



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Botany Bay is an iconic symbol for Australia. It was the European gateway to the continent and still remains a site of cross-cultural relations. Nugent has included multiple streams of interconnecting life into this history of place. Her history will be one with which many groups will identify: the descendants of the Sydney clans, the other clans who now reside there and the multitude of Anglo and non-British European families who lived there during the Great Depression or during the post-World War II period. Nugent has allowed the Indigenous voice to be a part of this history. The “Blacks camp” at “Larpa” during the turn of the twentieth century was a site of defiance for Sydney and south coast Kooris. Although for a time it was a mission and a segregation camp, and even a leprosarium, above all it was a refuge for Australians who did not have a place in wider Australian society. Indigenous people were always made welcome at “Larpa” and they got by. This history of survival is a credit to the tenacity of Indigenous Australians. Maria Nugent provides the reader with an insight into this world. Her work is inspirational for some readers for it promotes an intense desire to undertake further research into the ongoing history of Indigenous people of Sydney, to retell the stories of families in other Aboriginal camps. Nugent’s work is also important to non-Indigenous Australia for its cross-cultural interwoven stories. The Bay will never look the same again, for it seems a richer place after reading Nugent’s text.

BALANDA: MY YEAR IN ARNHEM LAND

Mary Ellen Jordan

Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005, viii+224pp, ISBN 1741142806

Reviewed by John Greateorex

School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory, 0909, Australia

Balanda not only brings back memories of when I first went to Arnhem Land, but still years later the searching conversations I still have with myself, trying to make sense of the world, or rather another cultural galaxy far removed from my own.

This book is a diary, recording the author’s observations, impressions and conversations in one of the Northern Territory’s largest Indigenous towns, Maningrida. True to the diary genre, these accounts are personal and compelling, written with sincerity and urgency. While *Balanda* describes the author’s daily experiences it also contains simplistic explanations that can distract and cloud the minds of readers from grasping deeper complexities at work in

the daily interaction and lives of the Aboriginal and Balanda (Europeans) residents. This misrecognition is particularly problematic in Indigenous settlements like Maningrida, formed by government policies determined to centralise peoples from multiple Indigenous cultural backgrounds and estates, into bureaucratically-convenient locations.

Like the many Balanda who arrive to take up positions in the schools, clinics and other designated areas of bureaucracy, the author was fortunate to be in a position demanding personal contact with members of different clans, including not only artists and art centre workers, but also those living on their ancestral homelands (outstations). On her arrival Jordan was confronted by the harsh living conditions and feelings of isolation and separation from her own culture. There were other Balanda, but none with whom she could really empathise. She describes her contact with other Balanda as often uneasy and strained, interactions leaving questions about their motives for living at Maningrida. She arrived with “good intentions” to work with Aboriginal people, but finds herself trying to understand her Indigenous co-workers through her Western eyes, ending up with countless contradictions and dilemmas. As complex as life can be in these towns, there are choices to be made. Readers will share Jordan’s despair, and the decisions she has made to live and work in Maningrida. Anxious to build new friendships, she encounters Balanda with seemingly no intention of mixing with the Aboriginal residents, and whose sole intention is to save dollars. Where does she go for advice, and how is she to develop meaningful relationships with local families from both cultures? While few Balanda stay for more than a year or two, and even fewer spend leisure time with the Aboriginal residents, there are others who live, leisure and stay for decades. The seeds are sown when newcomers are readily accepted into the complex Aboriginal kinship system of the area. Whether the plant grows to produce meaningful friendships depends on the determination and sincerity of all parties, but particularly the new arrival.

The author observes that government funding controlled by Balanda and “bureaucrats who speak the language of bureaucracy” can work against the active involvement of the local Aboriginal peoples, however, it must not be assumed that this is always the case. Good people, both black and white spend decades of their lives working collaboratively in situations of extreme social complexity – working under conditions where government policies are in a state of constant change, cumbersome and unresponsive to local conditions.

While Jordan superficially describes local Aboriginal control over ceremonies and cultural knowledges, she observes that even here Western academics are encroaching on Indigenous knowledges, when they receive research grants to document cultural practices. She describes how Balanda take, and continue to

take, then asks what do they give back in return? It is disappointing that in this book she hasn't taken the opportunity to acknowledge the numerous deep, long-term relationships founded on trust and goodness between individuals from both cultures. The author describes the mutual obligations for accountability within a Western framework, but few conversations with Aboriginal people and their views are noted. There are instances noted by the author where Aborigines leave paid employment to pursue their lives. She seems unable to continue the conversation as to why. It is easy to assume that Aborigines are passive partners of Western cultural dominance. This need not be so. Aborigines have strong voices and motivations, with cultural responsibilities, and inevitable accountabilities under local Aboriginal social codes.

While Jordan openly acknowledges *Balanda* as a "subjective, personal account", she has placed on public record her thoughts, albeit in the form of a diary, on one of the hottest issues currently facing Australia. As such she must be challenged for the inconsistencies, oversights and shortcomings within the book (a challenge I feel she would welcome). She glosses over funerals with little reference to conversations with resident Aborigines as to why the funerals continue for a week. Or to her observations recording the long, protracted hours of singing and dancing, or to the emotional commitment or the cultural integrity of the ceremony. She is patronisingly amazed with Alice's Aboriginal English, but not how little vernacular language she has after many years in Maningrida, nor does she connect this the wider loss of vernacular language.

The reader needs to be alert to superficial explanations of deeper issues. Maningrida is one of only two townships in Arnhem where alcohol is available. Jordan's explanation that this system was designed to sate the "Aboriginal" appetite for alcohol is superficial and needs further investigation. None of the other townships have high numbers of residents in Darwin or elsewhere merely for alcohol. Indigenous research conducted by the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* from the region documents that the majority of "long-grassers" are in Darwin for reasons unrelated to alcohol.

Balanda touches on the dysfunction of the larger Arnhem towns such as Maningrida, where card games and drugs are mediums for maintaining a social life. The mention that attempted suicides occur every "barge weekend" will draw horror from the reader, while at the same time suggesting this fortnightly situation indicates "hopelessness and despair". Mary Ellen acknowledges that her position changes, she has no solutions, though it would seem hope is ever present.

Fortunately the author took initiatives to visit homelands (outstations) during her time at Maningrida, there she noticed it was "very different to life in town". Here there were Western indicators of health and beauty, gardens, regular hunting, and

"how much healthier the people looked than the town people". The ease of "being" with people when "on Land" as opposed to the invisible barriers that keep black and white apart in the township. Unfortunately, the author's inner dialogue is silent, and she does not probe this most important issue.

The book is a year long journey written in a language that flows from Mary Ellen Jordan's pen. Every page brings us to a new situation and a new experience, conveyed with frankness and honesty. It is also a superficial journey lacking in insight and depth. This book will be interesting reading for those planning to work in the Top End of the Northern Territory for the first time, and highly recommended for those interested in glimpsing into everyday life in the larger Arnhem Land townships through one person's eyes. But we must wait for another book that lets us see Maningrida through the eyes of its Aboriginal owners and residents.

WHITENING RACE: ESSAYS IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Ed.)

Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004, xiv+303pp,
ISBN 0 85575 465 6

Reviewed by Neil Harrison

*School of Education, University of New England,
Armidale, New South Wales, 2351, Australia*

Gillian Cowlshaw tells a story about sitting in a coffee shop in the main street of Bourke when a fight broke out between some Aboriginal women in front of the café. The white waitress was embarrassed by the public melee and turned to Cowlshaw to respond in an exasperated tone, "they're at it again" (p. 74). While she viewed the street performance as an attempt to scandalise those "uptight, moralistic and judging whites" who were looking on, Cowlshaw was drawn by the waitress' response, but only to feel a sense of unease about her own superiority to the waitress' contempt for what was happening in front of them. Cowlshaw describes how she had to struggle with her own judgement of the waitress who was in turn judging Aboriginal women swearing and shouting, and through this story she raises questions about who is in a position to judge when one glance always sees another. This edited book suggests that white Australians have historically assumed that they have the power to look back in comfort, and judge. The white gaze has existed to maintain an unequal power relation in this country, and this series of critical essays on the "normative and dominant nature of whiteness" attempts to "address