



# Life as an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Male Prisoner: Poems of Grief, Trauma, Hope, and Resistance

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## Abstract

For Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, writing is predominantly about articulating their cultural belonging and identity. Published creative writing, which is a relatively new art form among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, has not been used as an outlet to the same extent as other forms of art. This is, however, changing as more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rappers and story-writers emerge, and as creative writing is used as a way to express Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment and resistance against discriminatory and oppressive government policies. This article explores the use of poetry and stories written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male prisoners in a correctional facility located in southern New South Wales, Australia, to understand how justice is perceived by people who are (and have been) surrounded by hardships, discrimination, racism, and grief over the loss of their culture, families, and freedom.

**Keywords:** Creative writing prison programs, post-colonial harms, country and culture, over-incarceration

## Résumé

Pour les aborigènes d'Australie et les insulaires du détroit de Torres, l'écriture consiste principalement à exprimer, et à articuler, leur appartenance culturelle et leur identité. La publication d'une écriture créatrice, qui est une forme d'art relativement nouvelle parmi les prisonniers aborigènes et insulaires du détroit de Torres, n'a pas été utilisée comme un exutoire au même titre que d'autres formes d'art. Cependant, la situation est en train de changer avec l'émergence de rappeurs et d'écrivains aborigènes et des insulaires du détroit de Torres, et l'utilisation de l'écriture créative comme moyen d'exprimer leur autonomisation et leur résistance aux politiques gouvernementales discriminatoires et oppressives. Cet article explore l'utilisation de la poésie et des histoires écrites par des prisonniers de sexe masculin aborigènes et insulaires du détroit de Torres dans un établissement correctionnel situé dans le sud de la Nouvelle-Galles-du-Sud, en Australie. Une exploration qui vise à comprendre comment la justice est perçue par des personnes qui sont (et ont été) entourées de difficultés, de discrimination, de racisme et de chagrin à la suite de la perte de leur culture, de leur famille et de leur liberté.

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**Mots clés:** Aborigènes et insulaires du détroit de Torres, programmes pénitentiaires d'écriture créatrice, préjugés post-coloniaux, pays et culture, surincarcération

## Introduction

### Proud Wiradjuri Barkindji Man

Here I am Growing each day  
Mistakes I've made learning each day  
Looking back on were I have been  
Ones I have lost it troubles me  
Tall I stand, strong I be  
Looking back is what has  
Made me

BLACK STRONG  
AND  
DEADLY  
IS  
WHAT I WILL BE

(Poem by Benjamin Arthur Hampton-Little, 2015, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 3, 21).<sup>1</sup>

The subject of our research is an analysis of topics and themes contained in poems and stories written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male prisoners and published in *Dreaming Inside: Voices from Junee Correctional Centre*, Volumes One to Seven. Junee Correctional Centre (JCC) is located on the unceded lands of the Wiradjuri Nation, today known as the Riverina region of New South Wales, Australia. The *Dreaming Inside* volumes are the product of a culturally safe program focused on using arts-based rather than formal educational tools to encourage and support prisoners in their writing. Prison-based art programs per se are not a new concept in Australia, but they have struggled to gain positive and continuing recognition. This is particularly the case for creative writing prison programs. As much as creative writing is an art form, it is the visual arts programs in adult prisons that appear to receive the majority of academic attention. Having said that, there is much more written about the operation and purpose of creative writing (and other arts-based) prison programs in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (see for example Cheliotis and Jordanoska 2016; Gussak 2009; Hill 2015; Piché 2015; Schwan 2011). Schwan notes that many of the programs in North America and the United Kingdom involve university and college students working with prisoners in programs using reading and writing skills to not only educate prisoners but provide

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<sup>1</sup> The poems have been reproduced exactly as they appear in the published version, including the positioning and spelling of the words, and the use of capitals. The reason for this is explained in the article. All poems are from the *Dreaming Inside* series, edited by Aunty Barbara Nicholson.

them with a forum in which to engage in social transformation. The transformation occurs both within the prison, due to improvements in prisoner well-being, and outside prison as a result of disseminating the narratives of prisoners. One of the more well-known outlets for prisoner writing in North America is the University of Ottawa Press publication *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, which emerged in 1988 after concerns were expressed at the *International Conference on Penal Abolition III*, held in Montreal, that there was a lack of prisoner representation at the conference. This journal, however, publishes scholarly articles and essays rather than fiction or poetry, which is often what is categorized as creative writing.

When it comes to programs that focus on First Nations prisoners, there is even less scholarship to access. Much of the research available regarding creative writing and arts-based prison programs is largely descriptive and fails to offer a theoretical explanation for why the programs exist or have been established (Hughes 2005). This absence may be due to the organic nature of these programs, which are most often developed at a grassroots level. In her Master of Arts thesis, Piché (2015) acknowledges the lack of research focusing on prison programs that have a community–corrections partnership, which is how arts and creative writing prison programs are usually established. Her study of the “Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing Program” operating at Saskatoon Correctional Centre found that creative writing programs such as that one can address toxic masculinity in prisons, and that for First Nations and Métis inmates, who make up the majority of the participants in the program, it can also act as a “tool for decolonization in a neo-colonial space” (2015, 9). From a neo-liberal, penalty perspective, prison writing programs, including creative writing and poetry, have been described as being rehabilitative and re-educative in nature (Djurichkovic 2011), but even then, as educational programs, they are seen to provide ways of learning that are different from what traditional prison education courses can offer. Indeed, Reiter notes that poetry therapy is “more concerned with wellness, self-esteem, and personal growth than rules of grammar or punctuation” (2010, 216). Two evaluations of the Dreaming Inside program agree with this assessment, concluding that although the program did encourage the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners who participated to write, it mainly enhanced their wellbeing by improving “self-esteem, skills development and connection to culture and community” (Hanley and Marchetti 2020, 298).

Alongside issues relating to the purpose and effectiveness of prison writing programs are questions regarding the premise upon which First Nations criminal justice issues tend to be examined. Criminology and criminal justice interventions and research have been found to be complicit in “pathologis[ing] Indigenous peoples and problematis[ing] their cultural beliefs and practices” (Cunneen and Tauri 2016, 1). For First Nations Peoples (and indeed, for other racialized groups), prisons have become the tool colonizers use to continue their subjugation and control of the colonized other (Blagg 2008). In Australia, mass incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continues despite numerous inquiries over the past twenty-five years to try and address what has been described as a “national tragedy” by a former federal Attorney-General (Conifer et al. 2016). Different ways of thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s

contact with the criminal justice system have been espoused, placing colonialism and its continuing effects at the centre of any criminological inquiry (Blagg and Anthony 2019). When it comes to prison-based rehabilitation programs, Australian scholars have cautioned against using “what works” literature derived from overseas studies to assess the effectiveness of such programs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Jones and Guthrie 2016). Prison-based rehabilitation programs usually focus on violent offending, sex offending, anger management, substance abuse treatment, cognitive skills, and victim awareness and empathy (Heseltine, Day, and Sarre 2011; for other categories see also Wilkinson 2009). Holistic and culturally appropriate programs addressing non-criminogenic needs, “such as grief, depression, spiritual healing, loss of culture and educational deficits” are more beneficial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, who experience multi-faceted and intergenerational disadvantage, than programs that “address needs directly related to criminal offending, such as cognitive deficits and drug or alcohol abuse” (Gilbert and Wilson 2009, 4). Moreover, programs that focus on strengths and improving a particular prisoner’s capacity “to achieve their goals in socially acceptable ways” are more likely to respect the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, because such an approach respects “their past selves and their goals, while searching for new means to reach those goals” (Gilbert and Wilson 2009, 5). This brings us to the Dreaming Inside program.

The Dreaming Inside program is the only creative writing prison program that is specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.<sup>2</sup> The Dreaming Inside program was conceived in 2010 by Wadi Wadi Aboriginal Elder Dr. Aunty Barbara Nicholson (better known as Aunty Barb) during a visit to the JCC. She decided to return to the JCC to run creative writing and reading workshops with the male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. A four-day visit during NAIDOC week<sup>3</sup> 2012, with Elders John Muk Muk Burke and Bruce Pascoe and tutor Simon Lockhurst, produced Volume 1 of the *Dreaming Inside* books. The publication of poems and stories is now in its eighth year of production. The name “Dreaming Inside” was chosen by the men who participated in the first set of workshops. This name signifies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner writing is more than mere prison writing. The term “The

<sup>2</sup> The *Unlocked* program, developed and run by Red Room Poetry, has been running since 2010, offering creative writing workshops to any inmate who is interested at nine different correctional centres (some which are diversionary residential centres) and a rehabilitation centre in New South Wales. It does not operate in the same way as the Dreaming Inside program, mainly because it has not adopted an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus. However, in 2017, the *Unlocked* program changed its focus to concentrate on inmates at the Balund-a Diversionary Program (Tabulam). Balund-a is a correctional facility where predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male offenders are sent to live and work prior to being sentenced. Balund-a reconnects residents to culture, employing Bundjalung Elders to assist at the facility. The *Unlocked* program at Balund-a ended in 2018 due to lack of funding. Since then it has not been run at other adult correctional centres in New South Wales. A Youth Unlocked program, however, continues to run (<https://redroomcompany.org/projects/youth-unlocked/>).

<sup>3</sup> NAIDOC week refers to a week of celebrations held across Australia to commemorate and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and achievements. The week of celebration is held in July. The acronym “NAIDOC” originally stood for the name of the committee (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) that organized national activities, but since the mid-1990s, it has been used as the name of the celebratory week.

Dreaming,” also referred to as “The Dreamtime,” was coined by European anthropologists to describe the period when the world was created according to Aboriginal cultures (Wolfe 1991). The Dreaming is central to Aboriginal worldviews and spirituality, shared through stories and drawings that are strongly linked to the past and the present, and that determine the future (Graham 2008). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share similar concepts of Dreaming but stories and practices are specific to the various Nations. Thus, the poems and stories written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison disrupt dominant modes of thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, declaring that they are more than simply prisoners to be locked up and forgotten. In the *Dreaming Inside* volumes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison speak up and speak out about their past lives (including being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in a settler colonial society), their grief and loss from being in prison, and their future hopes and dreams.

Twice a year, Aunty Barb and members of the Black Wallaby Writers team (a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative writers in the Wollongong, New South Wales area) and South Coast Writers Centre (also situated in Wollongong, New South Wales) visit at the JCC for three days to work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributors to produce poems or stories about various topics.<sup>4</sup> The impetus for the Dreaming Inside program was to develop the creative writing skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison as a form of expression and, in the process, improve their self-esteem. It is not to “offer literacy classes” but rather to get the men “thinking and writing creatively” (Nicholson 2017, 21). Contributors are able to write on almost any topic, but they cannot write stories or poems that might identify and traumatize victims, that discuss gang membership, that are sexually explicit, or that discuss matters that might incriminate them. The publication of the writings as book volumes ensures the contributors, who are mainly voiceless and forgotten in wider society, are given a voice to express their feelings and write their stories. Knowing their work is published gives the men a sense of pride and achievement, feelings that can increase a person’s confidence and self-esteem (Hanley and Marchetti 2020). The Dreaming Inside anthologies also include writing and visual reflections of the tutors. This provides a remarkable combination of art forms.

The latest volume, Volume Seven (published in 2019), is over six times longer (234 pages) than the first volume, published in 2013 (which was thirty-eight pages), and contains contributions from eighty-six men. There were five men who contributed to Volume One. Each year, the latest volume is launched at an event hosted by the Wollongong Art Gallery, as part of the Sydney Writers’ Festival, and at the JCC, with the contributors who are still in prison and prisoners who attend to do the program, during the first morning of the three-day workshop held there in May. The only requirement for participation in the program is that the men be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and have no active association alerts or restrictive

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<sup>4</sup> For many years, local Wiradjuri Elder John Muk Muk Burke also accompanied Aunty Barb during her visits.

protection status. Support for the program is provided by staff at the JCC, which is run by the GEO Group Australia Pty Ltd.

Readers of the anthologies will note that the works of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are unedited; that is, the spelling and grammar of the original handwritten manuscripts have been retained. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers asserted their right to the continued use of Aboriginal English, a recognized dialect of English, to tell their stories. Their decision is consistent with the principle of self-determination, a key principle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural maintenance (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2012). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners who write share a common bond of educational disadvantage as a result of Australia's history of colonization; therefore, the use of Aboriginal English also makes a political statement as to why they may be imprisoned. The onus is thus on the reader to be diligent. The Black Writers Wallaby Team believe that censorship presents itself as "indulgence in the moral high ground," and they therefore ascribe to a philosophy of "no censorship," with the belief that the work is "not ours to tinker with" (Nicholson 2018, 13). Some of the language used in the *Dreaming Inside* anthologies also reflects prison vernacular, together with Aboriginal vernacular that is well known in Aboriginal communities. As with most prison language, this "inventive language travels from the street to the 'joint' and back, ripening with each journey" (Chevigny 1999, xxi). For example, words like "Gin" (Nicholson 2019, 31) and "Bing lees" (Nicholson 2019, 33) have particular meaning for Aboriginal people. These words are more related to Aboriginal lives, with many being derogatory words used by White people to describe Aboriginal people, but which are then reclaimed by Black people with more positive meanings attached (for example see the use of the words "Gin" and "Black fella" in Nicholson 2017, 84). Examples of other words that are invented street or jail language are: "laggon" (Nicholson 2017, 177), meaning stretch or time to be served, "Bruthas" (Nicholson 2018, 56), meaning solidarity, "grog" (Nicholson 2015, 32; 2018, 52), meaning alcohol, "fence" (Nicholson 2015, 76), meaning the person who buys or sells stolen goods, "shot" (Nicholson 2015, 71), meaning a hit of heroin, "caddy's" (Nicholson 2015, 64), meaning running around doing criminal jobs, "mission" (Nicholson 2016, 69; 2018, 77) and "mish" (Nicholson 2018, 50), which refer to government-controlled settlements where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forced to live and where today many still remain living, making the meaning of those words akin to home, and "Johnny cakes" (Nicholson 2018, 69), meaning an Aboriginal form of damper, a bush bread used by Aboriginal people that formed a large part of their staple diet when they received minimal food rations.

Prisoner writing is a "valuable antidote to the sanitised prison of official discourse" (Brown 2008, 231). Analyzing the narratives contained in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner poems and stories improves our understanding of the lived experiences of punishment by looking at how the men describe their lives before and during imprisonment, and allows us also to appreciate how systemic and institutional racism and discrimination have contributed to putting them in prison. Their penned stories and poems act as counternarratives to the normative view of who Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners are, which

can “pave the way for more ardent activism” (Jacobi 2011, 41). Narratives are a tool for “understanding how individuals make sense of the social forces in their lives, how individuals construct social identities from cultural building blocks, and how culture can shape social action and individual behaviour” (Harding et al. 2016, 292). Focusing on how cultural identity (which Shepherd et al. (2018) define as having pride in identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, having knowledge about a person’s family’s tribal background and placing a level of importance on cultural knowledge) features in the poems and stories can help us understand the importance of facilitating cultural engagement within prisons to build cultural strength and resilience, in the hope that it will lead to pro-social identities. Additionally, reflecting on the narratives evident in the poems and stories can contribute to a moment of resistance and resurgence.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Prisoners and Creative Writing**

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody highlighted the high rates at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are incarcerated compared with non-Indigenous people (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991), rates that have since that time continued increasing. Between 2006 and 2016, the imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increased by 41% (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017). The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics publication presenting national and state prisoner statistics, reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners make up 28% of the total Australian prisoner population, while the adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is only approximately 2% of the Australian adult population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). In 2018, while an evaluation of the Dreaming Inside program was underway, there were on average 842 prisoners at JCC on any given day, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners making up approximately 25% of the prison population. These figures equate to the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in adult prisons across New South Wales, which according to the Australia Bureau of Statistics, was 24% on 30 June 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018).

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody concluded that imprisonment should be a sanction of last resort for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, considering the highly negative and culturally-specific impacts it has on individuals, families, and communities (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991). However, little has been done to ensure that Australian law enforcement agencies can honour that call for justice. More punitive approaches to law and order have, instead, become the norm, making it less likely for people who are charged with an offence to be granted bail and less likely for people who are convicted of an offence to be sentenced to a community-based order (Cunneen and Porter 2017). Studies have found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody have experienced multiple disadvantages throughout their lives, such as separation from carers, and abuse and neglect as children, mostly stemming from the long-term effects of racism and intergenerational trauma resulting from discriminatory and harmful government policies (Australian Law

Reform Commission 2017; Cunneen and Tauri 2016; Gilbert and Wilson 2009). They are also more likely to have been in custody on more than one occasion and to have family and friends who are in custody (Queensland Government 2012). Prisons have continued the ongoing control and subjugation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in settler colonial Australia, purporting to civilize, contain, and fix racialized others (Baldry and Cunneen 2014). As researchers, we recognize the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner writings in the *Dreaming Inside* anthologies as reflecting the ongoing struggles against this colonial mode of penalty.

Johnson and Chernoff (2002) ask why prison poetry writing should be used to explore what it means to be in prison, or, as we are asking, what it reflects about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner experiences of justice. The answer lies in the uniqueness and rawness of the writings. When using creative writing as a form of expression, the writer needs to think carefully about their words, particularly when it comes to poetry writing, and when it occurs in prison, it can be used as a vessel to discuss feelings and thoughts that are usually repressed. It is, as Johnson and Chernoff describe, “an authentic testimony about life in prison, allowing us to peer out from an inmate’s eyes at counts and searches, to wake up and spend time in a cell, to live inside an inmate’s head as he or she experiences the daily routine and marks the passing of time” (2002, 142), although we can never fully understand or appreciate what it means to be in prison without having lived experiences. In her introduction to an edited collection of prison writing, Chevigny (1999) proposes that prisoners are motivated to write in order to bear witness, resist institutionalization, attain self-awareness, sustain relationships, reacquaint themselves with feelings, resist racism and cross-cultural barriers, avoid being violent, and confront their own mortality. When the writing includes reflections about racism, discrimination, and the history of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner writing could be viewed as “an act of resistance” (Stanford 2004, 277) against the dehumanising, controlling, and racist practices of the prison and the criminal justice system. It locates their world of Indigeneity within an institution that maintains White privilege, strengthening and reinforcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity. Writing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, identity, and experiences becomes a form of resistance against “all and any attempt at fragmentation by outside forces” (Nicholson 2018, 17).

## Methodology

This article forms part of a small-scale process and outcomes evaluation of the *Dreaming Inside* program conducted in 2017 and 2018. That evaluation focused on program processes and program effects on the men who participated in the *Dreaming Inside* program using program documentation, prison administrative data, and interview data collected from eighteen stakeholders and thirty prisoners. The evaluation found that the *Dreaming Inside* program aimed to deliver a creative writing workshop to facilitate the free and voluntary expression of feelings and thoughts through poems and stories, and that the program did, in fact, improve



prisoner wellbeing and cultural engagement (Marchetti 2018; 2019). This article furthers the scope of the evaluation by relying on critical race, decolonizing, and Indigenist research frameworks (Dunbar Jr. 2008; Rigney 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 2012) to acknowledge and prioritize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in examining how justice is embodied in the *Dreaming Inside* volumes for people who are (and have been) surrounded with hardships, discrimination, racism, and grief over the loss of their culture, families, and freedom. A critical race, decolonizing, and Indigenist approach recognizes that research is not “value-neutral” but instead imbued with post-colonial and Western ideals of what is considered valid and reliable (Dunbar 2008; Rigney 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Using frameworks that understand and highlight the importance and uniqueness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, belief systems, and worldviews restructures the Anglo-centric hegemonic assumptions, values, and concepts commonly located in discussions concerning criminal justice and penal policy. In analyzing the poems and stories contained in the anthologies, a thematic narrative analysis as described by Reissman (2008) has been used. Reissman’s model places greater importance on the content of what is said in the writing than how it is said. Our primary interest was to generate themes informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences in prison and of the criminal justice system. Both authors were involved in the analysis, but the second author’s perspective as a Kamilaroi and Wonnarua Aboriginal woman was particularly pertinent in ensuring Indigenist knowledges, beliefs, and worldviews were prioritized. The second author did the first analysis of the *Dreaming Inside* anthologies, categorizing the poems according to various themes, and then the first author did the second analysis, checking to see whether our categorization matched. There were some discrepancies, which we discussed, and together we reached an agreement about how to remedy any divergent views. Reading through the poems to conduct the thematic analysis was challenging for both of us because of the raw and emotional content contained in many of the poems and stories. The content triggered memories of family and friends who had experienced similar traumas, which we discussed, allowing us to support each other during a task that was at times unsettling and difficult.

Most of the poems could have been categorized into a number of themes, but in conducting the analysis, we tried to determine the main idea and feeling that the author of the poem or story was trying to convey about their lived experiences of prison and life as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male. The exercise of categorizing was used to formulate a general sense of what is most important to the men, not to come up with any numeric thematic totals. Overall, we categorized the poems and stories (of which there were 757 original contributions in seven volumes) into the following six themes:

1. Feelings of love, loss, regret, and hope for the future, which included poems and stories about the men’s partners and children, and how they feel about not being there for them, the need to make amends, regrets about what they have done, and their hopes for a better life.

2. Connection to Country and culture, which included poems or stories about The Dreaming, connection to land, traditional dance, identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, and pride in a writer's cultural identity.
3. Prison life, which included poems or stories about what life is like in prison, including poems about boredom and the routinized nature of prison life. We could say that all the poems are about prison life since they have all been penned while being in prison, but some specifically refer to what their daily life is like in prison.
4. Feelings of trauma and grief, which was broken up into two parts: (a) Trauma and grief as a result of the history of colonization, which included poems and stories about the impact of growing up on missions, children being taken by government agencies, and racism and discrimination as a result of government policies; and (b) Trauma and grief from childhood experiences, which included stories about being ridiculed or bullied, living with absent parents, and living in poverty.
5. Resistance and political statements, which included poems about fighting the system, being in control, and having agency in a world where they have nothing, not even a voice.
6. Family life, which included poems and stories that generally described growing up and living with family.

Most of these themes can be related to harms caused by life in prison. Obviously, poems about feelings of loneliness or boredom in prison are directly related to emotional and mental harms caused by having their freedom taken away. Similarly, poems and stories about feelings of love, loss, regret, and hope for the future also stem from feelings about not being able to be with the people the men love because they are in prison, often far from where their families live. However, we wanted to tease out the narrative threads beyond simply viewing the topics as an extension of life in prison. In doing so, we can better understand how the men perceive their incarceration within the context of Australia's history of colonization and how they use notions of Country and culture to discuss who they are, where they have been and who they hope to be. Volume Seven includes a section titled "Because of her, I can," which was the NAIDOC week theme for 2018. The poems and stories written for the "Because of her, I can" topic have also been categorized into the six themes noted above. Below we present our analysis of the categories of poems and stories that were most prevalent and that had an explicit or implicit connection to justice experiences.

## **Prison Life and Justice Experiences**

### ***Love, Loss, Regret and Hope for the Future***

By far, the majority of poems and stories fall within the category of feelings of love, loss, regret, and hope for the future, a category that contains much retrospection and reflection. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the poems and stories focus on themes such as love and relationships since separation from, and lack of contact with, family and friends are recognized common difficulties experienced by

prisoners both at the time of entry and after extended incarceration (Adams 1992). Regrets about the past and uncertainty about the future, particularly regarding what will happen after release, are also concerns commonly experienced by prisoners according to previous studies. Many of the poems and stories in the *Dreaming Inside* volumes contain ruminations about how imprisonment has affected partners, children, parents, and other family members, evoking feelings of despair, regret, grief, and powerlessness. Some of the men acknowledge that they “have waisted ... [their] life away with crime and drugs and then ... final days outside doing crime only to end up in this Hell” (“The Rains of Cleansing Pain” by S. W., 2014, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 2, 22). Being confined to a prison cell and losing everyday liberties, relationships, Country, kin, and culture make many of the poems and stories in this category an indictment of how harmful and traumatic prison life can be for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander man (similar to the indicators found by Grant (2008) in her study of Aboriginal men in South Australian prisons). One of the earliest poems that encapsulates this theme is “I Hate” by D. F. (N. N.) (2013, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 1, 21). For Volume One, authors’ names appeared as initials to protect their “self-esteem and privacy” (Nicholson 2013, 5):

I hate that I can't hold you so tight,  
Hate that I can't make you my wife,  
I hate that I can't come home to you,  
I hate that I can't show you I'm true.

I hate that you can't give me your love,  
I hate that I can't say you're my dove.  
I hate that you can't share your love with me,  
I hate that your love can't set me free.

I hate that everything I try to do,  
I hate that you don't believe my love is true.  
I hate that I try so hard for love,  
I hate that there's no help from god above.

I hate the day I wasn't there,  
I hate the thoughts we didn't share.  
I hate that my thoughts are all over the place,  
I hate that no one else makes me feel safe.

I hate the way I've been living life,  
I hate that I never think twice.  
I hate that I keep coming to jail,  
I hate that love and life always fail.

I hate that they won't give me a chance,  
I hate that you won't buy me pants.  
I hate that I'm here and feel so blue,  
I hate that you don't understand I love you.

This poem and others like it capture the essence of hopelessness and powerlessness about being able to fix relationships and lives that have been broken or damaged. The pain of reflecting on everything the men have lost triggers a sense of regret and remorse, making them “hate” that they “never think twice” about the possibility of “coming to jail.” A common element contained in these poems, however, is a desire to change and to be connected to the outside world, a message that suggests that, given appropriate rehabilitation and support, some of the men may choose a different path. As mentioned earlier in this article, this usually requires prison programs that address non-criminogenic needs and that take a holistic and culturally-focused approach (Gilbert and Wilson 2009). For some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner writers, freedom comes across as an impossible dream, with release dates and re-connections to the outside world triggering feelings of fear and trepidation. An example of this is contained in Matt Merritt's poem, “Scared and Excited” (2018, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 6, 74):

I HAVE BEEN IN JAIL FOR 4 YRS AND HAVE 2 YRS TO GO.  
I FEEL LIKE I AM TORN BETWEEN  
BEING EXCITED ON GETTING RELEASED,  
AND ON THE OTHER HAND!  
SCARED ABOUT MY RELEASE.  
I FEEL THE BEST I EVER HAVE  
AND KNOW THAT I AM READY,  
BUT ITS ALWAYS IN THE BACK OF MY MIND  
ABOUT HOW EASY LIFE CAN FALL BACK  
INTO OLD WAYS.  
FIRST THE GATES OPEN  
AND YOU SMELL THE AIR OF FREEDOM,  
THEN YOU LOOK AROUND  
WITH YOUR HEART BEATING HARD  
HOPING THE POLICE AINT THERE WITH MORE CHARGES.  
I CANT WAIT TO SEE MY KIDS  
AND HOLD THEM IN MY ARMS,  
THEN I THINK WHAT IF THEY ARE ASHAMED  
OR THINK I AM A FAILURE.  
ALL I WANT TO DO IS KISS MY PARTNER  
AND GET THAT FEELING OF LOVE,  
BUT ITS BEEN SO LONG  
AND MAYBE WHEN SHE KISSES ME  
SHE DOESNT GET THE SAME FEELING.  
THESE ARE THE JOY'S OF BEING IN JAIL  
AND ON AN UP AND COMING RELEASE.  
STILL WILL BE  
AND ALWAYS WILL BE  
SCARED AND EXCITED

Implicitly this poem suggests that there is little faith in the justice system and in society in general to support any personal growth achieved while in prison and that will ensure a successful re-entry pathway. Racial targeting by the police, forgotten charges that are still pending, or family rejection weigh heavily in the minds of the prison writers.

### ***Connection to Country and Culture***

Being exposed to a grassroots, culturally safe program run by respected Elders and Aboriginal tutors motivated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male prisoners to write about the importance of Indigenous solidarity and brotherhood, and about Country and culture. Their appetite for cultural engagement and a (re) connection to cultural identity is evident from the fact that the category of connection to Country and culture contained the second largest number of poems and stories. Pride in their cultural identity supersedes a criminal justice system that reduces their humanity to that of a racialized group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners. This acquired racialized and criminogenic identity becomes ingrained in the justice system's treatment of the men, ultimately manifesting as cultural bias when actuarial risk assessment tools are administered to predict any future occurrence of reoffending (Day et al. 2018). Risk assessment tools do not examine and include "the potentially important social, contextual and cultural factors that impact on risk, response to services, and reintegration" (Day et al. 2018, 455). These social, contextual, and cultural factors are evidently of crucial importance to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison writers, who see themselves as having lived lives that are rooted in cultural and linguistic identities:

AUSTRALIAN BORN ORIGINAL  
REGULATORS INDIGNOUS GUARDIANS  
IN NATIVE AUSTRALIA LANDS AND SEAS  
US ABORIGINIES WITH OUR SONG AND DANCE  
IT'S COROBOREE  
WE WERE BORN AND BRED TO THRIVE THIS NATIVE  
LANDS,  
WE DA HUNTERS AND GATHERERS WITH A SPEAR IN  
OUR HANDS.

(Lyle Clulow, "Untitled," 2017, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 5, 83).

As Clulow's poem indicates, there is a shared understanding and history amongst the prisoners, despite the fact that many write about their own particular cultural group in their poems and stories. This stems from the fact that, at the time of colonization, there were more than "500 different Aboriginal nations" in Australia (Behrendt 2012, 8) and that despite being separated from family groups and removed from their traditional lands, many Aboriginal people today still identify according to their traditional language group. The importance of cultural engagement is reflected in the fact that some of the writers expressed their gratitude for Aunty Barb and the Aboriginal tutors running the workshops in the prison. An example of this appears in Robert Clark's piece entitled "Untitled 1":

FEEL GOOD AND HAPPY TO HAVE TH ELDERS HERE  
WITH US TODAY I FEEL HAPPY THAT DIFFERENT  
CULTURES HAVE COME TOGETHER TODAY. I HAVE  
RESPECT FOR THE ELDERS TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR  
CULTURES TOO. WITHOUT THE ELDERS OUR STORIES  
AND CULTURE COULD BE LOST. SO I THANK THE EL-  
DERS FOR BEING HERE TODAY. (MAY THE GOOD SPIR-  
ITS WALK WITH US ON OUR JOURNEYS).

(2016, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 4, 100).

Clark's words reflect the power that cultural engagement and respected Elders have in improving the wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (Hanley and Marchetti 2020). The Elders and their teachings provide a safe-guard against the subjugation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in prison and in the wider community.

### ***Life in Prison and Intergenerational Trauma and Grief Resulting from Australia's History of Colonization***

There are few poems about life in prison, but those that fall into this category reflect the mundaneness, loneliness, and confinement of what it is like to be incarcerated, with D. F. (N. N.) (the poet mentioned above) describing prison as "hell" (2013, Volume 1, 22). Being imprisoned can also lead to positive changes, with one of the prison writers penning a poem about how prison gave him back his life by keeping him off drugs (Adam Stewart, "Gaol," 2015, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 3, 41). David Stanford also writes about how he "didn't learn in school but learn in jail," concluding that he wished he "had stayed in school not in jail" ("Stay in School," 2014, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 2, 20). But more commonly, the poems and stories describe prison as a place where time passes slowly and where life is wasted:

Feelings of helplessness give way  
to determination and willingness  
to accept a future with no thought  
of the wasted years in prison.  
No-one to blame,  
fate weighs heavy on my moods.  
Decisions made  
and discussions of the heart  
limited to six minute phone calls.  
True feelings written down  
not spoken.  
Children outside  
riding the rollercoaster of life  
without me by your side.  
Watching them grow  
visit by visit.  
Each time our thoughts  
are of years to come.  
Camping surfing fishing  
all possible.

Who knows what the future holds.

7 years passed, 2 to go.

We'll see.

(Shane Wynne, "Untitled," 2016, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 4, 18).

There is no sense of justice in being sent to prison, since none of the poems or stories about prison life discuss opportunities for rehabilitation, and nor do they embody notions of just outcomes. Instead, a small proportion of the poems describe the intergenerational trauma and grief caused by an enduring history of colonization, identifying that enduring history as the source of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's criminalization and over-incarceration (for further reading regarding Australia's colonial history and its enduring impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system see Blagg 2008; Blagg and Anthony 2019; Cunneen and Porter 2017; Cunneen and Tauri 2016). These poems describe racialized injustices and inequalities resulting from discriminatory and genocidal government policies, while also proudly embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and resistance (overlapping with the category of resistance and political statements). An example is the poem by Jesse James ("the hypocrits", 2018, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 6, 38):

the white man teach me not to steal  
But they Stole first.  
they Lock us up for years and expect us not to hurt.  
They take away our People and expect us not to fight  
fathers angry as can be  
mothers crying through the night.  
But were strong as rock and proud as hell  
Like our great goana totem.  
Because we Love our Country  
we are as Free as the Fish in the ocean.  
they do things to Fill us  
Full of years of hate.  
You Finally aPollOlogiZe  
but it's 180 years To Late.  
Some of us accepted,  
Some of us Rejected,  
I bet that's Better than what you expected.

### ***Resistance and Political Statements***

The act of writing, for prisoners, can be viewed as an avenue to express resistance to all that confines and controls. As Stanford states "[i]t is an exercise of power in a place that attempts to deny power to those who are imprisoned there" (2004, 278). The exercise of power comes from attaining a voice through writing and publishing, which enables the expression and dissemination of thoughts and feelings that are normally hidden and suppressed (Hanley and Marchetti 2020). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, regaining a sense of agency and control comes from recounting Australia's history of colonization and the continuing subjugation of Australia's First Peoples using their inter-generational knowledge and experience, and from deploring

“discriminatory and stereotypical representations of Aboriginality” (Porter 2015, 296). Not many poems or stories were categorized into this theme, only the ones that contained a strong political message related to the intergenerational harms caused by colonization or that discussed cultural unity as a form of resistance and preservation. Some of these poems and stories could have been categorized as connection to Country and culture, but what differentiates them are the calls for respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the political undertones contained in the words. For example, Gordon Williams’s contribution entitled “Black (:indigenous is respect),” which is too long to replicate in full, begins with the words “I don’t like the word power, respect is what our countrymen are looking for!!” (2017, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 5, 192). Williams’s contribution focuses on the need for historical truth-telling, a shared understanding of the devastating and destructive consequences of colonization, and genuine equality for everyone.

A poem that encapsulates the spirit of this category is the following one, by Jay Egan:

Young Black & Deadly,  
 living on lies the government fed me.  
 Now Im ready 2 explode,  
 U mother fuckaz dont know,  
 But ya shit gotta go.  
 U blind,  
 U treadin over enemy lines,  
 200 years u had urs now its time 2 take mine.

Stolen wages,  
 locked in cages,  
 used as slaves,  
 2 early graves.  
 u say there’s no discrimination,  
 But u 4got bout the stolen generation.  
 u couldn’t apoligise at harbour bridge,  
 u seen tha tears in my uncles eyes while playin tha didge.  
 Our elders been through so much sorrow,  
 But we can run tomorrow,  
 If my peers follow.

So stand with me & stand proud & shout.  
 This is our country this is our land,  
 Before we were boyz now we are men,  
 This is our country this is our land,  
 & we’re taken it back wit tha master plan.

(“Untitled,” 2015, *Dreaming Inside*, Volume 3, 62).

Egan’s poem ends with a clarion call for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to proudly embrace and reclaim what has always been, and what always will be theirs—their land. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their land is not a commodity to be owned, but rather it “is an extension of self” which created their



laws, and if destroyed, it means destroying “an aspect of self” (Watson 2000, 15). The call to reclaim their land, echoed in other poems and stories of this nature, is therefore a crucial component of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty, self-determination, and identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners who are in a place and space that is highly colonizing, assimilating, and oppressive.

## Conclusion

The poems and stories speak about childhood memories and experiences, hardships and discrimination, government intervention in the lives of the men in prison and in the lives of their families, how and why the men got caught up in the criminal justice system, and how the devastating legacy of colonization has impacted on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The writers reminisce over life before imprisonment, and imagine their future with hope and freedom. The *Dreaming Inside* anthologies demonstrate that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander prisoner is much more than the worst thing they have ever done (an observation made by Chevigny (1999) about other prison writers). They are first and foremost Australia’s First Peoples. As Aunty Barb notes, “a pervading sense of their “dreamings” locates their work firmly within the world of Aboriginality, [representing,] at a fundamental level, a collective cultural belonging that would be difficult to find outside of this *locus standi*” (Nicholson 2014, 6). A program like *Dreaming Inside* is the *locus standi*, where the men not only have the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings but are also able to (re)connect with or reinforce their cultural identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, this may be what motivates them to choose a different pathway, both while they are in prison and once they are released. This was found by Shepherd et al. (2018) when they sought to assess the relationship between cultural identity, cultural engagement, and violent behaviour for a sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in eleven prisons in the state of Victoria, Australia. Their study found that cultural identity and cultural engagement were highly correlated and that once the prisoners were released, cultural engagement “was significantly associated with non-recidivism” of violent offending (Shepherd et al. 2018, 5). Cultural engagement (including connection to family, kin, and community, and to spirituality, Country, and culture) is the key that supports improved social and emotional wellbeing in an individual and in communities (Gee et al. 2014).

However, the opportunity to use poems and stories to convey life and prison experiences does more than simply encourage individual transformation. The *Dreaming Inside* program, through cultural engagement, disrupts the harmful and disempowering relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and settler colonial structures, of which the prison is a part. The stories and poems do this by privileging the voices of people who have been silenced, reconnecting and reinforcing cultural ties and identities so that the prisoners can resist their imposed separation from family, kin, community, and Country, and providing an avenue for truth telling based on intergenerational experiences of the harmful impacts of colonization, which continue to disempower and traumatize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By (re)connecting to culture, the Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander men can use their shared histories and Indigenous identities to resist the structural forces that try to control, contain, and assimilate the prisoners, and disrupt society's racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The *Dreaming Inside* project recognizes the contemporary impact of colonization on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners and their families and helps to address some of these harmful impacts at both a structural and societal level through the transfer of knowledge both inside and outside of the prison walls.

In analyzing the narratives that emerged from the *Dreaming Inside* volumes, we have gained an understanding of what life as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner means. The men are not passive players in a colonized world that has subjected their families and communities to a life of grief, trauma, and discrimination. Their poems and stories reflect their remorse and regret, but also their desire for a changed future that includes recognizing the political harms that have been inflicted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This analysis offers important insights into how justice is experienced and perceived (both in and out of prison) by male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, and how correctional policy does little to address those injustices at either an individual or a structural level.

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