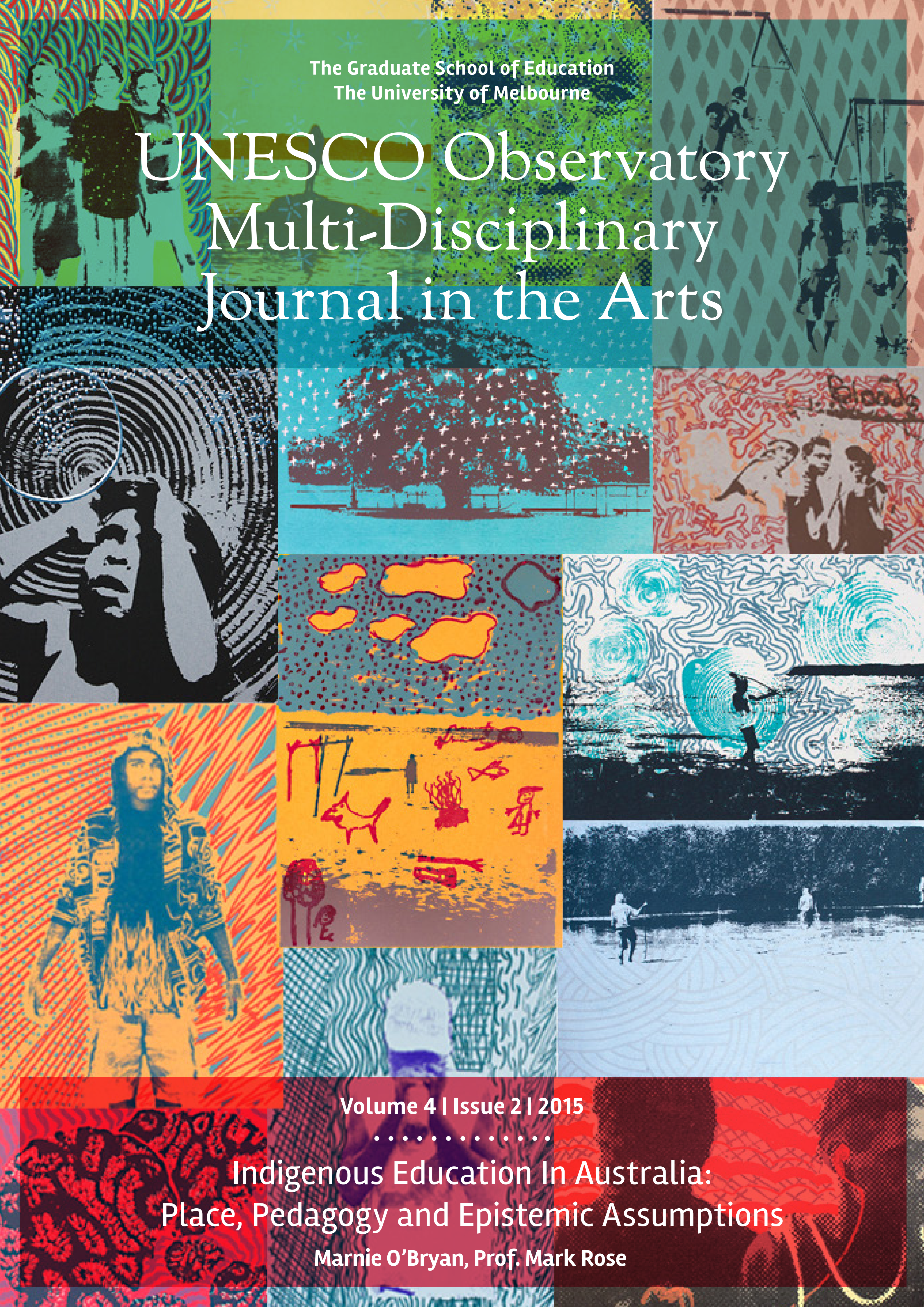

The Graduate School of Education
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UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

Volume 4 | Issue 2 | 2015

Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

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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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

Yirrkala Collage
Various Artists,
Yirrkala Art Centre

Courtesy of the artists and Yirrkala Art Centre

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.

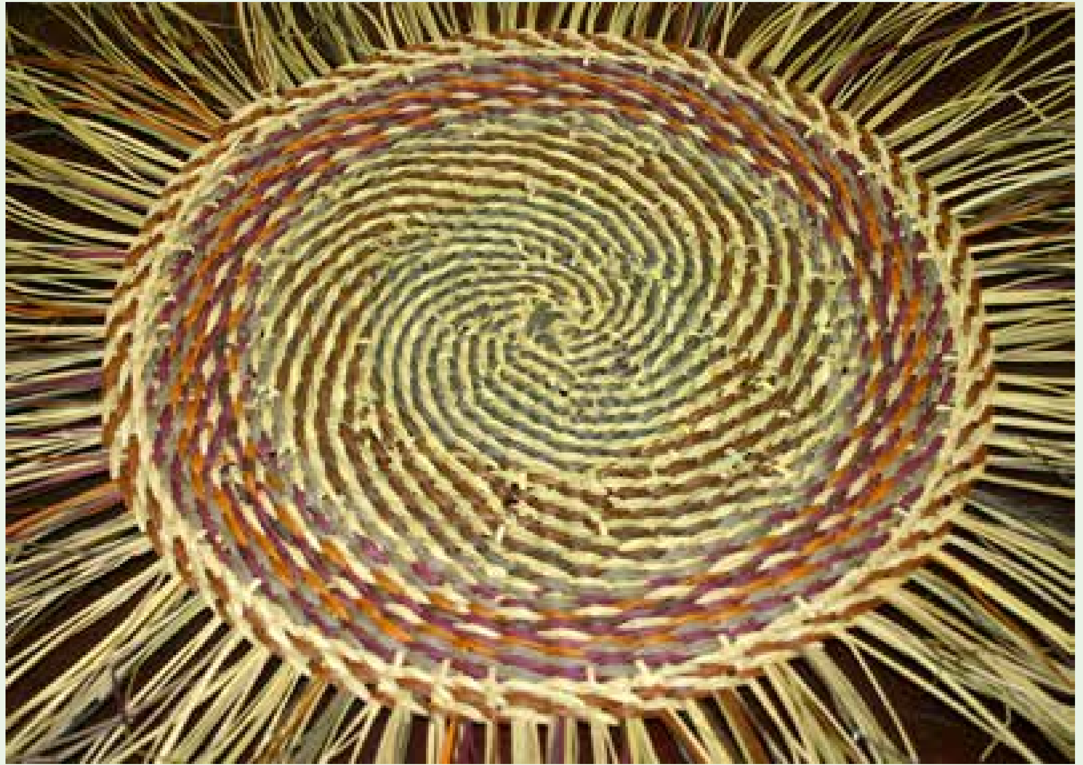
The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, 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

Namumarmuokawwa:
life-health

Heleana Wauchope-Gulwa
Charles Darwin University



This mat was woven by my mother, Molly Yarrgnu, who was also a teacher for many years (1978 to 2000) on Croker Island. Her clan is Gudwala/Girabuka and she speaks Gunwinggu. Molly is a semi-retired teacher and helps to support Indigenous education in communities and townships throughout the Northern Territory. To make this mat Molly went out with her mothers, aunties and children to collect pandanus leaves. Molly stripped the prickly edges off each leaf and then stripped each of her leaves into fibres. She tied these fibres into bundles and hung them up to dry. Then she used crushed lily bulbs, tree roots, fruits from the forest, leaves, bark and ash to dye the dried fibres into 24 different colours: yellow, red, dark red, brown, black, pink, purple, dark purple, olive, white, grey, copper, old gold, cream, maroon, AVred, raspberry, peridot, ash, smoke, cappuccino, latte and orange.

Molly's ideas for the colours of mats come from the ocean floor. The shells give the clan groups the rights to use the colours in the mat as it comes from the ocean girls. They are its own family tree. She wove these fibres together to make her own woven mat of coloured circles. She continues to teach her daughters and grandchildren about walking on country and weaving mats and baskets.

My life has been like this mat. It is woven together by threads in two worlds. As a teacher I am able to weave my threads of these two worlds together. I can weave the threads connected to my country and culture, but I can also weave my life of learning English, studying and becoming a teacher with my knowledge of country. Knowledge gives me the power to learn and teach my family and others.

My interest in education comes down through my mother. Learning is a tool to help us grow into the world's society- to understand what is happing and to make differences. Both mum and I can understand what we need to help others communicate with both societies, by doing this each person can learn how we make education a resources for better outcomes. We can weave both worlds and both ways together.

I am a student teacher with Charles Darwin University, completing my final placements in Darwin. I grew up at Murganella Rangers station in Cobourg National park. I come from western Arnhem Land, (Barrah) Junction Bay - (Gubunbungwu). I like to see myself as an Education Leader for Indigenous students who are able to learn about literacy, numeracy and their mother languages. If you struggled to understand what I wrote here, then you have experienced the position of our students in many remote Aboriginal communities. My role is to ensure that my students understand that they will find themselves in many situations where they do not understand, but it is their job to find out and work out what they need to have a balanced life journey. The teacher's role is to support students to create their own pathway, drawing on home and school experiences.

Heleana Wauchope Gulwa

NAMUMARMUOKAWWA: LIFE–HEALTH

The meaning of Namumarmuokawwa has many forms in our culture. It has elements in many different areas – it's about life and our health through mother-nature, it's about humans, animals, country, ocean, shapes, sizes, colours, rivers, creeks, stones, rocks, wood, hills, holes, stars, wind, rain, sand, blue sky, red sky, black sky, the moon, sun and medicine. It's about love, it's about migration, it's about language, it's about learning, it's about food, it's about flora and fauna, it's about seasons. It's about skin group systems, it's about artwork, and it's about tools. It's about marriage, and marriage systems, manhood, womanhood. It's about stress, happiness, feeling, testing, love; new and old things. It's about governing, law, balance, and belief: that word is about life.

I come from Arnhem Land, where the seasons change into six different systems. (Figure 1) I'm from the western (Barrah) region – my mother's country. My traditional Indigenous identity is inherited from my mother, Molly Yarrngu. My clan group is Gudwala/Girabuka. The main languages I speak are western Gunwinggu and English. My father is a Balanda (Caucasian). I live in two worlds – two mirrors – both my mother's ways and my father's. I didn't have much to do with my dad growing up because of his work. My name is Heleana Wauchope–Gulwa and this is my story about the two worlds of Western education and our bush education: Namumarmuokawwa. Without education we're nothing. With education, we can unite and share knowledges that keep our health strong. My learning was different from many other children growing up in Arnhem Land, because I had limited Western education. In some ways, this was best because my birthrights were not taken away from me. But it was also hard.

Figure I
In Arnhem Land the seasons change into six different systems

As young person my education came from the bush, which is our Old People's knowledge, handed down through generations of wisdom and leadership. When I was eighteen, my mum said that I had to make a choice, to find my own pathway and have a direction in my journey. This journey was not only for me, but it was for others. This is because in our culture, when you've got blood from Arnhem Land, your responsibility is for country, and for people. As an Aboriginal person, and with my identity as an Aboriginal woman from Arnhem Land, our responsibilities are bigger than a prime minister in parliament house. These responsibilities come from Old People and country. If we don't look after ourselves, others and country, it's easy to lose it. This is why our leadership is important. It's all about survival.

I was born in Darwin on 26 April 1974, but I lived most of my life on the Arnhem Land mainland, at Murganella, near Gurig National Park on the Coburg Peninsula. My family's country is in the Maningrida region, but I lived at Murganella because that's where my mother was born. She was born at a place called Inbarrmun Sawmill where my grandfather was a lumberjack and buffalo skinner and my grandmother salted the buffalo hides. My grandparents were part of the first Aboriginal workforce in the Northern Territory that moved from Arnhem Land to Darwin and back with the missionaries. They cut timber and shot buffalo for the price of their hide. I grew up at a wildlife sanctuary run by Parks and Wildlife (then known as Forestry) and we lived in the ranger station. I went to school from when I was about five to about eight, and I remember the early years of my schooling. But, from the age of nine, I had no formal Western education until I was thirty-one.

My education in this time was traditional learning on country: how to look after the environment and how to look after flora and fauna. We lived off the land: hunting and gathering, living off saltwater country in the wet season and stone country in the dry season, rotating that connection to country. In saltwater country, it is a coastal life and we hunt for turtle, dugong, mangrove jack, mullet, reef fish, skinny fish, trevally, oysters, mussels, pipi shells, long bums (a shellfish named for its long cone-shaped shell), mud mussels, mud crab, stingray, crayfish and reef shark. We hunt stingray and reef shark for the health properties of their liver fat, which is rich in omega oils. We use a throwing net, which is a tool our ancestors learnt through trade with the Makassans (Indonesian trepangers who have been visiting this coast and trading with Arnhem Land people for thousands of years). We call this cast net Djala. We use harpoons and harpoon sticks to hunt dugongs and turtles. A one-pronged harpoon is for turtles, and a six-pronged one with a barb in each prong is

for dugongs because of their thick blubbery skin. We use a fishing-wire for bigger fish, which is a spear with four prongs on the end. The force of the four prongs holds the fish or stingray and stops it getting away. We use a one-prong spear for mud crab and stingray. We call Djalikeratdj. You can see that Djala and Djalikeratdj have the same prefix, which is to do with saltwater. In saltwater country we also gather yam and fruit from the rainforest.

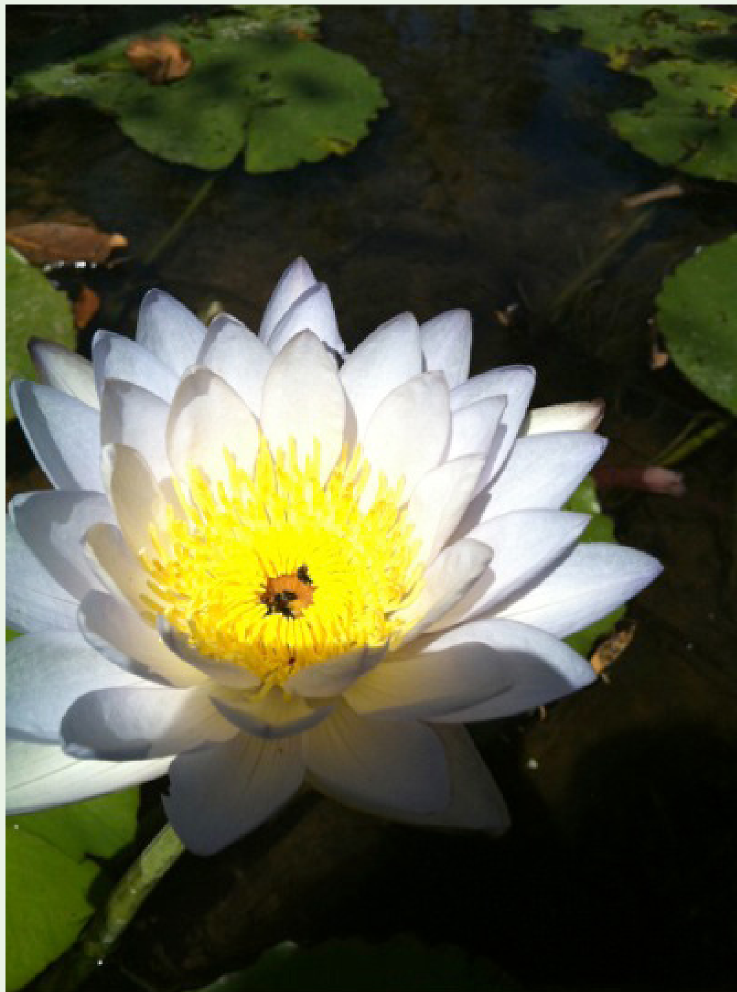
In the dry season, we move inland towards the black soil floodplains and stone country. Here we hunt around billabongs for magpie geese, whistling duck, goanna, buffalo and wild pigs. We use fishing lines and hooks (we also learnt that through trade with the Makassans) to catch Saratoga, freshwater black bream, freshwater grunter, and freshwater barramundi. We call the fishing line Wakitdj. In the billabongs we hunt longneck and shortneck turtle and gather water lilies and water chestnuts. There is so much knowledge to share from both saltwater country and stone country; it takes a lifetime of learning. It would need more than a book to share and explain all the knowledge from the bush. The Western education cannot match what we have.

When we go hunting, everything we do has a reason, and there are rules for hunting. We don't just go walkabout or kill for fun or sport; everything must be respected. This is why the seasons are important to us: we go by the rules of each season from Namumarmuokawwa. For example, we hunt barramundi only in the early stages of their life when they are male. The female barramundi give a new life in the freshwater, and the barramundi are born here (as male) and journey down to the saltwater. They are always migrating: fresh to salt, salt to fresh. They come back into the freshwater with the floodwaters at the beginning of the wet season, and we know this is when they are going to turn into a female. Once they are female, we respect them for who they are and what they are, and we can't hunt them because they become mothers. These are the rules that connect us to country. These are the rules we abide by for survival and for the long-term conservation of our country: for the future, for our children, and for generations after them. If we don't follow these rules we easily lose flora, fauna, and our knowledge and our connection to country.

On country, our learning is non-stop. It's different to the Western learning at school, where you learn between 8.30am and 3pm and it's divided into reading, writing, maths, spelling, etc. Our learning starts when the morning star starts coming up (which is Venus). We sing and dance to the morning star: she represents new beginnings, loss and happiness. Here, our mothers tell us stories and educate us, just like the morning star. Our journey of learning starts with the solar system, the weather, the sounds of night, sounds of morning, sounds of afternoon, and sounds of evening. It's about time as well. Time never stops for us. It can never be broken up – we sleep, but if there is a spirit calling at night, we are woken up and told a story about the spirit-being changing forms. This is life and death, and it allows us to protect our mental health. In the morning you can hear the sound of mosquitoes, birds calling, bees flying, fish jumping out of the water, and hear snakes slither through the leaves. They are just like us: we can feel and hear them moving from place to place, so we know their pathway and they know our pathway. This is the way we understand how Namumarmuokawwa has given us a life.

This learning is like a waterlily: opening in the morning and closing in the evening (figure II). Think of the waterlily in darkness. We are asleep, but still learning, listening to the night creatures, the night skies; our mothers telling us stories about the solar system. They tell us how to have respect for who's out there in the landscape at night, and to have an open understanding about night and day. Then, first thing in the morning when night stops and morning opens, sunshine comes into the centre of the waterlily. The petals are opening. Each petal gains energy of knowledge each night, each morning, each afternoon, each evening. It's like a book full of pages containing what you learnt through the night and day. It's what you learnt listening to your aunties, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, cousins, great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers telling you history stories about the past, about the present, and their love and wishes for the future.

Figure II
Our learning is like a waterlily: opening in the morning and closing in the evening.



Mum gave me three choices. In Arnhem Land, you've got three choices: health, business and education. As a child I was always interested in education and where it came from. I was always interested in this English and where it came from: the sounds and the letters of English. So I enrolled at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education in 2006. I chose Batchelor Institute because my mum was one of the first people to leave Arnhem Land to get an education, and she graduated from there. This is where my journey of Western education began. In 2009 I graduated in certificate 3 in spoken and written English. Now I am a student with Charles Darwin

University in their Remote Indigenous Teacher Education program. I am studying at Maningrida College to become a teacher to share the knowledge I have gained in this past journey of my life. I am aiming for a degree, master's degree, PhD and a career with education, sharing two-way knowledge (Figure III).

Figure III
Heleana Wauchope-Gulwa (right) and her mother, Molly Yarrngu, who have shared a journey of education

In our culture, we have a balanced system that allows us to be equal, to share, and care for what is most important: keeping our environment safe and clean for the new and next generations to take their place from the Old People's knowledge. In our way, our old people die but they never leave country – their spirits still live on country. The old people talk to me through country. These voices are strong with wisdom and knowledge and guidance. This has allowed me to find 'me', to build a circle around me, and to build a pathway to unite both cultures. This is what I'm doing now. I've learnt about Western education and I want to go further with it: I have a passion now and I want to bring the Western pedagogy together with our pedagogy.

I would like other people to have the experience from both sides that I've had, to find their place between two worlds. Every day I live between this 'Balanda' world and the Daluk (Aboriginal women's) world, switching from mirror to mirror. With this mirror, I now understand where my own balance is. It's not just for Aboriginal people to find this balance. We need to learn from each other and share together, to understand each other and truly know where we belong. This is why it is important to share the knowledge we hold deep beneath us for the new generations. With this balance, I can see that we can move forward on this country we call Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Molly Yarrngu contributed cultural information and authorized its publication here.