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LITERACY, GENOCIDE AND THE MEDIA

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The structures of a traditional school curriculum, timetable, and teaching practices can, by their very nature, be destructive of Aboriginal identity and traditional Aboriginal education¹, even when, on the surface, the content of the school curriculum is Aboriginal. This article explores the idea that the processes of reading and writing and making books, movies and videos can also be very destructive of Aboriginal identity when these things are controlled by the imagination of white educators and media makers.

The sixteen years since we started bilingual programs in the top end have produced very little in the way of literature which Aboriginal people can love or cherish, or call upon to strengthen themselves in their ongoing struggle to maintain their culture and their land. Ignoring for the moment a few gratifying successes, the shelves in the schools where I have worked are full of well made, interesting booklets in local languages dealing with local interest, which are very seldom used. And at the same time the classrooms are full of happy, strong, proud and active Aboriginal young people, a significant proportion of whom, after ten years or more of schooling, and despite the best efforts of their teachers are, according to the criteria of white educators, 'functionally illiterate'. What, one might ask, is the *function* of 'functional literacy'? Schools are running smoothly, young Aboriginal people are strong and confident, and the traditional practices of reading and writing, like most European habits, hardly impinge upon their lifestyles at all.

White educators have tended to see our poor success in literacy in terms of the Aboriginal children's lack of exposure to literacy in the home and their undeveloped appreciation of the nature and function of literacy. Accordingly, we

have tended to see the solution in terms of 'flooding' the school and community with books, and in providing warm and meaningful literacy learning classroom environments. The imaginations of white educators ran wild for a decade - lap reading, big books, words in colour, concentrated language encounters, uninterrupted sustained silent reading, etc. The list of 'new' ideas is embarrassingly long, and in the long term their success unremarkable because we were unable to see the crucial tie up between the medium and the message. Both what we were trying to teach (the reading process) and how we were trying to teach it (the literature) put Aboriginal kids right off the idea of learning to read.

In order to preserve their Aboriginal identity from the intrusion of individualistic European teaching methods, Aboriginal children everywhere have been actively resistant to learning to read and write. We could not see how our classroom assumptions and methods pressured these students to somehow compromise their Aboriginality by acting independently as individuals, mentally detaching themselves from the group of their Aboriginal peers who share with them the knowledge system which creates the meaning of their lives.

Now with Aboriginalization of schooling, literacy and the media are being used productively by Aboriginal people in their ongoing struggle to hold their Aboriginal identity. But for white educators to participate effectively in this process, we must clearly understand how white forms of literacy reflect the preoccupations of the white world, and are powerful assimilationist tools when employed by enthusiastic teachers with little identification with the Aboriginal world.

The fundamental idea underlying European literacy and the white media is that knowledge and ideas can be recorded as objects and stored. Later they can be read or viewed and they will still mean the same. The ideas are arranged like objects in a particular order, starting from the beginning and linking through to the end. It is the same for movies and videos as it is for books. There can be no branches, or backwards connections or parallel levels of action in written material. It has to be unidimensional, because your eyes must follow the single line of the text. Video images must be strung together into a sequence. In a sense Aboriginal knowledge cannot be cast in the framework of white media, because it refuses to be split off as a straight logical line from the complex fabric of Aboriginal meaning-making.

In literature inspired by white Australians, scant regard has traditionally been paid to the situation in which the content was produced, who told the story, why it was told, who was involved, what places were involved, how the people who produced the information were involved with the places that were mentioned, and how the media makers participated in the whole situation. These are the factors which contribute to significant learning in the Aboriginal world, yet these are exactly the factors which are habitually edited out of the Western media in order to make it 'objective'. This does not mean that all the story books and text books available on the market are harmful. But it does mean that this literature makes a doubtful contribution to the building of Aboriginal identity. Literacy in the white domain can be a powerful tool for Aboriginal people involved in the struggle for self determination. But can literacy be a tool for helping Aboriginal people with the more fundamental Aboriginal education question, that is, learning and teaching each other the ongoing meaning and spirit of being Aboriginal?

During the vernacular literature explosion of the 1970s and 80s bilingual education era, a lot of material was produced as white educators,

including myself, induced Aboriginal literacy workers to collect stories, transcribe and edit them, and make books from them. The editing process involved stripping off all the Aboriginal meaningfulness which connected the information with the storyteller, the place and time and purpose of the telling, who was there, all the interjections and discussions, etc., and left a dead piece of classroom material which may have looked smart to white eyes, but which Aboriginal teachers in ensuing years were usually reluctant to use. They would be more likely to take their students and produce their own books, telling of their own group and own experience of collecting yams.

The items from the literature centres which have withstood the test of time are old school magazines, and photo books, and excursion and sports reports which show real people we know in real places we know, participating in an event we remember. These books are the exceptions that prove the rule, i.e., that without links to real people, and real places, real experience and understood events, literature is dead and alien.

The parallel process of decontextualizing the objectifying information in the media has an equally devastating, in fact genocidal effect, in the wider Australian context. All around the world we can see evidence of the way in which the media has been used to destroy cultures. To see how this is done we need to understand the philosophies and fantasies of the media makers. The books and movies produced by white media makers about other cultures carry with them the subtle message that, black or white, all over the world people are basically the same. People from every culture experience birth and death, war and happiness, they eat, sleep, marry, grow old and die, as we do. The differences between Aborigines and white Australians they tell us are only superficial differences. They involve different myths and legends, and different ways of catching and preparing food, ways of healing illnesses, marriage customs, etc., and these superficial differences become the focus of white interpretations of Aborigines in the media. The

media act like a knife, splitting off the material culture and social practices of Aborigines from their fundamental Aboriginal identity which is common to Aborigines everywhere, bush medicine or no bush medicine. This fundamental identity is unnoticed or ignored by the media, so the impression is created that Aboriginality is in its entirety made up of all these things we can see on the television.

Those Aborigines who live in urban and rural areas who don't manifest a remarkably different material culture from the dominant white Australian way of life, but who are nevertheless conscious of the strength and vigor of their Aboriginal culture are ignored by the media makers as being somehow not the real thing. They are depressed by the alienation which is engendered by the white media about the so-called 'real' Aborigines. They look at a movie or read a book about Aborigines and they do not see themselves. That is, they do not recognise their fundamental unity and identity with the people of the past, or with the desert or top end people. This is clearly because the movie makers have ignored, or been oblivious to, or unable to capture the true Aboriginal identity which unites Aboriginal people everywhere. History shows that the media starts by creating a false impression of a culture. Then it moves in and destroys the culture. All that's left is what has been captured in books or on celluloid.

Looking at it this way the prospect of literacy being a strengthening tool for Aboriginal people seems rather bleak. In bilingual education, we tried every new teaching idea that came along, but literacy was never wholly embraced as a significant part of Aboriginal life until Aboriginal teachers started taking over and the thrust of the new Western methodologies and resources settled down into the dust. In situations where Aboriginal teachers are in the position to act more or less freely, without pressure of traditional schooling expectations, they and their students, helpers and onlookers, are Aboriginalising literacy. Changes begin with the suspension of a slavish

adherence to the traditional constraints of prescribed curriculum and timetable, in favour of a responsive (rather than planned) curriculum which allows the activities of the school to mirror or recapture the crucial aspect of responsiveness in traditional Aboriginal life.

From this develops a parallel suspension of the traditional focus on literacy and some new directions in literacy. This does not mean that all white methods and materials are abandoned. But there is a definite change of emphasis from simply learning to read and write, to using literacy as one of the adult tools in the ongoing process of Aboriginal life. Writing is used to record the significant aspects that come up in the learning experience - places, people, animals, etc. Reading is used to revise and modify the writing in the present experience rather than to glean data from a previously written source. Children are less often pressed into reading or even writing individually, but writing is done collectively with the most literate person - usually the teacher but often older students - doing the writing and the others looking on, or copying the writing down. Diagrams with lines and arrows are used more often than straight text, along with lists arranged in columns and signs and labels. And the writing is pasted only sheets of brown paper along with pictures and diagrams and put on display where people can see it, rather than into books.

From a white point of view what happens seems slow and inefficient. This is because the teachers' ultimate goal is not to achieve literacy but to share and explore Aboriginal ways of doing things with the pupils. Reading and writing might be useful tools to employ one day but not the next. There may be books in the literature centre but we might end up making our own book about our own experience and our own angle on the subject.

Far from being irrelevant to others, good books and videos by Aboriginal groups find acceptability with Aboriginal people all over.

The role of the white educator in this situation is to look and listen carefully, help when asked, and reflect on how white expectation and methods in literacy and media prevent Aboriginal initiatives in exploring and adapting the media for their own business of surviving the world as strong, uncompromised Aborigines². There are many examples of powerful strengthening books and videos made by Aboriginal people.

It is true that Aboriginal children enjoy English books and videos, but there are few Aboriginal children indeed who have learnt to use literacy as a natural tool in the fundamentally important work of learning and exploring what it means to be an Aboriginal in 1989. While white educators have been controlling the philosophy and practice of literacy in Aboriginal classrooms they haven't had a chance. But, in both the Aboriginal classroom and the world of Aboriginal controlled media, the white approach is being reversed: the book is not the beginning of an educational experience, it is the end of one: the sharing, discussing, remembering, communicating and learning which will come out of the book or movie will only be a reflection of all the sharing, discussing, remembering, communicating and learning that went into it. If nothing like that went into it, nothing like that will come out, and Aboriginal people will continue to ignore literacy and literature along with all the other dead trappings of White Australia.

NOTES

- 1 By traditional Aboriginal education I mean the ongoing traditional processes whereby Aboriginal people have always learnt what it means to be Aboriginal. This traditional education has been at work for the past 30,000 years, and continues, all over Australia, in Aboriginal families and communities everywhere. Schooling may help or it may undermine this traditional Aboriginal education, especially in urban and rural areas where schools often do not acknowledge the

strength and validity of contemporary Aboriginal cultures.

For discussion contrasting traditional Aboriginal Education with school curriculum practices, see "Aboriginalising Post Primary Curriculum", *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 16 No. 5, October/November 1988, pp. 3-16.

- 2 A recent address by Stephen Harris "Alternative Literatures?" (Joint Australian Reading Association and Australian Association for the Teaching of English, National Conference, Darwin, (1989) looks at different cultural uses of literacy around the world, and introduces the possibilities of new varieties and functions of Aboriginal literacy.

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