



Official Selection  
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WAYNE BLAIR

RHAE-KYE WAITES

# emu RUNNER

A FILM BY IMOGEN THOMAS • <https://www.emurunnerfilm.com>

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A STUDY GUIDE BY  
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A young girl with dark hair, wearing a maroon polo shirt and dark pants, stands with her hands on her hips on a wide, gravelly dirt road. The background shows a flat, open landscape with scattered trees under a clear sky.

# SYNOPSIS

*Emu Runner* is a story about a nine-year-old First Nations Ngemba girl, Gemma (Gem) Daniels, who lives in the remote Australian town of Brewarrina. As she copes with her mother's unexpected death, Gem finds solace in the company of a wild emu, unwittingly connecting her with her mother's traditional totem animal. As she spends more and more time with the emu, Gem skips school, attracting the attention of Heidi, a new social worker in town, who is convinced Gem's family is failing to look after her.

In nature, the male emu takes on the role of rearing the chicks. With the death of his wife, Gem's father Jay Jay is left on his own to raise Gem, her 15-year-old sister Valerie and her 17-year-old brother Ecka. While Jay Jay's commitment to his family doesn't waver, the pressures to make ends meet and hold the family together are exacerbated by the antics of his older children and Gem's truancy and stealing.

*Emu Runner* is as much Jay Jay Daniels' story as it is Gem's. Not only does Jay Jay face prejudices from the non-Indigenous community in the town, he also has to prove himself to his Indigenous family and friends, who have little confidence in his ability as a sole parent. Jay Jay is driven by a dogged determination as he strives to nurture and protect his children.

The story reaches its dramatic climax with social worker Heidi making the decision to remove Gem from her father's care, laying bare her limited understanding of the real motivations behind Gem's truancy and stealing. In the end, it is Heidi who learns from Gem and is confronted by her own lack of preparation for a job which has responsibilities not covered by her tertiary qualifications or her idealism.

*Emu Runner* is a story about respecting difference. It explores the underlying racial tensions in regional Australia and the importance of traditional customs in contemporary Indigenous culture.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



Gem is the driving force of *Emu Runner*. It is through her eyes that the story unfolds. She is a child full of wonder and intrigue and anchored by the deep cultural roots of her Ngemba people and country, and thus her sense of belonging is implicit. Her remote country town may struggle to exist, and yet, it is a place that offers great freedoms and a way of life where time slows and simple pleasures are found. At the same time *Emu Runner* presents the fragility of this world and how quickly it can change. The unexpected death of her mother puts Gem and her family's lives into a state of flux as they contend with their grief.

*Emu Runner* is about Gem's search for meaning at a time when nothing makes sense. Rather than turning her gaze inward she looks to nature for the answers. The emu is Gem's connection with her mother and its arrival after her death cannot be ignored. The emu is Gem's past, her present and her future. Flightless these birds may be, but ultimately, emus are a symbol of speed, agility and grace. They are always moving forward, as Gem must. They hold other valuable life lessons for Gem and her family, as it is the male emu that is fully responsible for raising their young, just as Gem's father finds himself fully responsible for his children. Like the male emu, Jay Jay Daniels is fiercely protective and is prepared to step up to meet the challenge he has been dealt.

Eleven-year-old Rhae-Kye Waites, from the remote New South Wales town of Brewarrina, plays Gem in this family drama of loss and redemption. Acting alongside the celebrated actor/director Wayne Blair, who plays her father Jay Jay Daniels. Waites and Blair deliver emotionally charged and honest performances at the centre of a dynamic ensemble of Brewarrina locals, augmented by Logie award-winning actor Rob Carlton and emerging talents Georgia Blizzard and Maurial Spearim in small key roles.

Premature death is an issue that repeatedly touches the lives of Indigenous Australians. It is a reality I have become more aware of through my longstanding association with the Indigenous community of Brewarrina. I believe story-telling offers an accessible way to shine the spotlight on this pressing issue, hopefully creating a greater awareness and an understanding about the profound impact loss and grief has on others. Stories have the power to engage audiences on so many levels, touching their hearts and minds and by transporting them into the worlds and lives of people that are often far from their own life experience. It has been a privilege to create a story in partnership with the Brewarrina Indigenous community.

*Emu Runner* invites audiences into Gem's world as she faces the hardest test of her life. My aim is to paint a positive and uplifting story for Gem. I hope audiences come to understand the adversities which arise from living in a remote community as well as marvel in the richness of our First Nations' cultures and the beguiling beauty of the Australian landscape.

Imogen Thomas





# CURRICULUM LINKS

## \* National Programs and Standards for Teachers

The National Professional Standards for Teachers specify many key areas in which teachers should develop programs inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. Programs also need to be developed which are informed by a knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.

Here are two examples of key areas of development from the \*Standards:

Standard 1.4 – ‘Know students and how they learn’

Develop teaching programs that support equitable and ongoing participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by engaging in collaborative relationships with community representatives and parents/carers.

Standard 2.4 – ‘Know the content and how to teach it’

Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.

Taken from <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>

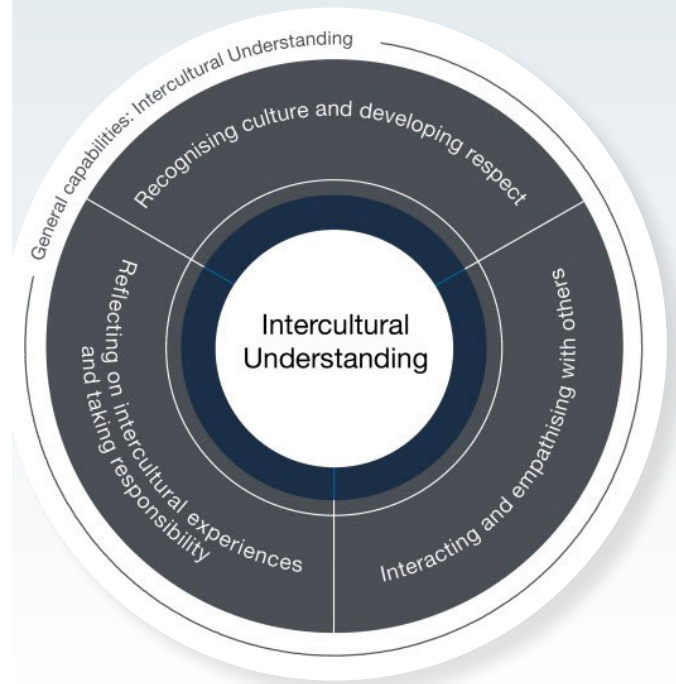
## \* Australian Curriculum

### General Capabilities

The Australian Curriculum specifies seven General Capabilities which are to be developed throughout all learning areas. Three of these General Capabilities are directly relevant for this study guide.

### Intercultural Understanding

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.



### Australian Curriculum Content Links

*Emu Runner* can be linked to the following subject areas within the Australian Curriculum.

- **YEAR 11 MODERN HISTORY**
- **LANGUAGES**
- **CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP**
- **ENGLISH**
- **GEOGRAPHY**
- **MEDIA STUDIES**
- **HISTORY**

### Year 11 Modern History, Unit 2: ‘Movements for Change in the 20th Century’

#### Recognition and rights of Indigenous peoples

The nature of the relationship of Indigenous peoples with their land and their response to perceptions of, and feelings about, the arrival of the colonisers (ACHMH070)

The basis on which the colonists claimed sovereignty and imposed control, including conquest, treaty and the doctrine of ‘terra nullius’; and the consequences for the legal status and land rights of Indigenous peoples (ACHMH071)

The nature of government policies and their impact on Indigenous peoples, for example protection, assimilation (including the Stolen Generations), and self-determination (ACHMH072)

The role of individuals and groups who supported the movement for Indigenous recognition and rights, including the methods they used and the resistance they encountered (ACHMH073)



The economic, political and social challenges and opportunities Indigenous peoples have faced, including the role of cultural activity in developing awareness in society (ACHMH074)

The achievements of Indigenous peoples at the end of the 20th century, including the right to vote, land rights/native title, and attempt at reconciliation (ACHMH075)

The continued efforts to achieve greater recognition, reconciliation, civil rights, and improvements in education and health (ACHMH076)

### **Languages – Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages (Years 8 & 9)**

Investigate programs, initiatives and techniques that keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages strong

Understanding the importance of intergenerational collaboration and transmission in keeping languages strong and discussing some of the associated challenges

### **Civics and Citizenship (Years 8 & 9)**

How and why individuals and groups, including religious groups, participate in and contribute to civic life (ACHCK079)

How Australia's international legal obligations shape Australian law and government policies, including in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACHCK093)

Account for different interpretations and points of view (ACHCS085) and (ACHCS098)

Recognise and consider multiple perspectives and ambiguities, and use strategies to negotiate and resolve contentious issues (ACHCS086) and (ACHCS099)

Present evidence-based civics and citizenship arguments using subject-specific language (ACHCS088) and (ACHCS101)

Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australian, regional and global contexts (ACHCS089) and (ACHCS102)

### **Media Arts (Years 7 & 8)**

Develop media representations to show familiar or shared social and cultural values and beliefs, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACAMAM067)

Analyse how technical and symbolic elements are used in media artworks to create representations influenced by story, genre, values and points of view of particular audiences (ACAMAR071)

Identify specific features and purposes of media artworks from contemporary and past times to explore viewpoints and enrich their media arts making, starting with Australian media artworks including of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media artworks (ACAMAR072)

### **Media Arts (Years 9 & 10)**

Manipulate media representations to identify and examine social and cultural values and beliefs, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACAMAM074)

Analyse a range of media artworks from contemporary and past times to explore differing viewpoints and enrich their media arts making, starting with Australian media artworks, including media artworks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and international media artworks (ACAMAR079)

### **English: Literature (Year 8)**

Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806)

### **English: Literacy (Year 8)**

Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content, including multimodal elements, to reflect a diversity of viewpoints (ACELY1731 - Scootle )

### **History: Knowledge and Understanding (Year 7)**

The importance of conserving the remains of the ancient past, including the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACDSEH148)

### **Geography: Geographical Knowledge and Understanding (Year 7)**

Economic, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic value of water for people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and peoples of the Asia region (ACHGK041)

### **Geography: Geographical Knowledge and Understanding (Year 8)**

Spiritual, aesthetic and cultural value of landscapes and landforms for people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ACHGK049)

### **Geography: Geographical Knowledge and Understanding (Year 9)**

The perceptions people have of place, and how these influence their connections to different places (ACHGK065)





## PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

## \* Brewarrina and Barwon River, NSW

Positioned near the banks of the Barwon River, Brewarrina is home to a large Indigenous community. The name is derived from the Weilwan word “burru waranha” -the name of a certain type of Acacia tree. It is the traditional land of the Ngemba, Murrawarri, Ualari, Weilwan and Baranbinja people. Brewarrina is a meeting place, a site where many groups came together to partake in important ceremonies, trade, as well as to enjoy the abundant fish that the river offered. To this day the river continues to hold great significance as well as nourish its community.

Of particular historical significance in the Brewarrina region are the Baiame’s Ngunnhu (Brewarrina Fish Traps). Estimated at over 40,000 years of age, the Baiame’s Ngunnhu have been described as the oldest human made structures in the world. The traps

are examples of Indigenous aquaculture. The fish traps comprise a series of dry-stone weirs across a shallow and narrow section the Barwon River, where the water moves quickly to channel fish into the traps. The traps are highly valued by members of the Ngemba language group and other local Indigenous communities. The traps have been on the Australian Natural Heritage List since 2005. However, the traps’ existence remains threatened by the waterflow changes created by the Brewarrina weir built in 1971.

Although the Barwon River runs through a dry and biologically sparse environment, the Indigenous peoples using the river have for tens of thousands of years enjoyed an abundance and variety of fish and shellfish. This abundance is due to carefully designed and implemented land, water and fire management practices that have been maintained and developed for tens of thousands of years. Today, modern colonial agriculture, overuse of water and introduction of feral fish and other animals have devastated the river’s ecological balance. The fish enjoyed by different Indigenous communities along the Barwon for over 40 000 years are now greatly diminished in numbers. Such fish include the Boney Bream, Freshwater Catfish, Silver Perch, Golden Perch and Murray Cod.





## QUESTIONS-MAP

- 1 Locate Brewarrina on the map of Indigenous Australian Language Groups.
- 2 Copy out the Brewarrina region of the map, using different colours to mark the different language groups around the Brewarrina region.
- 3 What is the name of the language group of your region?
- 4 In acknowledging the country of your school, which group do you recognize as the Traditional Owners?
- 5 What is the difference between a “clan”, a “language group” and a “nation”?
- 6 Why do you think many Indigenous leaders prefer the term “First Nations”?
- 7 What language does the word Aboriginal come from? What does the word mean?
- 8 What language does the word “Indigenous” come from? What does the word mean?
- 9 What are some of the problems with applying one word (eg. Aboriginal) to name all of the different



- 10 Only fifty years ago, most scientists believed it impossible that people had inhabited the continent of Australia for more than 10,000 years. Now, evidence from near Warrnambool in Victoria suggests habitation for over 100,000 years. For how long has it been proven archeologically that First Peoples have lived in the Brewarrina region?
- 11 What kinds of evidence does modern archaeology rely on to establish historical timelines?
- 12 What other kinds of information could be used to develop timelines of Indigenous history (eg. Indigenous Cultural Knowledge)?
- 13 The British invaders of Australia chose not to recognize First Nations’ ownership and habitation of this country. Instead of honouring First Peoples’ ownership and forming a Treaty, the British used the legal concept of *terra nullius* (“No one’s land”) to take possession. The British justified Australia as *terra nullius* on the basis that although First Peoples lived on the country, they did not appear to use the land agriculturally or to establish permanent settlements, and therefore they did not own it as property. How do the 40 000+ year old Baiame’s Ngunnhu (Brewarrina Fish Traps) contradict the lie of *terra nullius*?
- 14 What other examples from around Australia (eg. Indigenous aquaculture, agriculture, permanent settlements) can you find out which prove First Nations’ use and ownership of the land and contradict the premise of *terra nullius*?
- 15 Where does the Barwon River begin and end? Through how many language groups does the river pass?





## Activity 2

### \* Language

The First Peoples of the Brewarrina region were - like many groups across the continent - victims of successive waves of invasion, dispossession and assimilation. The cumulative results of this colonisation are often referred to as “cultural genocide”. Cultural genocide refers to the destruction not only of people, but of their cultures and especially their languages. After decades of forced First Peoples’ dispossession, removal and assimilation to the standards of English culture, many of the over 250 distinct Indigenous languages in this country have been lost. Efforts are being made today across the continent to revive First Languages and to keep First Languages at risk alive.

The Weilwan language group of the Brewarrina region speak a dialect of Ngiyambaa language. By the 1980s this language was close to extinction, with almost no fluent speakers left. Now, efforts are being made to revive the language among First Peoples of the Brewarrina area. The short documentary *Brewarrina’s Aboriginal Language Program* documents the introduction of an innovative Aboriginal language program for students in years 8 and 9. The program ties in learning of language with learning of culture and history, through family histories and oral histories.



*Brewarrina’s Aboriginal Language Program* can be found here:  
<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/brewarrina>

## VIEWING ACTIVITY

### \* Watch the film and discuss the following

- 1 What is the importance of language to an individual's and community's culture?
- 2 What is the importance of somebody's language and culture to their identity?
- 3 What things are taken from your culture if your language is lost?
- 4 What is the First Language of the country your school is situated on?
- 5 To what extent has the language been threatened by the history of colonisation?
- 6 What are the benefits for somebody to know the language of their own people?
- 7 What are the benefits for non-Indigenous people to know something of the local language of the country?
- 8 In what ways could a better knowledge of Indigenous languages become a part of all of our lives?





## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

## \* Indigenous Spiritualities

Like many spiritualities across the world, Indigenous spiritualities in Australia relate very powerfully to country, its fauna and flora. The creation stories that are sometimes generally referred to in English as ‘Dreamings’ i.e. ‘Dream Time Stories’ and/or ‘Song Lines’ relate the creation of the world and all living beings from the acts of spiritual ancestors. People, animals, plants and the country itself are all the creation of the spiritual ancestors. For this reason, Indigenous spiritualities do not distinguish between human and nature (or spirit and earth) in the same way that many monotheistic traditions like Christianity do. Spirit and nature are not understood separately. Humans are a part of nature, and all are the creation of spirit. Indigenous

spiritualities therefore understand a close tie between human and animal. Sometimes this is called *totemism* - a human being is connected to a particular animal spirit (like an eagle, a snake or indeed an emu). A totem can inform the role an individual has in their society. Sometimes an individual’s totem is described as their *dreaming*. Larger groups can also have *dreamings*, referred to as *moieties*. Moiety groups refer to kinship and marriage laws and organise the many smaller communities with language groups and nations.

In *Emu Runner* Gem forms a remarkable relationship with an emu, her mother’s *totem* or *dreaming* animal. This, in Indigenous spirituality, can be understood as Gem’s mother’s spirit connecting with her daughter. It can also be understood as Gem receiving her mother’s spiritual role as she begins to grow out of childhood. The way Gem finds her sense of self and freedom in running is likewise an expression of her spiritual identity.

The attached Sydney Morning Herald article by Stephanie Bunbury includes within it a statement by Mary Waites (a Brewarrina First Nations’ community member and collaborator on the film) about her spiritual connection with the emu. *Emu Runner*: ‘It was her ancestors calling her’ by Stephanie Bunbury: <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/it-was-her-ancestors-calling-her-how-emu-runner-took-flight-20191030-p535n3.html>

See also, a short film of interviews made during the production period where Mary speaks about the importance of the emu and the healing the film has brought to the community: <https://vimeo.com/264194084>





## QUESTIONS

- 1 Indigenous spirituality has to do with engaging with and appreciating nature. In the opening scene of *Emu Runner*, note down the different natural elements you can see and hear.
- 2 How does Gem's mother encourage Gem to engage with and "learn" the bush?
- 3 Define *totem*. Which language does the word come from? Is it really an appropriate word for Indigenous cultures in Australia?
- 4 Define *moiety*. How does *moieties* organise a society?
- 5 *Dreamings* and *Dream-time* are English terms that have been used to describe a huge variety of Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices across the continent. Why has the word "dream" used in these ways to describe Indigenous spiritualities? What are some of the limitations of these English terms?
- 6 What other Indigenous cultures in the world have forms of totemism in their spiritualities?
- 7 How does a totemic spirituality work within a culture that practices an ecological balance with its environment?
- 8 Locate your nearest First Nations/ Aboriginal council.
- 9 What can you learn of the creation stories of your area?
- 10 First Nations communities across the continent have lived through periods of seismic climate and geographical change. The most recent climate change (approx. 10 000 years ago) saw large areas of land flooded and communities displaced. Numerous stories recount these events. The following story of the Boon Wurrung People of the Kulin Nation (modern Melbourne) recounts the filling of Port Phillip Bay. [cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/nyernila/boon-wurrung-the-filling-of-the-bay-the-time-of-chaos/](http://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/nyernila/boon-wurrung-the-filling-of-the-bay-the-time-of-chaos/)
- 11 How are these ancient "Dreaming" stories in fact historical documents and what could be learned from them about the history of Australia?
- 12 From reading the Stephanie Bunbury article above, why do you think it was so important for filmmaker Imogen Thomas to connect with the community first before making *Emu Runner*?
- 13 Why might Rhae-Kye Waites have responded to the appearance of the emus as a good omen for the making of the film?







Environmental and ecological science are discovering just how advanced. Over tens of thousands of years, a profound interrelationship with the ecology of the country was achieved and maintained. Ways of knowing and even communicating with the country were developed. As this dry continent begins to fail under the stress of imported agricultural methods, an increasing number of people are beginning to ask about these successful Indigenous methods and knowledges.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the legal premise for the dispossession of land by colonial “settlers”? (ie. Why wasn’t it illegal for settlers to take ownership of the land?)
- 2 What do you know about what happened in the early years of colonial invasion of First Nations territories?
- 3 Why is this early settler history not a bigger part of the history we study at school?
- 4 Research the Hospital Creek Massacre.
- 5 Explore the different Indigenous calendars shown on the CSIRO website: <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Land-management/Indigenous/Indigenous-calendars>
- 6 In what ways do these Indigenous calendars differ from the “quartered” seasonal calendar of Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter?

### Activity 2

## \* Indigenous Knowledges

Indigenous cultures and ecologies are deeply interrelated. In some ways, what we call “Indigenous cultures” and “Indigenous environmental management” are one and the same thing. When Europeans first arrived in this country, their response (which is still prevalent among non-Indigenous people today) was to perceive the continent as a “wilderness”, a land untouched by civilisation and agriculture. Nothing in fact could have been further from the truth. As recent scholarship has begun to demonstrate, Indigenous groups have been farming and managing this land with refined practices for tens of thousands of years. There is evidence to suggest the first wheat was harvested here, the first bread baked, the first aquaculture dam built, *etc, etc, etc.* (Dark Emu, Bruce Pascoe) Country was managed across the continent by fire, keeping the bush manageable and attracting game. (Langton, Gammage) Because of these practices, European took possession of fertile soils and contained ecosystems when they forcefully dispossessed Aboriginal communities.

Non-Indigenous Australian history is starting to wake up to the idea that these most ancient and long running of cultures were highly sophisticated. Ironically, the “evolution” narrative that colonisers applied to First Peoples to define them as “backward” must now account for the likelihood that Indigenous cultures are historically the most “advanced” and “successful” in the world.





- 7 What part of the world does the “quartered” seasonal calendar come from and why is it used in Australia? What are some of its limitations?
- 8 Discuss as a class: what benefits might arise if non-Indigenous Australians worked more closely with Indigenous calendars?
- 9 How can the night sky be read as a calendar? What information can be gathered by following the astronomical calendar?
- 10 Gem learns about the “Emu in the Sky” -a southern constellation read by many First Peoples to seasonal and breeding cycles. Explore the internet for knowledge you can find on the “Emu in the Sky” and Aboriginal Astronomy.
- 11 What information can be known by following the Emu in the Sky?
- 12 The Emu in the Sky is an important part of Indigenous environmental science. It is also a creation story. How do traditional stories work in a culture to preserve scientific knowledge?
- 13 Should we learn more about Indigenous astronomy? What would be the benefits?
- 14 Indigenous Ways of Knowledge are sometimes called “eco-centric” whereas European sciences, laws and philosophies are called “human-centric.” Discuss what you think the key differences between “eco-centric” and “human-centric” are?
- 15 How is the colonial idea of possession of property (“I own/bought this land”) an example of a human-centric law?
- 16 How is the traditional idea of custodianship (“I belong to this country”) an example of an eco-centric law?
- 17 What kinds of Indigenous Knowledge could be helpful for Australia today? (Consider, for example, fire management, Indigenous knowledge of flora and fauna, management of native species, management of water resources.)



### Activity 3

## \* Assimilationism

A major theme in *Emu Runner* is the removal of Indigenous children from the care of their families. This is a long running story in this country’s history. Since the first arrival of Europeans, Indigenous communities have endured the removal of their children for a variety of destructive reasons. After the first waves of colonial invasion saw a decimation of First Nation communities through murder and disease, the policy of some colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned to one of *protectionism*. Protectionism included strategies devised to “preserve” remaining First Nations communities. This meant relocating communities or individuals to protected areas or European families to prevent their further harm from rapidly expanding colonisation. Groups from different clans/communities were herded together as if they were one homogenous Indigenous population. Usually, protection on such places meant First Peoples being required to relinquish their own spiritualities, cultures and languages and to adopt the language, cultural practices and Christian religion of the colonisers. Protectionism also included removing children to be raised in non-Indigenous settings.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Watch Episode 3 of *First Australians*, “Freedom in Our Lifetime” which explores the 19<sup>th</sup> century period of protectionism in Victoria and the case of the Coranderrk Mission.
- 2 What were some of the factors motivating colonial authorities to adopt protectionist policies towards First Nations Communities?
- 3 List some of the problems with the strategy of relocating First Peoples to missions and reserves.
- 4 What were the reasons for requiring First Peoples to adopt the language, cultures and beliefs of the invading colonial culture?
- 5 What did First Communities lose during the protectionist years?
- 6 How is the Coranderrk Mission an example of how First Peoples adapted to a very different culture?
- 7 The First Peoples of Coranderrk Mission assimilated willingly and successfully to the invading colonial culture, so why did Coranderrk Mission not succeed?





## Assimilationism

In the twentieth century the protectionist child-removal strategy became a nationally implemented policy known as *assimilationism*. Assimilationism was aimed at the “absorption” of First Nations’ individuals and cultures into a colonialist culture. The assimilation approach was outlined at the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities in 1937:

*“This Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin (sic)... lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end...The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the [Aboriginal] into a white citizen.”*

The Policy of Assimilation: Decisions of Commonwealth and State Ministers at the Native Welfare Conference (Canberra, January 26th and 27th, 1961): [aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue\\_resources/18801.pdf](http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/catalogue_resources/18801.pdf)

The policy of child removal saw state authorities remove children across Australia from their families, placing them in the care of state institutions and foster families. It remains unknown to the public how many Indigenous families were affected. Many people, taken at a young age, were never told of their real parents and so remain today unaware of their removal from their natural parents and uncertain of their Aboriginality.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the justifications given by Australian Commonwealth Governments for the removal of Aboriginal children?
- 2 When did the different states and territories adopt child removal policies?
- 3 Why might many non-Indigenous Australians have supported the policies?
- 4 Why were children not informed of their natural families and allowed to remain in contact with them?
- 5 List the detrimental impacts these policies had on First Nations people, communities and cultures.
- 6 What problems might remain today for Indigenous individuals, Indigenous communities and broader Australian society because of these policies?
- 7 Do you think Australians need to talk about this more?
- 8 Listen to Archie Roach’s song, “Took the Children Away” and discuss the lyrics (below).



*‘Took the Children Away’ - by Archie Roach.*

*This story’s right, this story’s true  
I would not tell lies to you  
Like the promises they did not keep  
And how they fenced us in like sheep.  
Said to us come take our hand  
Sent us off to mission land.  
Taught us to read, to write and pray  
Then they took the children away,  
Took the children away,  
The children away.  
Snatched from their mother’s breast  
Said this is for the best  
Took them away.  
The welfare and the policeman  
Said you’ve got to understand  
We’ll give them what you can’t give  
Teach them how to really live.  
Teach them how to live they said  
Humiliated them instead  
Taught them that and taught them this  
And others taught them prejudice.  
You took the children away*

*The children away  
Breaking their mothers heart  
Tearing us all apart  
Took them away  
One dark day on Framingham  
Come and didn’t give a damn  
My mother cried go get their dad  
He came running, fighting mad  
Mother’s tears were falling down  
Dad shaped up and stood his ground.  
He said ‘You touch my kids and you  
fight me’  
And they took us from our family.  
Took us away  
They took us away  
Snatched from our mother’s breast  
Said this was for the best  
Took us away.  
Told us what to do and say  
Told us all the white man’s ways  
Then they split us up again  
And gave us gifts to ease the pain  
Sent us off to foster homes  
As we grew up we felt alone*

*Cause we were acting white  
Yet feeling black  
One sweet day all the children came  
back  
The children come back  
The children come back  
Back where their hearts grow strong  
Back where they all belong  
The children came back  
Said the children come back  
The children come back  
Back where they understand  
Back to their mother’s land  
The children come back  
Back to their mother  
Back to their father  
Back to their sister  
Back to their brother  
Back to their people  
Back to their land  
All the children come back  
The children come back  
The children come back  
Yes I came back.*



## \* Bringing Them Home Report & the National Apology

In 1997 the *Bringing them Home Report* was released. The report was a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. Documenting the testimonies of survivors, the report provided evidence of the harrowing social and cultural impact that child removal has had on First Nations communities. The report found that Assimilationism coincided with the definition of *genocide* outlined in the Geneva Convention, specifically:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group... forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (Article 2 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948*)



The Report's conclusion was refuted by the then Prime Minister John Howard, who stated: "I didn't accept the conclusion of the *Bringing Them Home* report that genocide had been practised against the Indigenous people." (*Guardian*, Mon 22 Sep 2014) John Howard was asked to offer a formal apology for the removal of children, but he argued that it was not his government's responsibility to apologise for the decisions of past governments.

In February of 2008, in his first act of Parliament as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd issued a National Apology to survivors of the Stolen Generation. The following is a transcript of his address:

*Kevin Rudd - 13 February, 2008*

*Mr Speaker, I move:*

*That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.*

*We reflect on their past mistreatment.*

*We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations - this blemished chapter in our nation's history.*

*The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.*

*We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.*

*We apologise especially for the removal*

*of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.*

*For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.*

*To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.*

*And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.*

*We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.*

*For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.*

*We today take this first step by*

*acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.*

*A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.*

*A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.*

*A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.*

*A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.*

*A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.*

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Why does Kevin Rudd begin his apology to the Stolen Generations with the words: "We honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history."
- 2 What is meant by *righting the wrongs of the past* and how does Kevin Rudd try to do this?
- 3 Why does Kevin Rudd apologise to the Stolen Generations' "descendants and for their families left behind"?
- 4 What is meant by "the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture"?
- 5 List and discuss the aspects of the "future" which Kevin Rudd refers to. What are some of the essential things for this future?





worker create more problems than they solve -and how Aboriginality is still being used as a reason to remove children from their families.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the reasons behind Heidi's decision to remove Gem from Jay Jay's care?
- 2 In what ways are Heidi's and Stan's perceptions of Jay Jay's parenting based on their own prejudice?
- 3 What reason does Heidi give when Gem asks her why she has come to work in Brewarrina?
- 4 Gem asks Heidi, "Can't you make a difference back in Sydney?" What do you think she means by this?
- 5 What support or assistance could have been offered to Jay Jay and Gem instead of removing her?
- 6 How is Gem's cultural identity a factor in Heidi's decision to remove her? What does Heidi not understand of Gem's culture?

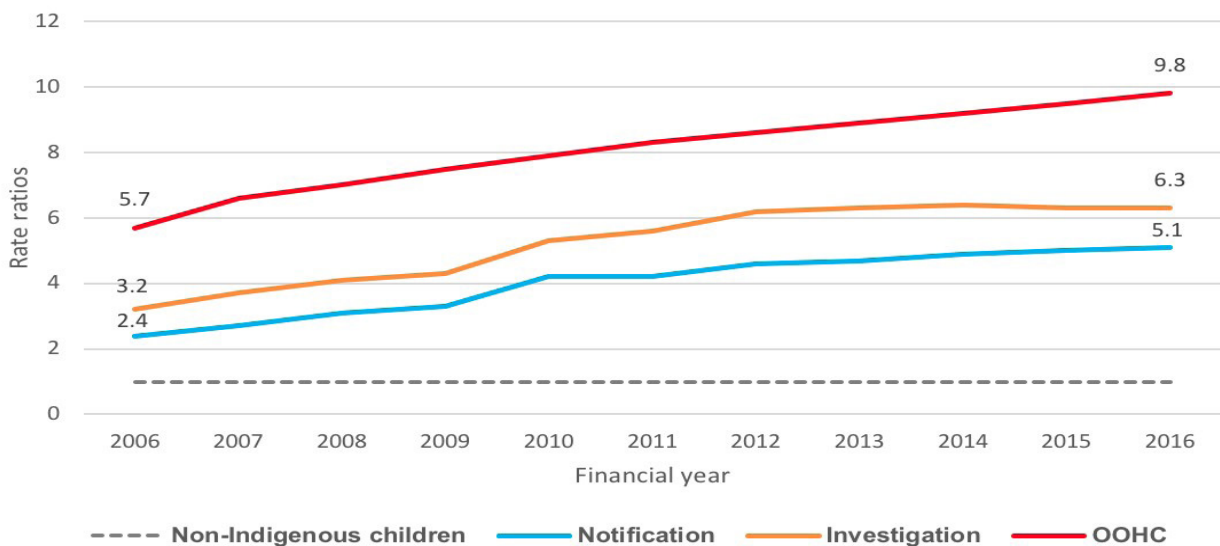
[aifs.gov.au/cfca/2018/05/07/growing-over-representation-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children-care](https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2018/05/07/growing-over-representation-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children-care)

## \* Current Statistics

Sorry means you don't do it again. Unfortunately, the years after the National Apology have seen an *increase* in the numbers of Indigenous children being removed by the state from the care of their families. Between 2007 and 2016 the numbers of children in out of home care increased from approximately 9000 to approximately 17,000. The recent documentary *After the Apology* documents this phenomenon - exploring the reasons for child removals and the arguments against it.

In *Emu Runner*, social worker Heidi and policeman Stan presume problems in Gem's situation after the death of her mother. As Gem begins to disengage from school and engage in antisocial activities, they begin to question father Jay Jay's fitness to be Gem's parent. Instead of offering support for Jay Jay, Heidi makes the decision to remove Gem from his care.

*Emu Runner* challenges us to consider how culture and judgements are related; how social worker Heidi's cultural ignorance and naive motivations becoming a social







For non-Indigenous Australians, one way to overcome racism is to question the very idea of race. Where did the idea of “race” come from? How has it been used by powerful groups to denigrate other human communities? What kinds of associations have been made in the past between a person’s supposed “race” and other aspects of their identity? Given what we know of human psychology and the complexities of culture, what use can a concept like “race” be in forming an accurate understanding of other people?

#### Activity 4

## \* Overcoming Racism

The concept of “race” is a cultural or social construct. It is an “idea” rather than a “fact”. Although differences exist between people, ethnicities and cultures, the idea of race is a cultural rather than a scientific concept. The meaning of “race” has been built up within the terms of a specific culture. And this means that “race” has been applied in different contexts in different ways, to have different meanings.

In Australia the concept of race has been applied to the diverse First Nations and First Peoples of this continent. Different peoples with different cultures and identities have been homogenised and labelled by non-Indigenous colonisers as a singular “Aboriginal” or “Indigenous” group. Frequently this racial concept has been used by colonial governments and cultures to make value judgements, form policies and to justify racist attitudes and racist violence against First Nations Peoples.

Throughout their proud history, First Nations activists like William Cooper, Charles Perkins, Cathy Freeman and Adam Goodes have dared to challenge not only the racism of colonial Australia, but also the very idea of race. One way they have done this is to insist on the equality of Aboriginal Australians with all other Australians. Another way has been to emphasise their unique cultural identity as a member of a sovereign First Nation, clan and language group.

#### QUESTIONS

- 1 What does it mean to say that “race” is a cultural construct?
- 2 What forms of racism have existed in Australia in the past?
- 3 What forms does racism take in Australian society today?
- 4 How is racism a form of violence against a person/ community?
- 5 How does racism affect a person’s human rights?
- 6 How can a better knowledge of Indigenous history help to challenge racism?
- 7 How can we be more aware of the racism that other people experience?
- 8 What can we do to challenge racist attitudes (from friends, family, colleagues, peers, other citizens)?
- 9 What would you say to someone who thought that racism does not exist in Australia anymore?





## SOME FURTHER LINKS

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) [aiatsis.gov.au](http://aiatsis.gov.au)

Closing the Gap website outlining the many different areas of the government led initiative. [closingthegap.pmc.gov.au](http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au)

Lowitja Institute - Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health Research [www.lowitja.org.au](http://www.lowitja.org.au)

Bringing the Home Report (1997) – Report of the National enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997)

AIATSIS – Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples. [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997)

Australian Human Rights Commission – Social Determinants and the health of Indigenous peoples in Australia - a human rights based approach. [www.humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/social-determinants-and-health-indigenous-peoples-australia-human-rights-based](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/social-determinants-and-health-indigenous-peoples-australia-human-rights-based)

*On Identity* - Stan Grant: <https://www.mup.com.au/books/>

Creative Spirits is an independent website covering a wide range of Aboriginal cultural, social and political issues. [www.creativespirits.info](http://www.creativespirits.info)

The Cape York Partnership - outlining the initiatives in social and education reform in the Cape York region. [www.capeyorkpartnership.org.au](http://www.capeyorkpartnership.org.au)

The Central Land Council (Northern Territory) [www.clc.org.au](http://www.clc.org.au)

Reconciliation Australia [www.reconciliation.org.au](http://www.reconciliation.org.au)

The Aurora Project – for more information on initiatives in Indigenous education. [www.auroraproject.com.au](http://www.auroraproject.com.au)

Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association: [caama.com.au/](http://caama.com.au/)

Referendum Council: [www.referendumcouncil.org.au](http://www.referendumcouncil.org.au)

United Nations UNDRIP: [www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Australian Curriculum: [www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2018/11/05/experts-say-indigenous-knowledge-will-enrich-science-education](http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2018/11/05/experts-say-indigenous-knowledge-will-enrich-science-education)

Human Rights - No Place for Racism: [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/no-place-racism](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/no-place-racism)



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For more information on *Emu Runner* visit the film's website: [www.emurunnerfilm.com](http://www.emurunnerfilm.com)