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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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Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

Guest Editors

Marnie O'Bryan

Prof. Mark Rose

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

Editorial

Marnie O'Bryan
Mark Rose

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, more commonly known by its acronym, UNESCO, was constituted in 1945. It was born out of the global cataclysm that had engulfed the world for the previous six years and the realisation that ‘since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed’ (UNESCO 1945). Central to its constitution, adopted in London on 16 November of that year, is an understanding of the transformative power of education and a recognition that ‘the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace’ are ‘indispensable to the dignity of man’ and constitute a ‘sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern’ (UNESCO 1945). While the constitution of the organization prohibits it from interfering in matters which are essentially domestic (UNESCO Constitution, Article 1.3), in the modern, globalized world its mandates resonate powerfully within nation states.

This electronic journal is published from the UNESCO Observatory based in Australia and this special edition focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of this continent. The two volumes of this issue bear witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. They testify 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.

As in much of the colonized world, the mantle of history does not sit lightly on contemporary Australia: past experiences of dispossession and alienation, often implemented through the dominant education system, cast a long shadow over the present. These manifest in persistent and unacceptable discrepancies in opportunity and outcome for Indigenous Australians. That this population continues to experience entrenched social and educational disadvantage presents an ongoing challenge to practitioners and policy makers alike.

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.

The articles 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. Anderson takes us with compelling insight to a place within academic disciplines and identifies frontiers where a class of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals will be needed to meet the challenges of their communities in all social indicators. Similarly situated within the higher education sphere, *Pechenkina* explores the role of institutional support structures for Indigenous university students, and how they are perceived and interpreted by those students. *Goddard* and *MacFie* shift the focus to the secondary school sector and look at the structures and supports that make school accessible and meaningful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. *Goddard* writes about the Clontarf model of holistic mentoring that builds strengths based resilience in young men through programs using Australian Rules football, while *MacFie* identifies a range of strategies for making education more positive, engaging and meaningful for remote Indigenous learners. *Stewart* is also concerned with the education of young people from remote communities, looking in particular at the experience of students from far north Queensland and the Torres Strait as they transition to boarding schools further south.

In a policy environment that discourages, or even prohibits, bi-lingual education, the issue of language maintenance and transmission is of grave importance to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. *Disbray* provides an overview of Indigenous language programs and activities, and looks to future directions and innovations within the education sector that may strengthen Australian languages. The author describes an ambiguous policy environment, in which the rhetoric of the value of Australia's heritage languages risks being cancelled out by the rhetoric that positions them as a barrier to mainstream education, notwithstanding extensive research evidence to establish the importance of language to community and individual wellbeing.

In Australia, education outcomes correlate strongly to socio-economic status. Issues of equity and access are recurring themes in the national policy discourse (Teese & Polisel, 2011). In light of this, *O'Bryan* and *Drennen* both focus on the power of partnerships and the capacity of high performing urban or peri-urban schools to contribute to education outcomes for young people growing up in remote areas. *O'Bryan's* article suggests that in a differentiated schools market, schools with a significant concentration of Western educational and human capital have much to offer and much to learn as they engage with Indigenous knowledge systems. Already answering the call for innovative approaches to interschool partnerships, *Drennan* and *McCord* offer a case study of an existing program jointly designed and implemented between Melbourne's Wesley College and the Fitzroy Valley community in Western Australia's Kimberley district. The Yiramalay Studio School follows the seasons as it moves between communities, cultures and educational traditions; it presents a new model of school that, implemented more broadly, would change forever the narrative of Australian national identity.

The final article in Volume One touches on the role and potential of curriculum as a vehicle to effect real reconciliation. Whereas the priority of mandating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum to ensure a base level of understanding in all Australian students has become embroiled in political controversy, *Kent, May & Gough* present a case study of a Year 9 English class in a mainstream Victorian school. Their paper provides insight into the complexity of communicating the colonial story, and the power of art to break down prejudice and cut through defensive reactions to the painful truths of post-colonial Australian history. The extracts of student responses to Julie Gough's confronting work entitled 'Imperial Leather' are both moving and thought provoking.

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. It opens with *Fogarty, Lovell & Dodson's* exposition of the social and cultural norms that underpin contemporary Indigenous education policy. They argue that policy responses are 'increasingly divorced from the lived experience of Aboriginal people in the bush' and challenge policymakers to develop policy to accommodate a range of educational aspirations that do not silence Indigenous voices, or disenfranchise whole populations for whom language, culture and geography work together to invest lives with meaning and dignity.

Building on this, *Osbourne* explores how a deficit discourse, epitomised by the 'Closing the Gap' policy umbrella, silences the voices and dismisses the priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. His paper draws on a wide range of interviews with Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) educators and community members where families speak on their own terms about the critical elements of a foundation for educational success, and the role they play in their children's educational outcomes.

Bradley & Johnson's paper is concerned with the 'alternative actualities [that] still enliven and inform everyday existence for many Indigenous Australians'. These authors explore the notion of truth and the ancient truths that are communicated through the kujika, or song lines, of the Yanuwa people of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

They conclude on a cautionary tone, reflecting that where the 'legitimacy of one's voice is denied or reduced into conformity with another's superlative truth', identity is lost and self worth becomes difficult to sustain.

Following the same theme, *Corn & Patrick* explore the innovative teaching strategies used by the co-author of this piece to facilitate the intergenerational and intercultural transference of classical Warlpiri knowledge. Steven Wantarri Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu Patrick is a Warlpiri man from the remote Tanami desert region of the Northern Territory and creative director of the Milpirri Festival. His theorisation of *Ngurra-kurlu*, the interconnection between land, law, ceremony, kinship and language, has become an important tool for building intercultural communication and trust. In working with schools and universities to communicate this knowledge, he has embarked on a project to challenge the anglo-centric assumptions of the Australian education system.

Whereas 'success' in education is typically judged in standardised, euro-centric terms, Patrick is a passionate advocate of understanding educational success by means of a more holistic measure that prioritises identity and cultural integrity. Testifying to the wisdom of this approach, *Wauchope*, who had no formal Western education between the ages of 9 and 31 years of age, but 'a lifetime of learning' on country that 'Western education cannot match', writes movingly about her own learning journey, and the richness of a life that honours the wisdom, knowledge and guidance of generations past. Like Patrick, *Wauchope* now devotes her life to exploring ways to 'build a pathway to unite both cultures' and help others to 'find their place between two worlds' just as she has. Her beautiful description of the accompanying artwork, a mat woven by her mother Molly Yarrgnu, describes the strength of a life 'woven together by threads in two worlds'.

The front cover of Volume Two is a collage of prints created by young Yolngu people from the North East Arnhem Land community of Yirrkala. Their work is the subject of *Salvestro, Studd & Stubbs'* paper. That traditional culture and identity is alive and adaptive to the mandates of the modern world is manifest in the works produced by youth who, even while they were disengaged from school and employment, had much to say about the nexus between past, present and future. Their artwork and *Salvestro et al's* paper encourages practitioners and policy makers alike to reflect on the wisdom of honouring students' cultural inheritance through school structure and curriculum foci.

The notion of cultural identity also lies at the heart of the next two papers which both focus on 'Learning on Country' programs. *Schwab & Fogarty* explore the concept of 'Learning on Country' and argue that there are 'deep and subtle cultural concepts of life in Indigenous communities that are likely to directly influence the engagement and learning outcomes for students'. They add a coda to their paper reflecting that this has serious implications for teacher training, curriculum development and future policy priorities.

Issues of respect, reciprocity and responsiveness to need are canvassed in *Godinho, Woolley, Webb & Winkel's* report on a cross-disciplinary Learning on Country project that aimed to develop the English and Science literacy skills of remote Aboriginal students. Written by Western academics, this paper is an exemplar of *Wauchope's* call to find a balance between two worlds, 'to learn from each other and share together, to understand each other and truly know where we belong'.

Most of the articles in this publication are accompanied by a piece of artwork, visual representations consistent with the principles of Indigenous Knowledge transfer that take the reader to a whole new place of interpretative thinking. Four pieces of work themselves revolve around visualisation. *Salvestro et al* state; 'The artists of Yirrkala were amongst the first artists globally to recognise the potential use of visual art as a political tool'. A master of political commentary through art, *Michael Cook's* stunning photography that appears as the front cover of Volume One invites us to question what a shift in the balance of power might look like. His work elicits both sensual and intellectual responses that like *Mununggurr's* poems will stretch the mind and stir the spirit.

The articles in this UNESCO special issue 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 artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in Australia. 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 would like to thank Executive Editor Lindy Joubert for the opportunity to put this special issue together. Our grateful thanks also to those who carefully and thoughtfully reviewed submissions; your comments have been invaluable to contributors, and instructive to us as editors. Finally, our thanks to each of the poets, artists and authors whose work appears here: your passion and commitment to the Indigenous empowerment through education in Australia today answers the clarion call made by post war governments in 1945.

Marnie O'Bryan and Mark Rose
Guest Editors,
January 2015

ABOUT THE COVER

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 Indigenous. 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 Indigenous 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