

Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

Volume 10 | Issue 2022

Article 5

8-7-2022

Settler-on-Settler Violence: ritual protocols in YouTube street fight videos - paper 1

Kelly Menzel

Bond University, kelly.menzel@scu.edu.au

Tyson Yunkaporta

Deakin University, tyson.yunkaporta@deakin.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir>

Recommended Citation

Menzel, Kelly and Yunkaporta, Tyson (2022) "Settler-on-Settler Violence: ritual protocols in YouTube street fight videos - paper 1," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2022, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol10/iss2022/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Indigenous Research by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Abstract

This is part one of a series of two papers exploring a project that was conducted by two Australian Aboriginal researchers, one male and one female, and might be described as ‘reverse anthropology’, in the same way that people sometimes refer to positive discrimination as ‘reverse racism’. But we would just call it anthropology; a tidal river is still a river when it flows back the other way. The project could hardly be acknowledged as anthropology though, as it was based on Indigenous methods of inquiry that do not yet belong to a formal discipline. Initially the goal was to disrupt Australian colonial narratives of ‘black-on-black violence’ and hold up a mirror to the occupying culture, by applying customary Indigenous conflict protocols to an analysis of online street fight videos featuring settlers from various colonies. However, our early encounters with the field revealed that public violence in settler communities is a lot more rule-governed than we had expected, inspiring us to a deeper investigation that went beyond critique and culture jamming. These findings are reported in the second paper, while the first contains the literature review and outlines the Indigenous methods of inquiry and theoretical approach to the field, which will be of utility to researchers even in unrelated disciplines.

Keywords

Public violence, Indigenous, rule-governed violence, YouTube, settlers, Indigenous methodology

The Position

This project was initially an act of culture jamming to disrupt Australian colonial narratives of ‘black-on-black violence’, utilising what might be described as ‘reverse anthropology’, in which Indigenous researchers applied a heuristic of Indigenous rule-governed violence to an analysis of YouTube videos featuring settlers from various colonies involved in street fights. However, through the application of Indigenous methods of inquiry and relational ethics, the project evolved rapidly into a more rigorous and respectful investigation.

The heuristic ‘code’ for Indigenous rule-governed violence was curated by two Indigenous researchers, one male and one female, based on a literature review, community experience and a previous study of Indigenous fight videos that one of the researchers had been involved with (Rennie et al, 2018). One hundred street fight videos from settler states around the world were analysed for ‘violations’ of this code, with quantitative data being recorded as marks on a traditional woman’s fighting stick (observed frequency of violations - ‘number story’) and qualitative data (observed emergent patterns - ‘picto-story’) being recorded as symbols on a man’s fighting club. Our hypothesis was that public violence in settler communities is less rule-governed and more dangerous than the Indigenous public violence that receives much negative attention in the media. However, the findings did not entirely support this, and also revealed some surprising insights into the uniquely gendered nature of participation in settler street fighting rituals. It was necessary to pivot and adapt our inquiry and methods during the research in order to align with the revealed context, which demanded a shift in focus from ethnicity to gender.

The Knowledge

While there is a vast body of research on colonial violence against Indigenous people, minorities, outsiders, and women, we were unable to locate any studies of settler-on-settler violence at the community level rather than as a tool for social control. Searches for violence rituals yielded results only about Indigenous or non-western peoples rather than their colonizers, while any references to street fights and public violence focused on injury statistics or trends mostly relating to teen violence or the link between alcohol and violence. Most of this literature review is dedicated to the few studies analyzing online fight videos and, more importantly, the Australian Indigenous protocols for violent conflict that formed our heuristic for analyzing the rituals of settler-on-settler violence.

There are several studies of online fight videos in the literature, including research on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous material. Wood (2018) notes that the purpose of most online street fight videos is to take viewers outside of their comfort zone or to inform martial arts instruction. He does not mention thrill-seeking or voyeurism as motivating factors for audiences consuming these videos. In his study of (non-Indigenous) Facebook fight videos, he identified three main categories of combat: clean fights, brawls and beatings.

Clean fights are restrained, do not contain dirty or underhanded moves and are usually in a public setting with a crowd of onlookers who “fulfill a dual role of both encouraging participants and making sure they do not overstep the mark in their violence” (Wood, 2018, p. 29). The second category, brawls, are spontaneous, often involving intoxicated fighters. The third category of beatings usually begins with a challenge followed by self-defense or retaliation, with a victim and an aggressor “seeking out and assailing another in retribution of past wrongs” (Wood, 2018, p. 29).

In a study by Rennie et al (2018) of Australian Aboriginal fight videos on YouTube and Facebook it was found that the majority of Indigenous fights fall into the clean fight category. Participants, including fighters and spectators, behaved within the parameters of what was expressed as a 'fair fight' protocol, with transgressions being corrected immediately. For example, hair-pulling was clearly considered a violation of the rules and in 11 of 40 videos, spectators pulled the fighters apart when this occurred.

In the vast majority of the videos analyzed, participants fought in a boxing style stance, with no weapons, no fighting on the ground or striking a fallen combatant, and no kicking. The fights appeared to end before anyone was seriously hurt. Fights where people ended up on the ground were stopped by bystanders, often multiple people. Collateral damage to bystanders was clearly considered unacceptable, as small children and babies were often in the crowd, and parents did not seem concerned that they might get injured. Only one video showed fighting that resulted in blood being drawn.

The study also found that the Aboriginal social rules for violence did not exclude females as participants, but rather that women participated in fights more frequently than men, with almost three quarters of the fighters being female (although there were no examples found of mixed-gender fights).

In their study of (non-Indigenous) fight videos involving girls, Larkin and Dwyer (2016) found that the rare instances of female fight videos attract public attention because "violence is a behaviour synonymous with masculinity, which has resulted in an expectation that young women should refrain from engaging in violent behaviors" (p. 270). The opposite seems to be true of Aboriginal gender protocols around public violence.

Burbank's (1994) study of violence among women in a northern Aboriginal community revealed that Indigenous female fighters are not regarded as "sick" or "irrational", but that their violent actions are regarded as justified and predictable in the community. He describes them as "women who are displeased with a turn of events and express their displeasure in culturally prescribed, culturally expected ways" (Burbank, 1994, p. 184).

While it is clear that very different social norms are operating in fields of Indigenous conflict, reliable studies on traditional forms of rule-governed violence are rare and constrained by what Marcia Langton refers to as a kind of moral prudery (1988). This colonial bias did not expire with early anthropologists, as modern media and scholarship continues to misconstrue clean fights involving Indigenous people as rioting and chaotic violence (Cowlshaw, 2004), over-reporting these incidents while making repeated claims about a conspiracy of silence in the under-reporting of Indigenous violence (Willis, 2011).

However, ancient Indigenous customs of rule-governed violence deployed to minimize harm and resolve disputes is undeniably evident in traditional Lore. Dickson (2010) cites a Ngiyampaa Dreaming story in which a community leader, assisted by the rainbow serpent, developed a martial art system called Coreeda based on the fighting rituals of kangaroos, to curb the excesses of violence. Dickson also cites numerous early settler reports of similar lore-based structures of controlled violence throughout Australia.

Indigenous legal scholar Larissa Behrendt asserts that contemporary Aboriginal dispute resolution remains true to traditional values and that in traditional Law, grievances that cannot be dealt with through adjudication in meetings, public shouting or yelling to air the issue, or through temporary exile, are resolved through ordeals of rule-governed violence:

My father told me how the men in our area would meet for battle with the men of the clan they were in dispute with and as soon as the first man was injured, they would go home. This story highlights the symbolism of the practice of ordeal (Behrendt, 1995, p. 21).

There appears to be a continuity between Indigenous cultures of conflict pre-invasion and those of the modern era. Anthropologists such as Burbank (1994), have linked contemporary fights in Aboriginal communities to traditional forms of conflict resolution, noting that they were “clearly structured activities, patterned and predicted by cultural rules” (Burbank, 1994, p. 4). W.E.H. Stanner described Indigenous ritualized violence as a way to “control, approve and enjoy”, and importantly to limit, aggressive aspects of human nature (Stanner, 1968/2009, p. 209).

Gaynor Macdonald, writing of the Wiradjari people in the 1980s, observed that a fight was an event in which the whole community might participate. The presence of spectators who could become protagonists in a fight is noted in many such accounts.

A 'good fight', as opposed to 'fooling round' or 'fightin dirty', would take place in an area symbolically set aside from daily living. In the past this would be up at the back gates of the Aboriginal station, known as the mission, or in a clearing by the railway bridge just along from the mission. There are still favored spots today -- near particular street lights, in a natural or created clearing such as a carpark (Macdonald, 1988, p. 181).

Such ritualized combat is part of public life and, more importantly, public discourse, as the telling of fight stories in contemporary Indigenous communities is a way to place events in a social order (Burbank, 1994). However, it must also be acknowledged that this customary practice does not scale well, so in the context of contemporary settlements it can depart from traditional governance models and escalate into harmful conflict. Martin (1993), states that Indigenous

aggression and violence resonates with “certain deeply sedimented cultural views and practices, but its massive and chronic scale and domination of the social, intellectual and emotional agendas [are] an entirely contemporary phenomena” (Martin, 1993, p. 143).

The Process

Our Indigenous methodology demanded high ethical standards that came into dialogue with the ethical processes of the academy. Concerns were expressed that we may be negatively portraying settlers as an ethnic group, so we took careful measures to ensure cultural safety for the settler community generally, and for ourselves as Indigenous researchers, in terms of both institutional and cultural protocols. We decided to err on the side of generosity and apply ‘the benefit of the doubt’ when categorizing settler behaviors, to offset our own ingrained prejudices that might result in unjust confirmation bias.

We measured only our responses to the stimulus material within the heuristic of Indigenous rule-governed violence. We identified a potential risk of desensitization in viewing violent material and put cultural mechanisms in place to ensure constant mutual self-care during the data collection phase and beyond. These involved periodic checking-in with feelings, expressing empathy and understanding for settler combatants, placing ourselves in the ‘shoes’ of others, redirecting upset feelings towards productive analysis and communication of crucial messages with a view to increasing understanding and healing. We were able to enhance this approach by aligning with our Indigenous methodological approaches and traditions such as the interconnectedness of “human and more-than-human agencies” co-becoming and becoming part of ongoing “co-constitution” (Country et al., 2017). This was an enactment and embodiment of our Indigenous methodological approach and kept us culturally safe over the course of the project.

While the urls and location information of the videos were recorded and stored securely in a password-protected device for five years, humans and locations appearing in the videos were not recorded or identifiable in any way in the reported research. While this same level of anonymity has not been afforded to Indigenous people in studies on this topic (e.g. Chagnon, 2013), our Indigenous cultural standpoint demands a different ethical standard, and so the persons appearing in the videos were afforded respect in our commentary and responses, as well as complete anonymity.

This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional anthropological studies of Indigenous violence, in which conflict has been instigated and escalated by researchers in order to support social Darwinist dogma, game theoretical models and selfish gene hypotheses that justify free market ideologies (e.g. Chagnon, 1968). We were careful to ensure that our ‘reverse anthropology’ project did not replicate the same kinds of academic violence and produce the same kinds of externalities. Our methodology instead demanded an increase in respect, relationality and shared narratives. So, we were careful to employ a strict ethical sampling process for each video; for example, we would not include any videos that appeared to feature minors as combatants. Another rule was about involuntary loss of dignity - for example viewing would cease if unintended nudity or partial nudity occurred (which became known as ‘the butt-crack rule’). It goes without saying that we would also never engage with the comments section of YouTube videos. It should also be noted that we resisted the urge to recruit a token co-author from the settler community at the last minute to cover our paucity of meaningful community consultation in the field.

In our process of ‘coming into relation’ with both the field of study and Wathaurong land (where we were situated while conducting the research), we designed a ‘Groundwater Methodology’ (Yunkaporta and Menzel 2020, Menzel 2021). To refine the practice and enhance

our skills, we watched many videos and walked along the hidden lines of underground water on the university campus while analyzing the videos, until we became adept at using this method. We were able to enhance this approach by aligning with Indigenous methods (IM) and traditions of co-becoming and becoming (Country et al., 2017). The Groundwater Method mirrors the thinking and relational processes of walking through the landscape and looking for things that are both seen and unseen, an embodied awareness affording a birds-eye perspective of terrain. For example, to find groundwater, one might look at the growth patterns of plants, the flight of birds, the colour of trees or the direction of their branches, and the aggregate of these signals in a sentient landscape extending from and incorporating one's own body.

The method is rigorous, requiring more than triangulation - we referred to it as 'polyangulation' during our walks. The branches of a tree may seem to be reaching towards a particular piece of ground, but are the other trees around it doing the same? Is the grass different there? Is the soil damper than the soil nearby? What is the bird sign indicating there? Where are the ridges in the topography of that place? What insect activity do we see in the bark of the tree? A plethora of indicators must align, along with a particular feeling in the gut while standing in that spot, before a judgement can be made about the presence of groundwater. We approached the highly complex, incomplete data sets of street fight videos from different countries with the same pattern of inquiry.

An Indigenous data analysis technique known as Thought Ritual (Moodie and Yunkaporta, 2020) was employed. The technique combines traditions of Indigenous inquiry and ritualized knowledge production with contemporary theory and practice involving complexity theory and thought experiment. We undertook cultural activities using two sticks containing data recorded while viewing the street fight videos over four weeks, examining the data at each stage with a

different focus - connectivity, diversity, interactivity and adaptation. Each stage utilised different forms of cultural expression/inquiry - visual practice, land-based practice, material culture practice, spiritual/ritual practice.

Our data collection was similar to approaches used by non-Indigenous studies of Indigenous public violence videos (e.g. Rennie et al 2018) but modified by an auto-ethnographic focus in which the videos themselves are not considered data, but stimulus for the data, which emphasized the responses of the Indigenous researchers to the stimuli. So, rather than controlling for observer effects we embraced them completely, as in our ontology there is no such thing as uncontaminated data. Another point of difference was that researcher responses were not recorded digitally, but as notches and marks (number-story/quantitative) and symbols (picto-story/qualitative) drawn on traditional weapons (Figure 1: data sticks).



Figure 1 data sticks

The weapons were carved as part of the non-print-based data analysis method of Thought Ritual, in which various cultural activities were undertaken to gain deep layers of insight. The number-story data was recorded on a woman's fighting stick of Gidgirr wood and the picto-story

was recorded on a man's fighting club made from English walnut. European wood was chosen for the qualitative data collection phase, as it was anticipated that some images may be problematic and inappropriate for carving on an Indigenous Australian wood, and also we wanted to pay our respects to the entities of land in the distant nation that is currently exerting illegal sovereign power over our unceded continent.

Initially we considered using 'clean' devices as per similar studies to avoid algorithmic biases in web searches, however the Groundwater Method demands that the researcher be considered as part of the field rather than an observer, which means the consumer algorithms of the researchers are part of the field; thus, we utilized our personal laptops and did not employ incognito search modes. The undesirable alteration of our own algorithms, resulting in frequent suggestions of violent and disturbing content, were regarded as a fair consequence and ongoing reminder of accountability to the field and to the knowledge.

The most difficult challenge in implementing the Groundwater Method came in sample selection. This required that we define what 'settler' and 'settler state' would mean for the purposes of the study. After weeks of reflection, we decided that melanin content in the skin and ethnic affiliation were not key variables in determining settler status for the purposes of this study, and (perhaps controversially) decided to include involuntary settlers (e.g. African Americans, Australian South Sea Islanders) in the sample. It must be noted that we later found these populations were more likely to exhibit the governance protocols we are familiar with in Indigenous conflict. We also found they frequently demonstrated the violations we observed in the dominant cultures of the settlement. We understand that this may have skewed the data towards a more favorable portrayal of European settlers, but as previously stated, we were committed to erring on the side of generosity in our evaluation to offset our own internal bias against colonists.

The definition of ‘settler state’ was also a concern in selecting the populations from which we would draw the sample. Most were uncontested, but Israel and Taiwan required a lot of reading and debate. In the end we determined that if the states were declaring areas as settlements in their own legal and military documents or policing them as such, and if the First Peoples of that place were present within the borders of the state, they qualified for the sample. We were also determined to avoid as much of our own racialized prejudice as possible by including non-European settlements in the sample. This decision was later vindicated when we observed the same patterns of settler violence protocols across every settlement in the sample. The same patterns, particularly gendered structures, were not observed in preliminary viewings of fight videos from decolonized nations such as Brazil.

Please see Paper 2 for the analysis and findings of the study.

References

Country, B., Suchet-Pearson S., Wright S. L, Lloyd K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D. & Sweeney, J. (2017). Co-becoming

- time/s: time/s-as-telling-as-time/s. In J. Thorpe, S. Rutherford & L. Anders Sandberg (Eds), *Experiments with Methods in Nature-Culture-History Research* (pp. 81-92). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315665924>
- Behrendt, L. (1995). *Aboriginal dispute resolution: A step towards self-determination and community autonomy*. Federation Press.
- Burbank, V. K. (1994). *Fighting Women: Anger and aggression in Aboriginal Australia*. University of California Press. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-2337\(1995\)21:4%3C311::AID-AB2480210407%3E3.0.CO;2-Y](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-2337(1995)21:4%3C311::AID-AB2480210407%3E3.0.CO;2-Y)
- Chagnon, N. A. (1968), *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Chagnon, N. (2013). *Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes – The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists*. Simon and Schuster.
- Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. A&U Academic.
- Cowlshaw, G. (2004). *Blackfellas, whitefellas, and the hidden injuries of race*. Blackwell.
- Dickson, G. (2010). *From the dreaming to the dreamers: The Australian wrestling tradition*. Sid Harta Publications.
- Henrich, J. (2020). *The Weirdest People in the World: How the west became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous*. Straus and Giroux.
- Langton, M. (1988). Medicine Square. In I. Keen (Ed). *Being Black: Aboriginal cultures in “settled” Australia* (pp. 201–226). Aboriginal Studies Press.

- Larkin, A., & Dwyer, A. (2016). Fighting like a girl... or a boy? An analysis of videos of violence between young girls posted on online fight websites. *Current issues in criminal justice*, 27(3), 269-284. DOI:10.1080/10345329.2016.12036046
- Macdonald, G. (1988). A Wiradjuri Fight Story. In I. Keen (ed.). *Being Black: Aboriginal cultures in "settled" Australia* (pp. 179–199). Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Martin, D. F. (1993). *Autonomy and relatedness: An ethnography of Wik people of Aurukun, western Cape York Peninsula*. [Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Australian National University].
- Menzel, K. (2021). *Stirred, Not Shaken: An Aboriginal Woman's Experience of the Academy*. [Doctoral dissertation, Deakin University].
- Rennie, E., Yunkaporta, T., and Holcombe-James, I. (2018). Cyber safety in remote Aboriginal Communities: Final Report In: *Telstra Melbourne*.
- Stanner, W. E. H. (1905–1981/2009). *The Dreaming and Other Essays*. Black Inc.
- Willis, M. (2011). Non-disclosure of violence in Australian Indigenous communities. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 405. Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi405>
- Wood, M. A. (2018). 'I just wanna see someone get knocked the fuck out': Spectating affray on Facebook fight pages. *Crime, Media, Culture*;14(1), 23-40. doi:[10.1177/1741659016667437](https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016667437)

Yunkaporta, T. & Menzel K. (2020 January 10–12). *Gender, power and sustainability* [Paper presentation]. Sustainable Prosperity Conference. University of Adelaide.

Yunkaporta, T. & Moodie, D. (2021). Thought ritual: an Indigenous data analysis method for research. In T. McKenna, D. Moodie & P. Onesta (Eds), *Indigenous knowledges: privileging our voices*. (pp. 87-96). Brill Sense. doi: 10.1163/9789004461642_006