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Dark Emu and Indigenous Studies

Tim Rowse

Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW, Australia
Email: t.rowse@westernsydney.edu.au

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Abstract

Indigenous Studies seeks to affirm the distinct worth of "Indigenous Knowledge" and to question, as colonial, the privileging of Western Knowledge. How should Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* be taught, after it has been persuasively criticised by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate.* Australia's "culture wars" have encouraged readings that sharply distinguish the two books' theses, and this paper attempts to soften that polarity. After noting a point of convergence between *Dark Emu* and *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* I outline two ways to think about knowledge that may help answer the question: How should *Dark Emu* be taught? Paul A. Cohen distinguishes among three ways that we can know the past: as event, as experience, and as myth. Martin Nakata considers the relationship between Indigenous experience and university-authorised critique. This paper seeks to draw out what is useful in each author: an acceptance that our thinking about the past is both mythical and critical. We can teach *Dark Emu* as "myth" without equating myth with error.

Keywords: *Dark Emu*; Indigenous Studies; knowledge; myth; Aboriginal; Australians; Anthropology; History

Dark Emu is an important piece of Indigenous public humanities in Australia. It shows how knowledge interacts with public life, stirring public debate. It has been persuasively criticised by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* and before and since that book's publication, Australia's "culture wars" have encouraged readings that sharply distinguish the two books' theses.[1] This paper attempts to soften their polarity. After noting a point of convergence between *Dark Emu* and *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* I outline two ways to think about knowledge that may help answer the question: How should *Dark Emu* be taught? Paul A. Cohen distinguishes among three ways that we can know the past: as event, as experience, and as myth.[2] Martin Nakata considers the relationship between Indigenous experience and university-authorised critique.[3] This paper seeks to draw out what is useful in each author: an acceptance that our thinking about the past is both

[1] Sutton and Walshe 2021.
[2] Cohen 1997.
[3] Nakata 2013.

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mythical and critical. As we will see, one can teach *Dark Emu* as "myth" without equating myth with error.

This paper starts by laying out the debate about the pre-colonial past in *Dark Emu.* It then discusses the book's presentation of Australia's colonial heritage as denigration and despoliation. The next two sections engage with two authors to explore what it could mean to treat *Dark Emu* as myth: Cohen and Nakata. To conclude, I return to the opening question on how to teach *Dark Emu.*

If a book by an Aboriginal author has been embraced by the reading public and yet criticised as flawed by credible critics (mostly non-Indigenous), how should it be positioned within Indigenous Studies? *Dark Emu* is one of the most important works of historical scholarship ever to be published in Australia. In a short, easily digested book, Bruce Pascoe has created a widely appealing image of Australia's pre-colonial past, positioning readers as makers of a better post-colonial future.[4] The book makes three claims—one about the pre-colonial past and two about Australians' ability to overcome their nation's colonial heritage.

1. The pre-colonial past

Most controversial is what *Dark Emu* says about the pre-colonial past: that Australia was inhabited for thousands of years by people who lived by techniques that included agriculture, leading a semi-sedentary life that included constructing villages. Sutton (anthropologist) and Walshe (archaeologist) have published a book-length critique of this bundle of claims.[5] Drawing on a large body of research, including their own, they make several arguments (here brutally condensed). Perhaps the most important is that Pascoe's understanding of Aboriginal civilisation is too materialist, deploying an ontology that occludes Aboriginal understanding of the world as imbued with spiritual entities, including plant and animal species. In addition, Sutton and Walshe argue that Aboriginal languages lack words referring to the practices of agriculture; that while in some regions Aboriginal people conserved plant species, they did not "garden"; that *Dark Emu* generalises region-specific practices (such as wearing sewn animal skins, constructing dwellings, and fishing from watercraft) to the whole continent; that *Dark Emu* lacks evidence that constructed shelters were continuously occupied; that Pascoe is careless in his use of explorers' observations as evidence; that Pascoe does not provide evidence that certain objects ("cylcons" and "Bogan picks") were used as agricultural tools; and that Pascoe has not handled carefully the evidence of social complexity in Western Victoria.

Sutton and Walshe have convinced many that the "Aboriginal agriculture" thesis presented by Pascoe in *Dark Emu* is—at best—overstated.[6] As well, Sutton and Walshe take aim at two claims that Pascoe makes when he presents *Dark Emu* as a salutary corrective to widespread public ignorance and colonial mystification. First, they argue that to inflate the novelty of *Dark Emu*, Pascoe understates the availability of reliable information about the pre-colonial

[4] My references are to the revised 2018 edition. According to a report in *The Conversation* (Van Loon, Coate, and Weber 2023), by February 2023, *Dark Emu* had sold over 250,000 copies.

[5] *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* (Sutton and Walshe 2021) was preceded by Keen (2021). Keen thanks Sutton for access to the manuscript of *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?*

[6] For broadly favourable reviews of *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*, see Nicholls 2021; McNiven 2021; Riley 2021; Bellwood 2021; Veth 2021; and Holdaway 2022. *Dark Emu* had been largely neglected by the book review editors of academic journals, but see Davis 2014; Riley 2019; Griffiths 2019; and White 2020.

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human societies of Australia. Second, they question Pascoe's revival of a "social evolutionist" approach to human diversity in which "agricultural" societies are more worthy of our respect than "hunting and gathering" societies.

While the critical points made in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* are persuasive, in my view, Sutton and Walshe have exaggerated, in one respect, the void between themselves and Pascoe. Sutton and Walshe suggest "semi-sedentary" as the most accurate description of the ways that Aboriginal people used their territory: people were neither settled in one place (in villages) nor ceaselessly on the move. "'Semi-sedentary' is not mentioned in *Dark Emu*," Sutton and Walshe claim.[7] They have not noticed that Pascoe has also labelled pre-colonial Aboriginal society as "semi-sedentary."[8]

At the time of writing, I am not aware of Pascoe or anyone else refuting the critical observations of Sutton and Walshe. However, their critique has not diminished the public esteem for Pascoe and his book, and I doubt that it ever will. Thoughtful Australians have welcomed Pascoe's new perspective on their nation's past. The publicity of Adelaide Writers Week in March 2022—after the release of *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?*—gives an example of the terms in which praise for Pascoe has continued. A session called "History, Story-Telling and the Collective Imagination" billed Pascoe in this way:

> With its descriptions of the sophisticated economic and socio-political livelihoods of many First Nations' communities, Bruce Pascoe's 2014 multi-award-winning *Dark Emu* called for a reconsideration of pre-colonial Aboriginal Australia. Confronting criticism from some who reject its portrayal of Aboriginal agriculturalists, and following the COVID-cancellation of their anticipated Melbourne Writers' Festival session, Bruce and eminent historian Tom Griffiths (*The Art of Time Travel*) come together to consider the productive conversation emerging around Australia's understanding of Aboriginal histories, and discuss the best way to deepen our shared knowledge of our nation's vital first stories.[9]

An eye-witness to this festival session described Pascoe's approach to the occasion as "preaching style, working up the two-thousand-strong crowd in call-and-response mode. This made it difficult for Griffiths to persist with a critical stance." Pascoe replied to Griffiths "by appealing to the urgency of the politics."[10] Pascoe has engaged his readers not only as solitary readers but as audiences. Some books that do well in Australia are part of a publishing "eco-system" that includes repeated live encounters of the author with readers *en masse.* Festivals are vital parts of this ecosystem.

2. A colonial heritage: denigration and despoliation

What "politics" are readers and live audiences engaged by? If they are aware of the critique of his account of pre-colonial Aboriginal society, they do not treat it as important, and some

[7] Sutton and Walshe 2021, 128.

[8] Pascoe 2018, 106.

[9] History, Storytelling and the Collective Imagination—Adelaide Festival 2022

[10] These observations came to me from a member of the audience who wishes not to be named. In one of the most perceptive responses to *Dark Emu*, Griffiths (2019) drew on other writings by Pascoe and on personal encounters: "Pascoe is a writer but also a performer, an orator, a dedicated storyteller in the old style. I've sat with Bruce on a stage and found myself captivated by his careful, humble manner of speaking and gruff bush charm; he has a natural charisma and a mischievous wit."

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may see criticism of the "Aboriginal agriculture" thesis as continuing the colonial denigration of Aboriginal achievement.[11] To understand the inclination to accept *Dark Emu* as an unchallenged, revelatory truth, it is important to bring to light the other two historical claims that Pascoe makes. They are *claims about the colonists*, not about the Aboriginal societies that were colonised.

One claim is that Australians have been denied knowledge that Aboriginal people were skilled practitioners of agriculture. According to Pascoe, Aboriginal people who were ignorant of agriculture became the colonists' self-serving intellectual orthodoxy. To see Aboriginal people as ignorant, opportunistic wanderers made it ideologically easier for the colonists to occupy and assume ownership over their lands. Now that Australians have conceded Indigenous land and native title rights, it is time to reject this pejorative characterisation. Pascoe thus presents *Dark Emu* as his readers' way out of a settler colonial heritage of ignorance and prejudice that has militated against settlers' acceptance of the Indigenous claim to sovereignty. Fully embracing the idea that Aboriginal people are the original owners of Australia, we can and should free ourselves of one of the principal colonial misconceptions that contributed to their dispossession. Pascoe offers readers this *post-colonial* subject position in such passages as follows:

> Few [colonists] bothered with the evidence of the existing [Aboriginal] economy because they knew it was about to be subsumed.[12]

And:

> In denying the existence of the economy, they were denying the right of the people to their land, and fabricating the excuse that is at the heart of Australia's claim to legitimacy today.[13]

The second claim that *Dark Emu* makes about the colonists is that although they supposed their own use of natural resources to be superior to Indigenous Australians', the colonists' exploitation of nature since 1788 has been ruinous. Now that contemporary Australians are learning that their uses of the land may despoil it and render it less productive, their hard-won ecological insight distances them from the over-confident colonists whose

> cultural myopia ensured that even as the nature of the country changed, they would never blame their own form of agriculture for that devastation.[14]

Pascoe offers the reader a subject position that is informed by knowledge of Australia's ecological history and which is disposed now to admit that "the fertility [the colonists] extolled on first entering the country was the result of careful management [by Aboriginal people]."[15] By describing the agricultural land management that colonisation displaced, Pascoe invites us to recognise Indigenous knowledge as the source of the revised land use practices that Australians now should embrace.

[11] As well, many who admire Pascoe and even those who have doubts about *Dark Emu* are appalled that his claim to be Indigenous has been publicly questioned and even ridiculed.

[12] Pascoe 2018, 5.

[13] Pascoe 2018, 10.

[14] Pascoe 2018, 11.

[15] Pascoe 2018, 11.

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These two political claims are based on ideas that are widely accepted among progressive Australians. The first aligns with the High Court's 1992 revision of Australian law in the Mabo case: the overthrow of the legal doctrine *terra nullius.* Just as that doctrine had ignored the law and government of the colonised, so the orthodox perception of the Aboriginal economy had ignored that it was agriculture not hunter-gatherer. The other claim aligns with Australians' increasing awareness of the severe damage that industrial civilisation has done to the planet's natural systems. Our growing understanding of how much we endanger these systems may enable us (through de-carbonisation and other reforms) to mitigate climate change and ocean acidification. Any reader of *Dark Emu* who holds these progressive ideas will be susceptible to its appeal: absorbing *Dark Emu* gives a reader some of the knowledge required to change the trajectory of the nation and of all humanity. The appeal of *Dark Emu* is partly that readers are empowered by assenting to its primary thesis—pre-colonial Aboriginal agriculture. *Dark Emu* enables readers—relieved of their ignorance of what Aboriginal societies were and inspired by Aboriginal practices of land and sea care—to act as self-conscious agents of a different and better history.

These two theses about how we, now, can distinguish ourselves from the colonists buttress the "Aboriginal agriculture" thesis. That the three theses are mutually entailing is what makes *Dark Emu* so appealing to many Australians who support Indigenous land rights, self-determination, and the Indigenous demand for Australian institutions "to include and emphasise Indigenous communities, and their cultures and values as an essential part of wider Australian society."[16] While the "Aboriginal agriculture" thesis has been persuasively questioned by critics such as Sutton and Walshe, Dark Emu has continued to appeal to the public. That appeal is based on the book's consistency with larger critiques of Australia's colonial and ecologically irresponsible past. Dark Emu offers readers ways of thinking that break from those pasts. In suggesting that the appeal of *Dark Emu* is, in part, the appeal of self-redemption, I intend no criticism of the book or its admirers.

Ideologically attractive and immensely popular, *Dark Emu* thus presents teachers of Australian Studies and Indigenous Studies with a dilemma. How do we include a book as intellectually flawed as *Dark Emu* in our school and university curricula when it speaks so persuasively to many Australian readers? To ignore *Dark Emu* would be to ignore its harmony with three popular progressive themes that I would like to see flourish in our schools and universities:

1. That Aboriginal people who were more sophisticated than colonists burdened by racist thoughts have been able to admit.

2. That non-Indigenous Australians have misappropriated, misunderstood, and misused the land that the Aboriginal people had looked after for thousands of years.

3. That Australians can rethink and improve their ways of living with each other and with the Earth's non-human species and physical resources.

Dark Emu will continue to be an important item of popular culture, an extremely influential (and forward-looking) guide to Australia's past. Those who design the Humanities and Social Science curriculum in secondary and tertiary education must not ignore this, for their students' knowledge of Australia is shaped (if not totally determined) by texts such as *Dark*

[16] Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016, 787.

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Emu, which are widely read and even loved. As Indigenous Studies makes its claim for space within secondary school and university curricula, the question I am posing becomes even more urgent. How are teachers to engage—both respectfully and critically—with *Dark Emu*?

To ignore *Dark Emu*—that is, not include it on any Indigenous Studies reading lists and not mention it in lectures and tutorials—is no answer. That response risks being represented as an intellectual elite's censorship, thus furthering *Dark Emu*'s reputation as the vehicle of truths unwelcomed by colonising intellectual authorities who are unable and unwilling to acknowledge their epistemic privilege. The populist appeal of such excluded knowledge should not be underestimated. The exclusionary practices of elites would again be illustrated if teachers ignored a book that is widely read and admired.

So let us consider an alternative approach: positioning *Dark Emu* as "myth." I do not equate "myth" with error or falsehood. Within the Humanities and Social Sciences, there is a more respectful meaning of "myth." Introducing *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*, Ian Watt made it clear that he was not equating "myth" with falsehood. He quoted the definition of "myth" in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*:

> A traditional story that is exceptionally widely known throughout the culture, that is credited with a historical or quasi-historical belief, and that embodies or symbolizes some of the most basic values of a society.[17]

The late Frances Peters-Little deployed "myth" in this sense when introducing her discussion of some histories that many Aboriginal people (and non-Aboriginal Australians, I suggest) believe to be true.

> What I am referring to in this instance is the concept of "myth" as an idea or a story that has been passed down from generation to generation that in time becomes thought of as fact or history. Although the term "myth" conjures up notions of speculation and fantasy to some extent, what I intend to do is state why I think some "myths" are more truthful than others based on the lived experiences and the knowledges of Aboriginal people.[18]

In the remainder of this paper, I will explore what it could mean to treat *Dark Emu* as a new Australian "myth." I will introduce two authors: Cohen and Nakata. Neither has written on *Dark Emu*, but what makes each author useful is their sense that a true/false binary does not enable a *political* understanding of the contention of beliefs and knowledges.

3. Cohen: myth and history

In 1997, Cohen published *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth.*[19] The book is not only a study of an outbreak of violence (the "Boxer Rebellion") against foreigners in China at the end of the nineteenth century but also an extended essay about how we can know the past. Cohen's account is in three parts (or "keys"). First, he narrates a sequence of events known as the Boxer Rebellion. Second, he describes some of the subjective experiences of those who were involved in these events. Third, he shows us the different ways that the Boxer Rebellion has been retold in histories of China written over the course of the twentieth century. He refers to the third "key"—this series of historians' retellings—as the

[17] Watt 1996, xvi.
[18] Peters-Little 2010, 81.
[19] Cohen 1997.

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"myths" of the Boxer Rebellion. Like Watt and Peters-Little, Cohen refuses to equate "myth" with untruth. His book is about the proximity of historical knowledge to myth.

Mythologisation, Cohen writes, is one of the ways that we know the past. It can be distinguished from academically attested historical knowledge, but this distinction is not clear-cut. Cohen does not condemn mythologising. Rather he accepts it as one of the ways that we know the past. To give an example of mythologising that is not simply error or untruth, Cohen presents autobiographical mythologising. We all have a strong urge to remember the events of our own lives in the form of a "psychologically tolerable" narrative.[20] It is not only in autobiographical memory or writing that we mythologise. Much of what circulates publicly as a narrative of the past is myth.

Mythologising is defined partly by the fact that a myth has emotional appeal.

> Once assertions about the past enter deeply into people's minds (and hearts), it is arguable that they acquire a truth of their own, even if this truth does not all coincide with what actually happened at some point in past time.[21]

Mythologising starts with accounts of the past that are understood to be true, but mythologising then goes further—NOT "to enlarge upon or deepen this understanding" BUT to "draw on it to serve the political, ideological, rhetorical, and/or emotional needs of the present."[22] "To live on as myth…an event or person must embody characteristics or themes that seem especially pertinent to the concerns of people and/or governments in later times."[23] Myths are "sources of energy in the present, making it possible for present and past to affirm and validate one another…."[24]

In contrast with mythologisers, historians aspire "to construct, on the basis of evidence available, as accurate and truthful an understanding of the past as possible."[25] This may result in narratives that are complex, incomplete, ambiguous, puzzling, and confronting—not emotionally satisfying. When historians apply tests (of evidence and logic) to truth claims about the past, they demand much more than a narrative that is psychologically tolerable.

Cohen acknowledges that the distinction between mythologising and historicising is not clear-cut. He quotes Eric Hobsbawm as saying that all historians are engaged in the invention of tradition, so that historians who challenge "one mythologised past, inevitably fashion others."[26] As I understand Cohen, there are two reasons why the distinction between History and myth cannot be sharp:

1. Historical knowledge, like myths, is the product of intellectual operations to select, simplify, and essentialise.

[20] Cohen 1997, 6.
[21] Cohen 1997, 212.
[22] Cohen 1997, 213.
[23] Cohen 1997, 292.
[24] Cohen 1997, 293.
[25] Cohen 1997, 213.
[26] While these are Cohen's words (Cohen 1997, 213), they gloss Hobsbawm (1983, 13), where Hobsbawm, after developing his views about the formation of senses of nationhood, wrote that "all historians, whatever their objectives,…contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation *but to the public sphere of man as a political being*" (emphasis added).

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2. Myths have more purchase if they correspond—to some extent—to widely acknowledged and scholarly attested truth.

Cohen says that early in his career, he thought that History was in every way more "valid" than myth. By the time he wrote *History in Three Keys*, however, he was prepared to concede that myth had value. This is because he thinks that there are different kinds of values: "moral, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic—an assertion about the past that ranks high in respect to one of them may not rank very high in respect to the others."[27] For example, autobiographical myth-making "helps to preserve a sense of psychological coherence and personal integrity over time."[28]

However, Cohen does not want to give myth a free pass. He is not advocating that myth should go unchecked by historical research. He wants to continue to distinguish the activity of producing History from the activity of myth-making. By giving History a licence to challenge myths, Cohen honours the role of the historian. Historians must not disavow their critical distance. They should continue to presume a social licence for their scrutiny. They should enter willingly into a relationship of tension with mythologising. To be a historian is to be—in this sense—outside the object of study. To be outside is both a problem and an asset, Cohen argues. The problem arises from the fact that the historian may "misconstrue and distort" what they are outside.[29] The benefit of being outside is that the historian is a mediator or translator who makes the past available to the present.

Aligning myself with Cohen, I want to appreciate that however flawed *Dark Emu* is as an account of the past, it is meaningful and powerful as myth because of the way that it addresses contemporary readers as inheritors of a colonial past with which they would like to break by committing to *Dark Emu*. But what is the place of myth in formal education? In particular, what is the place of *Dark Emu* in courses that create representations of the past for students—so conscious of their colonial inheritance—to consider?[30]

4. Nakata: *Dark Emu* in Indigenous Studies

Addressing the question of how Indigenous Studies is to flourish in universities, the Torres Strait Islander academic Nakata has distinguished between three kinds of knowledge:

- Indigenous community positions that inform and arise from the daily striving for self-determination. In his words: "grassroots analysis that is borne out of experience and out of community interaction with the analytical frames used for understanding that experience."[31]

- Indigenous intellectual positions (what academics—increasingly Indigenous-identified—produce and teach as Indigenous Studies).

[27] Cohen 1997, 295.
[28] Cohen 1997, 295.
[29] Cohen 1997, 297.
[30] A referee asks: to what reader is this paper addressed? I am intervening in current discussions about "Indigenous Studies" in Australian universities and schools. My implicit ideal reader is someone who is, to some extent, interested in those discussions and perhaps contributing to them. Some of those readers will, I hope, be First Nations people.
[31] Nakata 2013, 290.

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- The knowledge produced by and taught in the wider academy.

The three kinds of knowledge interact in relationships that he describes as "translation back and forth."[32]

Nakata is worried that Indigenous intellectuals—including, but not restricted to, those with academic appointments—"have been reluctant to question or do battle with the limits of entrenched community analysis and discourse."[33] (By "community," he means the Australian Indigenous community.) He adds that "we often promote and conform to the reductive simplicities of community discourse in efforts to prove our connectedness and relevance to it."[34] These efforts have the unfortunate result that "Indigenous intellectualism is predominantly orthodox and predictable in its engagement with Western knowledge and theory, its forms of analysis, and its production of new knowledge for use in Indigenous contexts."[35] I believe that these words apply to the ways that *Dark Emu* has been admired as (a) reclaiming Indigenous land management knowledge and (b) rejecting the colonial intellectual orthodoxy (what Nakata refers to as "Western knowledge").

Nakata invites us to consider critically what he sees as a common Indigenous orientation to participating in Higher Education. He asks: "What happens when anti-colonial analysis becomes completely pre-occupied with resistance to, and rejection of, Western knowledge, theory, and practice?"[36] This preoccupation with rejecting Western knowledge is damaging, he suggests. He is worried that students within Indigenous Studies courses are drawn to a "very superficial, limited, and selective engagement with Western knowledge and theory in ways that misunderstand and misrepresent it."[37] As well, he advises Indigenous scholars to approach with caution the project that he describes as "restorations of Indigenous language, concepts, and knowledge."[38]

Let us apply Nakata's cautions to *Dark Emu* and *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* Before doing so, I will try to substantiate that binaries such as Indigenous Knowledge/Western Knowledge to which Nakata refers do have wide currency in the discussion of the environment in which Indigenous Studies is taught. Two examples will suffice. Taking aim at "biased Eurocentric epistemologies," Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson write:

> To more fully understand the limitations of such outsider-based epistemologies, researchers must move beyond (although not necessarily discard) the Western lens, and embrace both the complexity, uniqueness and validity of valuable insider knowledge and research that has been traditionally discarded due to its alleged lack of methodological rigour.[39]

The same authors refer to "Indigenous ways of being and knowing" that are not only different from "the lens of Western ways of knowing" but also have been marginalised by knowledge-producing institutions—"epistemological racism."[40] Tracey Bunda et al., drawing on "standpoint

[32] Nakata 2013, 290.
[33] Nakata 2013, 291.
[34] Nakata 2013, 292.
[35] Nakata 2013, 292.
[36] Nakata 2013, 295.
[37] Nakata 2013, 295.
[38] Nakata 2013, 295.
[39] Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016, 786.
[40] Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016, 791, 793.

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theory," point to the way that non-Indigenous ways of knowing are institutionally embedded. Indigenous perspectives will not flourish at universities unless they make "spaces" for them:

> First Peoples in many social spaces have made crucial contributions to a critical understanding of colonising dimensions of power. Circulating such knowledge can serve Indigenous purposes when fed, with care, into trustworthy networks of wider reception. But the question begs: Can universities help in constructing spaces of trustworthy reception, generation and relay of Indigenous knowledges?[41]

One way of appreciating *Dark Emu* would be to read it as an assertion of Indigenous Knowledge against Colonial/Western Knowledge—correcting, in particular, the colonists' learned but mistaken and self-interested classification of pre-colonial Indigenous Australia as a hunter-gatherer. In this approach, all critiques of *Dark Emu* are under suspicion—not least if they come from academically accredited writers. Sutton and Walshe can be evoked as embodying the epistemic privilege of Western Knowledge. In this perspective, the critique offered in *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* can be parried or dismissed by characterising it as Western Knowledge fighting back against Pascoe's challenge and effectively restoring the orthodoxy (that pre-colonial human society in Australia was a hunter-gatherer economy) demolished by *Dark Emu.* We should resist this way of distinguishing the two books. In at least three ways, *Dark Emu* is not a rejection of Western Knowledge but a critical reconfiguration of materials drawn from it.

First, Pascoe cites in support of his thesis much Archaeological research, including authors who have themselves drawn on and synthesised Archaeological research.[42] Second, Pascoe's philosophy of history resembles the social evolutionist schema of human progress: that is, he appears to believe that agricultural civilisation is more advanced than hunter-gatherer civilisation. Third, as pointed out by Sutton and Walshe, Pascoe attributes to pre-colonial Aboriginal people a materialist ontology that is belied by much of the ethnography on which *Farmers and Hunter-Gatherers?* draws. One chapter in that book presents a synthesis of ethnographies by non-Indigenous researchers (not least Sutton himself) of the "widely practised, complex and highly valued ceremonies and speech acts that constituted spiritual species maintenance."[43] That is, non-Indigenous Sutton and Walshe claim to have a better understanding of Indigenous cosmology than that presented by Pascoe. Their confidence in ethnography is based on the conventional (in the academic world) esteem for a research method based on talking to Indigenous knowledge-holders, living with them for long periods and observing their interactions with non-human plants and animals (as Sutton did with the Wik people). Sutton and Walshe contrast this worldview with the one Pascoe deploys: a decidedly secular, modern, and materialist conception of what makes Nature fruitful. They make a strong case that Pascoe's ontology of human/non-human interactions is more "Western" than he cares to acknowledge.

Thus to valorise *Dark Emu* as Indigenous Knowledge's riposte to Western Knowledge is to overlook much that is arguably non-Indigenous in *Dark Emu.* The binary Indigenous Knowledge/Western Knowledge cannot be applied in any simple way to a comparison of *Dark Emu* with *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* Each book is a hybrid of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge. Here, it will be apparent to the reader that I am giving much weight to Sutton's

[41] Bunda, Zipin, and Brennan 2012, 951.

[42] Examples in the bibliography of *Dark Emu* are Gammage 2011; Gerritsen 2008; Gott 1982; Hallam 1975; and Lourandos (1997).

[43] Sutton and Walshe 2021, 131.

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ethnographic challenge to *Dark Emu.* Readers who hold all ethnography of non-Western peoples under suspicion—as the intellectual tool/product of colonisation—may not be willing to concede that ethnographies are one reliable source of Indigenous knowledge.

Nakata made it clear in his 2007 monograph *Disciplining the Savages—Savaging the Disciplines* that he understands his own Torres Strait heritage partly through a critical reading of ethnographies such as the data collected by A. C. Haddon's 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition.[44] Nakata's writing about the position of Indigenous Studies is consistent with this openness to finding in the Haddon publications "a valuable source of data on Islander beliefs and traditions and, *by definition of Islander people.*"[45] When he refers to "the middle ground where Indigenous and Western meanings converge" and to "the mutual constitution of both Indigenous and Western meaning," I understand him to include Indigenous practices of making what they will of the ethnographic record.[46] Both *Dark Emu* and *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* seem to me to be (very different) examples of what he refers to as the "middle ground" where Western and Indigenous knowledges can engage each other. Nakata writes: "More time spent in that middle ground will likely reveal just how intricate and open to interpretation our scholarly dance around worldviews, knowledge, and practice is."[47]

In a later paper "Rethinking Majors in Australian Indigenous Studies," Nakata et al. give further guidance to educators who wish to build up this "middle ground."[48] They contrast two goals for Indigenous Studies.

One—less favoured by Nakata et al.—is to transmit "Indigenous interpretations and cultural perspectives and practice as a way to uphold Indigenous interests, and to pave the way for university students to overcome the biases, misrepresentations and omissions in disciplinary knowledge or content." Success, when this is the goal, takes the form of "compliance to a particular view of the world."[49]

The other possible goal for Indigenous Studies (and the one that Nakata et al. clearly favour) is to understand the variety of representations of "Indigenous people's knowledge, cultures and experiences." That is, the goal of Indigenous Studies should be to objectify what are labelled Indigenous perspectives to examine their construction, policy pertinence, and historical effects. Success, according to this alternative goal, takes the form of the student acquiring awareness that the "Indigenous perspective" is multiple and evolving, so that the student has the confidence to understand the indigenous perspective as an object of "scholarly thought and productive engagements."[50]

5. Conclusion: how to teach *Dark Emu*?

I offer Cohen and Nakata as two possible ways to teach *Dark Emu* by respectfully historicising it. Following Cohen, let us teach *Dark Emu* as myth. This would mean more than considering (with the help of such critics as Sutton and Walshe) the evidence for and against each of the books' specific claims. We would also study the way that the book exerts its appeal by

[44] Nakata 2007, 28.
[45] Nakata 2007, 101, emphasis added.
[46] Nakata 2013, 297.
[47] Nakata 2013, 302.
[48] Nakata et al. 2014.
[49] Nakata et al. 2014, 10.
[50] Nakata et al. 2014, 10.

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resonating with two progressive ideologies of our times: one that is disposed to question any idea identified as a colonial inheritance and the other aligned with ecologically informed history.

Following Nakata, we could also teach *Dark Emu* as an instance of Indigenous appropriation of Western knowledge—appropriation that many readers welcome as an assertion of the Indigenous standpoint. I have pointed to three ways that *Dark Emu* draws on ideas that we can identify as Western: the idea that as societies evolve from hunter-gatherer to agriculture, they advance in civilisational complexity and thus merit more respect; the heritage of Archaeological research; and the materialist ontology underpinning scientific knowledge of productive, sustainable natural resource use. That is, in teaching *Dark Emu*, we can appreciate not only its myths but also its (what Nakata calls) "convergence" of knowledge from different traditions. When Nakata describes Indigenous Studies as a "knowledge field," I understand him to say that it consists of "both Indigenous and non-Indigenous accounts of Indigenous reality and the deep entanglements of methods of knowledge production, of vantage points and analytical standpoints, and the contests and debates that occur in response to them."[51]

Finally, teaching *Dark Emu* as myth does not require us to treat *Farmer or Hunter-Gatherers?* as truth. That critique too must be relativised, by conveying the limitations of ethnographies and archaeological studies in general and of *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* in particular. The reviews of that book will be helpful. The primary hazard facing any attempt to teach *Dark Emu* as myth is the common equation of "myth" with error and falsehood. One of the continuing tasks of Humanities education is to introduce students to a better epistemology than the one that assumes that all propositions are either true or false. The success of *Dark Emu* reminds us of the inescapable necessity of myths to our political being.

Emeritus Professor Tim Rowse has been writing on Australian history since the 1970s and on Indigenous affairs since the early 1980s. His most recent monograph is *Indigenous and other Australians since 1901* (UNSW Press, 2017). With co-author Murray Goot, he is soon to publish an account of Australia's 2023 Voice referendum.

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[51] Nakata et al. 2014, 15.

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