construction of knowledge.....	113
3.8 Classical grounded theory: the origins.....	118
3.9 Summary.....	131
Chapter 4 A Rationale for the Choice of Methods and Their Utility.....	132
4.1 Introduction.....	132
4.2 Secondary methods of practice.....	134
4.3 Research participants.....	144
4.4 Data collection.....	151
4.5 Ethical considerations.....	159
4.6 Summary.....	160
Chapter 5 Transformation of Data.....	162
5.1 Introduction.....	162

5.2	Conceptual processes implicated in grounded theory.....	162
5.3	Strategies of grounded theory analysis	165
5.4	Analytic tools in grounded theory	166
5.5	Introducing the findings.....	180
5.6	Theoretical sensitivity and literature.....	183
5.7	Summary	193
Chapter 6	Aboriginal Women’s Voices: The Lived Experience Part 1.....	194
6.1	A prelude to the findings	194
6.2	Reading the findings	197
6.3	‘Defining Moments’	200
6.4	‘Seeking Authenticity’	220
6.5	Summary.....	258
Chapter 7	Aboriginal Women’s Voices: The Lived Experience Part 2.....	260
7.1	The strategic signifying facet ‘Authoring Narratives of Self’	260
7.2	Anna’s story.....	262
7.3	‘Building a resilient identity’	269
7.4	‘Building cultural competence’	298
7.5	‘Capturing Autonomy’: exercising agency.....	305
7.6	‘Capturing autonomy’: exercising individual and relational forms of agency to effect personal, social and political change	309
7.7	Andie’s story.....	310
7.8	‘Coming to authority’: breaking cycles	313
7.9	Leading: working with and to empower others	318
7.10	Summary.....	323
Chapter 8	Discussion and Conclusion	325
8.1	Introduction.....	325
8.2	Revisiting the intentions and significance of the study	326
8.3	Major contributions of the study.....	328
8.4	Limitations and strengths of the study.....	329
8.5	Appraisal of the study	332
8.6	An overview of the process of Becoming Empowered	335
8.7	Positioning the findings within the extant literature	337
8.8	What is empowerment?	339
8.9	A framework of women’s empowerment: resources, agency, achievements.....	344
8.10	Exploring the interactive causal sequence of resources, agency and achievements.....	347
8.11	Achievements.....	374
8.12	Synthesis	375
8.13	A new agenda: a response to social exclusion.....	377
8.14	Recommendations for further research.....	381
8.15	Ponderings	383
References.....		384
Appendix A	Characteristics of Participants.....	410
Appendix B	Participant Information Package	411
Appendix C	Ethical Clearance, amendment to ethics, Informed Consent.....	418
Appendix D	Introducing the Participants	420

List of Tables

Table 5.1 Example of initial line by line coding.....	170
Table 5.2 Higher order abstract categories	172

List of Figures

Figure P.1 Lacewood	3
Figure 2.1 Statistical information of the Indigenous population (June 2006)	55
Figure 2.2 Population distribution of the Indigenous population (June 2006)	56
Figure 3.1 The scaffolding of the research design.....	82
Figure 3.2 Research Framework.....	84
Figure 4.1 Methods of data generation and practice.....	134
Figure 4.2 Map locating residence and language groups represented in the study	147
Figure 5.1 Grounded theory in practice	167
Figure 6.1 Becoming Empowered: a processual model of agency.....	197
Figure 6.2 Signifying facets as sub-processes of Becoming Empowered	200
Figure 6.3 Signifying facets of ‘Seeking Authenticity’	221
Figure 7.1 Signifying facets of ‘Authoring Narratives of Self’	261
Figure 7.2 Individual and relational components of ‘Capturing Autonomy’	309
Figure 8.1 An ecological model of Aboriginal women’s empowerment	345
Figure 8.2 The interplay between and nature of human and social capital	347

Definition of Terms

- Umbi** Translated as Aboriginal women in the language of the Gungarri people of South Western Queensland.
- Fit, relevance, modifiability and work** Grounded theory research may be evaluated against four integrated and interdependent criteria – *fit*, *relevance*, *modifiability* and whether it *works* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992). *Fit* is achieved when the data under analysis is well-reflected in the developed categories and in “the realities under study in the eyes of the subjects, practitioners and researchers in the area” (Glaser, 1992, p15), thus avoiding the imposition of preconceived concepts onto the study.
- Findings are deemed *relevant* when the researcher allows the emergence of categories that constitutes *fit*. As such, the theory proffers explanations of the core concern or basic processes in the substantive area under study; that is the theory has *relevance*.
- As variations are presented to the researcher in new data, the emergent theory is modified to engage those emerging understandings. The flexibility of the theory to accommodate changing conditions by the integration of new concepts is what is referred to as *modifiability* (Glaser, 1992).
- When fit, relevance and modifiability are present the grounded theory is said to *work*. Work means that the categories “are meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behaviour under study” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.3) in terms of “variations in behavior in the area with respect to the processing of the main concerns of the subjects” (Glaser, 1992, p. 15).
- Genocide** In this thesis, the meaning of genocide is consonant with its legal definition as advanced by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. At the hands of colonisers, Aboriginal people were massacred, raped, tortured, deliberately exposed to disease and poisoned; legislation was passed to impose stringent conditions on the lives of Aboriginal people (forced assimilation) and reproduction of culture despite the exclusion of Aboriginal people as Australian citizens until 1967; measures such as sterilisation were imposed to prevent births within the group; and children were forcibly removed from their families and communities (Tatz, 1999).
- Trauma** The nature of trauma experienced by many Aboriginal people today is transgenerational and derived from the genocidal practices of the colonisers and ongoing deprivation in terms of housing, education, social and economic opportunity and health care (Tatz, 1999).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are advised that there is a possibility this document contains the transcribed voices of people who have passed away.