UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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**ABOUT THE
E-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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Volume 4, Issue 1
Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

Guest Editors
Marnie O'Bryan
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THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

COVER ART
Majority Rule
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist
and Andrew Baker
Art Dealer, Brisbane*

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan
Guest Editors

Accompanying Piece
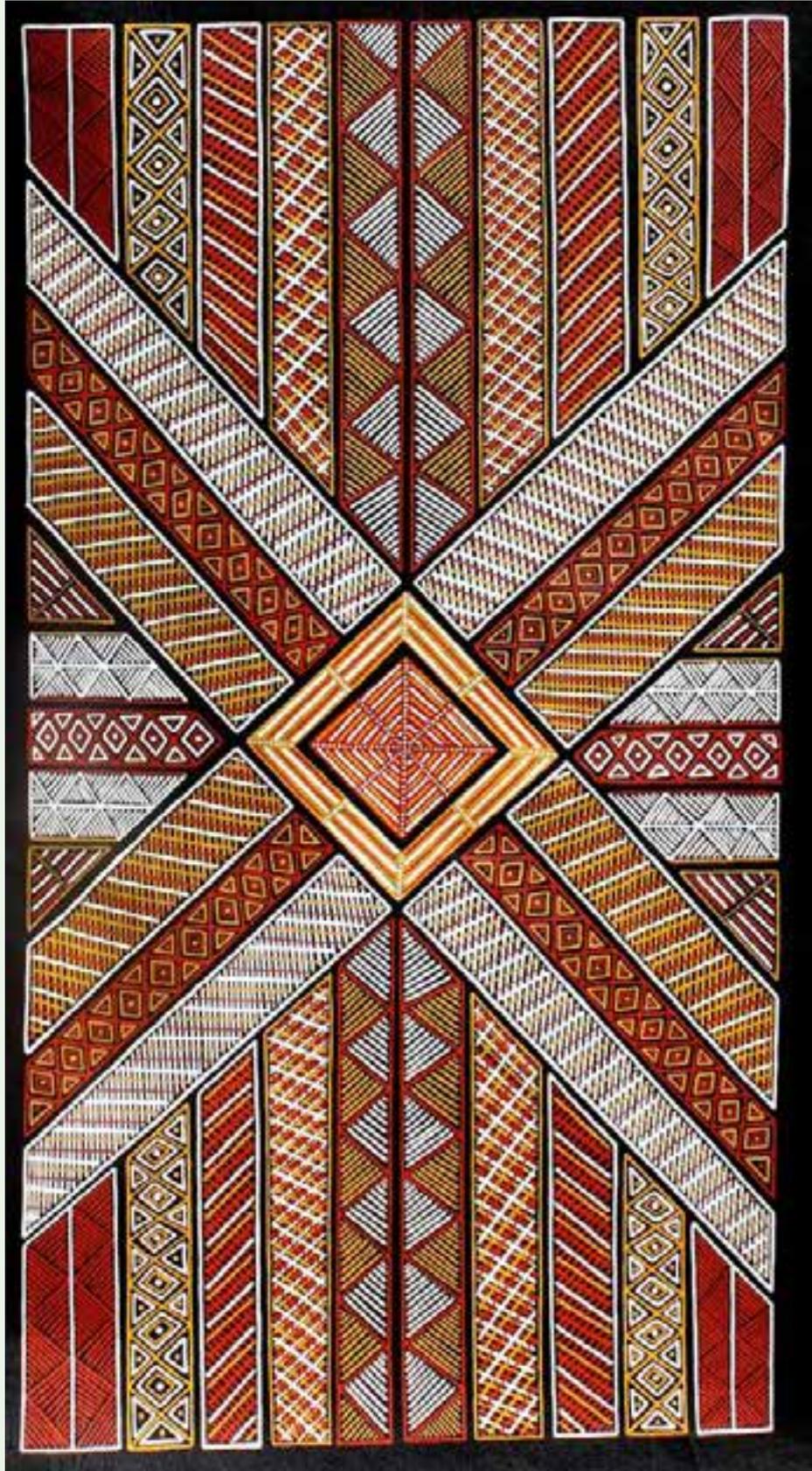
Tiwi Design
2014, acrylic on canvas
Dianne Tictac Moore

Courtesy of the Artist

Making school meaningful
for Indigenous learners

Ailsa Bride MacFie

Assistant Principal – Kormilda College, Darwin, NT

ABSTRACT

This article aims to identify strategies for making education more positive, engaging and meaningful for remote Indigenous learners. It focuses firstly on the interpersonal realm and contends that three primary factors are crucial to achieving these aims: establishment of strong teacher-student and teacher-family relationships, a high degree of emotional support for students, and an understanding of communities' aspirations for their young people. This is followed by an examination of the impact of environmental and organisational factors on Indigenous learning outcomes, with arguments made for the importance of culturally aware classroom environments and greater flexibility of course delivery. The third section of the article examines pedagogy and curriculum, arguing that a truly intercultural education system is required in order to engage Indigenous learners, and that to achieve this the dominant cultural group and its educators must be prepared to not only learn about Indigenous epistemology and ontology but also question their own.

While politicians, policy-makers, academics and educators outline a complex - and sometimes contradictory - array of concerns and solutions relating to Indigenous education, they agree that the experience of schooling is often a negative one for Indigenous students. This article takes as its focus the question of what can be done to provide educational experiences for Aboriginal learners which they find positive, engaging and meaningful. It will begin with a brief personal context statement, including a justification for including personal material in an academic context. It will then outline the specific type of Indigenous learners and learning environment upon which this paper will focus, before moving into the main arguments. The first section explores the interpersonal realm, contending that strong teacher-student and teacher-family relationships, a high degree of emotional support for students, and an understanding of communities' aspirations for their young people are three critical factors in creating positive educational experiences. The second section will then look at environmental and organisational factors, arguing for the importance of culturally aware classroom environments and greater flexibility of course delivery. The final section of the paper will explore pedagogy and curriculum, putting forward the need for more meaningful curriculum and an intercultural education system, and arguing that to achieve this there must be greater understanding by those of the dominant Australian culture of both Indigenous *and* their own epistemologies and ontologies.

It is common practice for Indigenous academics to begin articles with a personal statement in order to establish their family, clan and cultural connections and to put their research in context. This practice is also valuable for non-Indigenous scholars, for although Western epistemologies aspire towards validity and objectivity, and attempt to create them by removing evidence of the author from within academic writing, the reality is that one's interests, life experiences and cultural background shape the path which research takes (Christie 1991; Rigney 2001). Therefore, this piece will begin with a personal statement. My name is Ailsa MacFie and I am the eldest of three children born to English and Tasmanian parents. Growing up in Hobart I had little contact with Indigenous Australians until I attended the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land several years ago. I felt horrified by my own ignorance, which led to me leaving my mainstream Melbourne school for a remote school in the Northern Territory. I subsequently took a permanent position at a school in Darwin which educates both 'mainstream' students from Darwin and Indigenous

students from remote communities who board at the school. I am teaching a range of 'low literacy' and 'modified mainstream' English classes, all of which contain only Indigenous students. During my time in the Northern Territory I have been studying a Graduate Certificate of Indigenous Education through Charles Darwin University, which has strongly informed my teaching practice, beliefs regarding education and sense of my own Australian identity.

The cohort and learning environment upon which this paper will focus is high-school aged Indigenous learners (twelve to eighteen years old) from remote communities in the Northern Territory who attend boarding school in Darwin. This specific group has been chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, Indigenous people around Australia differ in terms of their life experiences, cultural practices and worldview, which in turn are often influenced by geographical location and degree of remoteness from urban centres. It is more appropriate to focus on a specific group than make generalisations about all Indigenous students. Secondly, many of the arguments and strategies discussed in this paper have been influenced by my experiences of teaching in this learning context, and hence they may not be as applicable to Indigenous students in other contexts. Having said this, the latter section of this paper goes on to argue for wide-reaching changes to Australia's curriculum and education system which would influence a broader group of Indigenous learners and, indeed, non-Indigenous students. The paper will turn now to exploring ways in which the educational experience can be made more positive, engaging and meaningful for Indigenous learners.

A key factor in engaging Indigenous learners is building meaningful relationships with students and their families. This is valuable in any educational setting but is particularly important in Indigenous contexts, given the strong emphasis which Indigenous cultures place on kinship and relationships, and should be an immediate priority for any teacher of Indigenous students (Dockery 2009; Fasoli & Ford 2001). While many teachers complain of feeling pressured by time constraints to move straight into 'content' teaching at the start of the school year, it is vital they take the time to get to know their Indigenous students and learn about their families, home community, the lands they are from and their languages (Herbert 2006; Byrne & Munns 2012). Contact with remote parents is harder in a boarding environment, but creative use of SMS messages, facebook or calls to a community pay phone can help to achieve this. Teachers are more likely to build firm bonds with students if they are willing to share information about themselves in return; bringing family photos and sharing stories can be useful first steps. Shared experiences provide a strong foundation for good relationships (Clarke 2000); attending students' football matches or visiting a boarding house for dinner can lead to a better working relationship in the classroom. Kindness and friendly body language also help establish positive relationships, particularly in multi-lingual classrooms where verbal language might not be fully understood (Wolfgang 2001). This investment in relationships is likely to engage students through building trust and respect, and positioning the teacher within the web of significant carers in the young person's life (Kitson & Bowes 2010). It also helps the teacher to understand the context from which the student comes and tailor their teaching accordingly (Herbert 2006; Gower & Byrne 2012).

Provision of significant emotional support is crucial to creating a positive educational experience for Indigenous students. Firstly, students are likely to need

support in coping with alienation and low self-esteem. Indigenous students have the dual pressure of learning and existing in two worlds (Plevitz 2007). They may feel alienated and suffer from lowered self-esteem in a school environment where many of the language, knowledge and behavioural expectations are foreign and their particular skills and knowledge are undervalued or not counted towards academic success (Dockery 2009; Malin 2003). This is particularly the case in a boarding school environment, where students are unable to return to the safety of familiar environments and people outside school hours. This sense of alienation and cultural vulnerability may be exacerbated by their parents' and grandparents' own negative experiences of schooling (Plevitz 2007). Praise and positive reinforcement are crucial to combatting low confidence and self-esteem. Teachers should bear in mind, though, that students' cultures may have different norms to the teacher's own culture regarding drawing attention to individuals and how to positively reinforce behaviour (Farmer & Fasoli 2010; Malin, Campbell & Aguis 1996). Greater inclusion of Indigenous content in the curriculum and strong, supportive relationships (topics discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this paper) are vital to preventing alienation and disengagement. Secondly, students may need support in coping with grief and trauma. Given the increased mortality rates in the Indigenous population and the highly interconnected nature of Indigenous families, Indigenous children are more likely to experience regular loss that non-Indigenous students (Australian Indigenous Healthinfonet 2002). The rippling impact of racist government policies and the experiences of the Stolen Generations have also created intergenerational trauma (Trudgen, 2000; Williams-Mozley 2012). Thirdly, teachers should also be aware that Indigenous students who appear to be coping and succeeding are still likely to require emotional support. The very skills and behaviours which define them as successful in the dominant culture's institutions may cause them to be ostracised from their family, peers and community. An Indigenous colleague who chose to attend university and then remain in Melbourne for employment rather than return to his remote community described his family mocking his qualifications and labelling him a 'coconut': black on the outside but white on the inside. He rarely returns to his community now due to the hurt and confusion such treatment causes, leaving him culturally bereft and the community robbed of his cross-cultural capital. School staff, particularly those giving enrollment and careers advice, must bear in mind that Western notions of success and achievement may not have the same meaning in their students' lives.

Understanding the context and communities from which students come and tailoring education accordingly is also important. Too often, education and training fails to suit the realities of community life to which students are returning, nor the aims and aspirations of the community (Kral & Falk 2004). A pertinent example of this was recounted to me by a colleague whose school enrolled a class of Indigenous students, including seven students from the same community, into a VET Sport and Recreation course. Consultation by the school's course administrators would have revealed that all seven students wish to return to their community after completing school, and research into the community would have shown that employment opportunities for Sport and Recreation officers are very limited, whereas there are significant employment opportunities and skill shortages in the areas of hospitality, forestry, mechanics, childcare and health care. While student engagement and interest is certainly important, and was evidently the main factor in the enrolment decision, research suggests that Indigenous people may be more likely to pursue

and complete education which is seen to be beneficial for the whole community (Dockery 2009). Further, perceptions particularly in remote communities, that there is little correlation between education and real employment are a key factor in poor educational outcomes (Mellor & Corrigan 2004). While there is increasing awareness (or at least rhetoric) within remote schools about the importance of community consultation and partnerships (Clarke 2000; Earles 2011; MCEECDYA 2010; What Works 2012), there is less communication between urban boarding schools and the families of their remote students regarding what the community wants the school's role to be.

Educators can engage Indigenous learners by creating a school environment which accommodates and respects cultural differences in behaviour and communication styles. In terms of behaviour, teachers should be aware that Indigenous and non-Indigenous parenting may prioritise different traits. For example, Indigenous children are typically encouraged to be independent and allowed to make decisions earlier than non-Indigenous children (Malin, Campbell & Aguis 1996). Having familiar classroom routines which do not require lengthy instructions, and providing choices (such as a choice of topics, reading books, or order in which to complete activities) are two tactics which can reduce students' frustration by providing some independence. Such flexibility also helps to prevent punctual, engaged students from being held back by others. Teachers should also bear in mind that behaviour they consider desirable is culturally defined rather than inherent; while non-Indigenous students will generally receive a consistent message between school/childcare and home about 'correct' behaviours, Indigenous students may feel confused about conflicting messages (Farmer & Fasoli 2010; Fasoli & Ford 2001). This is also the case in terms of communication. For example, direct questioning tends to be avoided in Indigenous speech, seen as overbearing and rude, and yet in mainstream classrooms students are bombarded with questions and may be deemed unintelligent or rude if they do not respond immediately (DET 2007; Zijlstra 2012). Similarly, direct eye contact can seem threatening or disrespectful in some cultures, yet is considered a valuable sign of confidence and trustworthiness in non-Indigenous Australian contexts (Wolfgang 2001). Students are more likely to engage in learning which is not confrontational or confusing to them, and which allows them to communicate their ideas in ways they feel comfortable with. Finally, teachers should also try to see the positive rather than negative sides of cultural differences. For example, while Indigenous cultures' low emphasis on individual possessions may be frustrating when it manifests itself as mislaid workbooks, the positive side is students' willingness to cooperate and share with one another (Dockery 2009).

Greater flexibility regarding course delivery and better accommodation of Indigenous students' absences and transience will also improve their engagement and achievement. Many Indigenous students miss periods of schooling for reasons outside their control related to higher rates of health problems and mortality in Indigenous populations, remoteness and associated travel difficulties, cultural obligations such as ceremonies and funerals, and family-related transience (Plevitz 2007). The school system discriminates against such absence in two main ways: firstly, the syllabus is designed such that concepts build in a chain and if students miss one 'link' it is difficult to learn subsequent material. Secondly, assessment procedures, particularly in senior years, are such that students can only pass if

they have completed all areas and therefore receive no credit for the parts they have completed (Plevitz 2007). Furthermore, cultural differences relating to trust invested in schools and sense of entitlement mean that Indigenous parents are less likely than parents from the dominant culture to pressure schools to support their students (Lea et al. 2011). For example, in the school context described above, a non-Indigenous year 8 student's three-day absence was followed by a parent email asking that teachers help him catch up on work and provide modified assessment tasks. There was no such parental pressure when a year 11 Indigenous student was called home to attend a smoking ceremony and could not return for two weeks due to travel complications. This illustrates how it is even more important that teachers and the school system itself take responsibility for ensuring Indigenous students are adequately supported. Creating more flexible modes of syllabus delivery, capitalising on Indigenous students' strong sense of group responsibility to allow more peer-to-peer teaching, more actively sharing assessment results and student records across schools (such that a student could gain credit for previous work completed) would help to engage Indigenous students by preventing them returning to unfamiliar work, failing unfairly or repeating subjects unnecessarily.

The immediate goal for teachers in this setting is to make existing curriculum more meaningful in terms of content, delivery and assessment. While teachers may feel constrained by curriculum regulations, there is still much they can do to make it more accessible for Indigenous learners. Students are more likely to be engaged and willing to continue learning if their prior knowledge is valued and new learning is connected to their existing knowledge and skills (Nakata 2002; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009). An important strategy is to make links between what is being learned and students' own experiences and background (Herbert 2006). For example, beginning a potentially abstract unit on 'governments and elections' with a visit to Darwin's Parliament House and a meeting with a local Indigenous politician (who was related to some class-members) helped to successfully engage students in subsequent material about how bills are presented in parliament and how elections work. Another useful approach is to start with familiar content before moving to new material, which helps to 'hook' students' interest and provide context for new knowledge (Clarke 2000). A Geography teacher colleague began a unit on mapping by having students map their own communities utilising images from Google Earth instead of completing the preliminary activities in the textbook which all involved maps of city streets. Not only were students more engaged, but it helped the teacher to establish which clan and language groups his students were from and thus strengthen his relationships with them. Teachers should be particularly aware of modes of assessment which will best suit Indigenous students. For example, a Year 11 Aboriginal Studies student (who was herself Indigenous) recently submitted a paper on reconciliation which could barely pass due to poor written literacy skills. However, adjustments to the assessment mode led to a 'B' grade because her oral communication skills were far stronger and allowed her to adequately communicate her analysis and evidence. While teachers tend to favour written assignments, the study designs often allow for at least 50% of assessments to be oral or multimodal, which strongly improves Indigenous students' opportunity to clearly communicate their understanding of content (SACE 2013). Tailoring assessment to avoid unfair penalties due to language proficiency or cultural differences is critical for Indigenous learners' success and equity (Fleet & Kitson 2009; Guenther 2012).

The next step is to more adequately incorporate Indigenous knowledge, epistemologies and ontologies into the dominant education system. While the Australian Curriculum's references to Indigenous perspectives are heartening (ACARA 2011), what is needed is not just addendums but for the dominant system to be challenged (Nakata 2011). This would mean large-scale epistemological and ontological changes: questioning Western principles of 'validity' and 'reliability', challenging dominant understandings of 'history' and 'stories', and disputing the primacy of economic growth above ecological values (Christie 1991; Kanu 2011; Ober 2009; Rigney 2001). It would see curriculum and assessment adjusted to acknowledge that the current system "privileges a positivist and reductive reality, emphasizing mechanistic and compartmentalized ways of thinking" (Morgan 2003, p. 398) which disadvantages Indigenous learners whose epistemological approach values knowledge in context and within an interconnected web of understanding (Christie 1991; Kanu 2011; Yunkaporta 2010). It would require changes to research methods, assessment styles, classroom activities and curriculum content to avoid Indigenous students being disadvantaged by their differences in ways of learning, ways of seeing the world, communication styles and interpersonal relationships (Fleet and Kitson 2009; McLoughlin and Oliver 2000; Yunkaporta 2010). Changes to the structure of the education system and the way schools run are also needed; the current hierarchical model involving power-structures with little basis in personal relationships is alienating for many Indigenous students (Plevitz 2007). There are many reasons why such changes would be beneficial. Firstly, while locally adapted curriculum and 'both ways learning' have proved very beneficial for Indigenous learners in remote schools (see, for example, Ober 2009 and Tamisari & Milmilany 2003), these models are not as applicable in urban settings separate from community or for a cohort from a range of different Indigenous cultures, as is the case in a boarding school environment. Secondly, given that the goal of urban boarding schools is for Indigenous students to complete 'mainstream' subjects and for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to attend classes together, changes to the mainstream curriculum to make it more inclusive are preferable to having separate, 'watered-down' courses for Indigenous students (Trounson 2011). Thirdly, it is important that Indigenous students have an education which gives the skills to navigate the mainstream culture and be able to go between different cultural domains (Hill et al. 2001; Kitson and Bowes 2010; McLoughlin and Oliver 2000). Fourthly, the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and ontology would increase Indigenous students' interest in schooling and ability to succeed (Nakata 2007; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009).

Ultimately, the key to improving the educational experiences of Indigenous students is ensuring that Australia's educators, curriculum developers and education policy-makers - who are predominantly from the dominant culture - have a better understanding of both Indigenous ontologies and their own ontologies. Cultural awareness training and education about Indigenous knowledge is part of this, and should be mandatory for all educators (Kitson and Bowes 2010). Teachers of Indigenous students in particular need support in understanding the different world-views, life experiences and knowledge which their students bring to the classroom, but all Australian educators would benefit from this understanding. They also need support and examples of what pedagogy influenced by Indigenous epistemologies could look like in practice (Biermann & Townsend-Cross 2008). However, if we are to go beyond tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous content into the curriculum and create a meaningful, culturally inclusive education system for Australia, dominant-cultured

educators go beyond seeking to understanding the 'other' and seek to understand themselves and their own ontologies, too (Gallavan 2005; Kessaris 2006; Kincheloe 2006; Rose 2012). For it is only by doing this - by becoming "visible as a subject and not invisible as the naturalised dominant white Australian" (Biermann & Townsend-Cross 2008, p. 151) - that they can discover the power imbalance in the current system and recognise the 'whiteness' of the education system's content, structures and values (Kessaris 2006). Steps are being taken in this direction: Friere's work has for decades encouraged greater valuing of indigenous knowledges, 'whiteness studies' has developed as an academic field and approaches such as Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy and Indigenist Research are being applied in academia (Biermann & Townsend-Cross 2008; Choy & Woodlock 2007; Friere 1993; Walter, Taylor & Habibis 2011). However, it is only when such realisation occurs on a widespread scale that meaningful change to the education system will come.

As I come to the end of this paper, I realise that the order in which the arguments unfold replicates the path my own learning journey has taken over the past two years. The paper begins by arguing that developing strong relationships with students and their families, providing a high degree of emotional support for students, and understanding students' communities and context are critical to providing a positive experience of schooling for Indigenous students. As a teacher starting out in Indigenous education, these were the first strategies I utilised. They were reassuring in that, while I was confronted by realising how little I knew about Indigenous cultures and families, they were largely compatible with my existing notions of the role of the teacher. Also, they could be achieved at an individual teacher level and did not require me to challenge colleagues or the dominant education system. The middle section of the paper argues that creating a school environment sensitive to cultural differences in behaviour and communication and providing flexibility regarding course delivery are also important factors in engaging Indigenous learners. This reflects the next step I took on my learning journey: realising that being a friendly, supportive teacher was not enough, and that I needed to question my own assumptions, change my behaviours and challenge the school's practices in order to provide a meaningful educational experience for my students. The final section of the paper argues that changes to curriculum and pedagogy – at both a school and nationwide level – are the key to genuinely improving Indigenous education, and that this can only be achieved by 'mainstream' Australia having a better understanding of both Indigenous and dominant Australian cultures' ontologies and epistemologies. As an Australian from the dominant culture whose sense of identity and success is strongly influenced by my experience of the mainstream education system, coming to believe in these arguments has been confronting for me. In fact, it continues to be challenging. However, I firmly believe that such changes will not only benefit Indigenous learners from all backgrounds but will through their influence on all Australian students, be the path to a reconciled and equal Australia.

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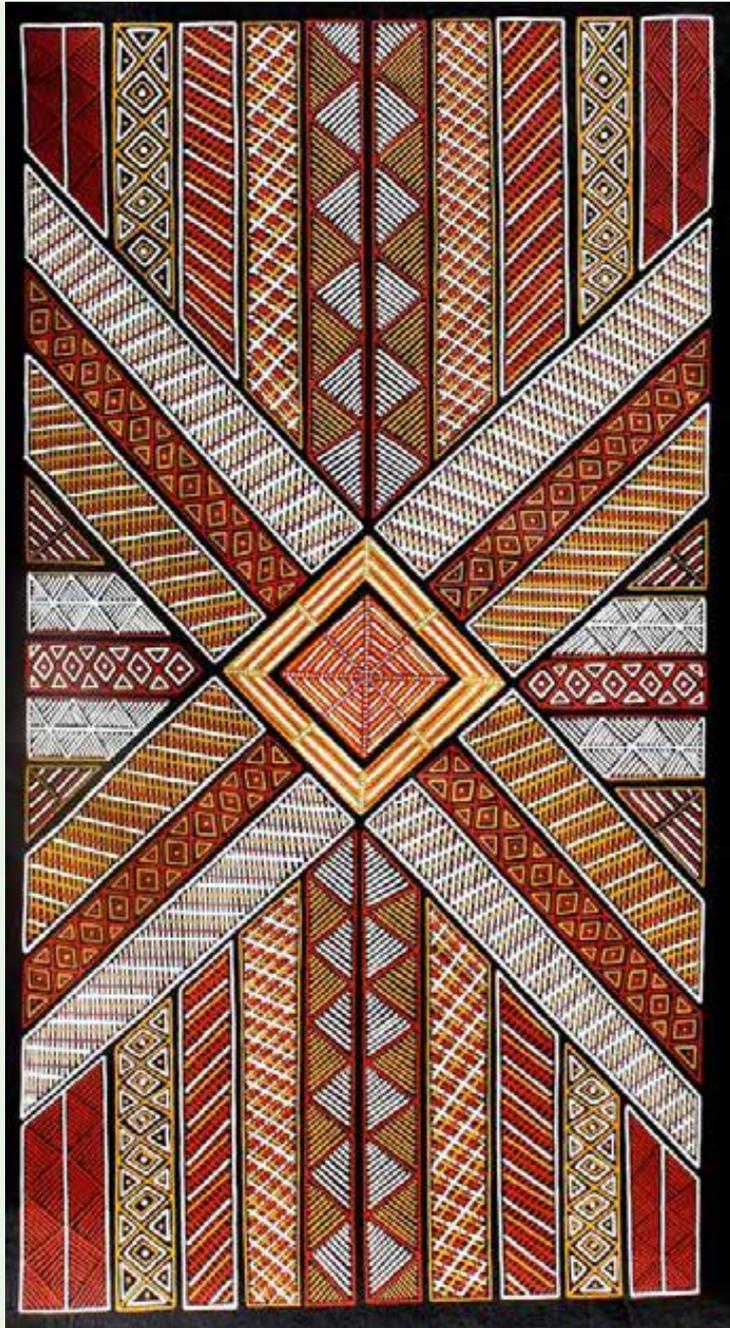radionational/programs/linguafranca/aboriginal-english/3790818>.

COUNTRY

Purrumpunarli.

SKIN

Warntaringuwi (sun)

DANCE

Yirrikapayi (crocodile)

ARTIST STATEMENT

I live in the Tiwi College community at Pickertaramoor, Melville Island, NT. I work at the college as a T.A., teacher assistant, with the senior girls. As a connection to my Tiwi Culture I enjoy painting traditional designs that I have learnt from my big sister Marlene Brooks. My style of painting is typical of Tiwi designs, with strong geometric patterns, painted in earth colours of ochres, white, and charcoal blacks.

Both my Grandparents were artists and I often think of them when I paint. My Aminayi (grandpa), Ali Miller, made ceremony poles, and my Muningo (nanna), Polly Miller, made traditional Tunga bark baskets.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

2011-2014 Tiwi College Assistant Teacher.

COMMISSIONS

2014-Macquarie Bank corporate cricket bat commission (10 bats)

Gifted-3 cricket bats painted in Pink Tiwi design for Glen McGrath Foundation fundraiser.

COLLECTIONS

Private collections Australia and overseas.

Majority Rule
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist
and Andrew Baker
Art Dealer, Brisbane*

Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, Through My Eyes (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenes. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history-in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, Broken Dreams and Undiscovered, together under the title of Uninhabited. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real

and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series Civilised (2012) was selected to promote The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, Majority Rule (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international 19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, Michael Cook [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

MAJORITY RULE– DESCRIPTION

Majority Rule is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenes are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality—yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, "The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. 'Indigenous' is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality."

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, "I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like 'natives' and 'discovery of Australia'. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years."

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting. The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture—the bowler hat in Majority Rules (Memorial) revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, A Clockwork Orange, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In Majority Rule Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. "The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn't. Then there is racism that arises as a result."

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. Majority Rule (Bridge) is suggestive of Raphael's School of Athens (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community—the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, Majority Rule (Tunnel), records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in Majority Rule (Memorial).

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside

the building or on the verandah. (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in Majority Rule (Parliament) evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In Majority Rule (Bus), a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled WALKABOUT, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW, FEBRUARY 2014