



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.

PERFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY *and the* CREATION *of* DESIRE: *the* INDIGENOUS ATHLETE/ROLE MODEL *and* IMPLICATIONS *for* LEARNING

STELLA CORAM

Faculty of Education, Building 6, Monash University,
 Victoria, 3800, Australia

■ Abstract

The athlete role model has emerged as the new pastor invested with the task of leading young people classed "at-risk" from entering into self-destructive pathways. The logic invested in the athlete role model is that young people identify with their sporting heroes and in the process try to emulate them. This holds for the major sporting codes in Australia including the Australian Football League (AFL), which supports the formation of role model programmes based on the input of Indigenous athletes to target Indigenous youth living in rural outposts. Armstrong (1996) sees the push to emulate the deeds of elite athletes in terms of a mythic function, the creation of desire to be like the hero. This article explores the theoretical implications for Indigenous learning grounded in the athlete/hero as role model. It is proposed that the athlete role model in the contemporary context of capitalism can work to obscure the realities of competition in sport and in the process promulgate false opportunity through sport at the expense of education.

■ Introduction

The sports fixation permeates the lives of countless people whose ideas about their own developmental possibilities are tightly bound to the world of physical self-expression (Hoberman, 1997, p. xvii).

In popular sports culture athletes are constructed as role models to young people. For example, each new intake of draftees is informed by the Australian Football League (AFL) that they are role models. Importantly, the AFL supports the training of Indigenous athletes to be role models. Armstrong (1996) sees the push to emulate the deeds of elite athletes in terms of a mythic function, the creation of desire to be like the hero. The easy acceptance of the role model in mainstream culture makes it essential to examine the importance and meanings surrounding the construct of the role model (Fisher, 1988, p. 213). In this article, I explore the theoretical implications for Indigenous learning grounded in the sporting hero as role model. To that end, Butler's (1993) notion of performativity is helpful for drawing attention to the bio-politics of the "raced" athletic body and the silences of the regulatory embedded in liberal models for change. This article draws on narratives depicting Indigenous efficacy for sporting excellence in popular culture in order to tease out the origins of desire and their implications for the representation of the role model within Indigenous educational policy contexts.

■ Setting the context

The engagement of the Indigenous athlete role model with young people is yet to be fully examined in Australian research and for that reason this study draws on literature on the US experience of role modelling in particular (Coram, 2004). An important social dynamic underpins the rise of the athlete/role model in Western liberal culture. Critical scholars (Hoberman, 1997; Marqusee, 1995; Messner, 1994) express concern that

black education in Western societies is “at-risk” of being traded out to sport. In stratified Western societies marked by the exclusion of race or ethnic minorities, such as the US and Australia, aspirations for social and economic mobility are increasingly located in elite sports. Young people are perfecting variations of the basketball “slam dunk” in place of the classroom.

The possibility that Indigenous entry into elite sports in Australia may parallel the trend of black athletic “dominance” at the expense of education elsewhere begs important considerations for examining Indigenous learning in the popular contexts. I wish to stress that the objective is not to undermine the importance that Indigenous communities attribute to role modelling as a positive intervention strategy in the lives of Indigenous young people nor the importance that role models play in their efforts to instill pride in cultural identity. An article celebrating Ralph White’s milestone of 250 games in the AFL highlights the importance he places on being a role model given that as a “troubled” young man he benefited from being mentored (Blucher, 2004, p. 22). I am interested in the “nature” of desire and its political underpinnings as a trajectory for pedagogic change.



The institutionalisation of desire and the erasing of dissent

Champion athletes are symbolic figures in popular culture. The greats in African American sports history such as the basketball player Michael Jordan are depicted as transcending race through their personal dignity in popular discourse (Dyson, 1993). It is through the appropriation of black culture that a desire to dream, to be like Mike, has been created (Dyson, 1993, p. 70). For Dyson (1993), the idealisation of skill and performance is at the heart of the desire to emulate the athlete. However, the desire that Jordan embodies is at times immobilised by its depoliticised cultural contexts. Jordan is the bearer of meanings about black culture larger than his own life. He is the symbol of a pedagogy of style, presence, and desire that is communicated by the sight of his black body (Dyson, 1993, p. 70). Jordan represents the mythic function of the African American athlete, which is to engender the desire in young people deemed at “at-risk” to be like their heroes (Armstrong, 1996).

Much like in the US, Australian sporting culture is awash with legendary figures embodying the Australian spirit. Cricket’s spin bowler Shane Warne is the classic example of the “wild colonial boy” who beats the master at his own game. The most celebrated Indigenous role model in Australia is the retired athlete Catherine Freeman. Her iconic role as statesperson was immortalised when she lit the cauldron at the Sydney 2000 Olympics amid a circle of flames.

Freeman’s transcendental shift from the ghettos of Queensland to becoming, to quote Attwood (2000), “our Cathy”, is telling of how Indigenous athletes as role models are made.

A major silence underpinning the celebration of black athletes is that they are symbolic figures, who reaffirm dominant ideology about the black body because their participation is largely limited to events that square with common knowledge. Rarely is the assumption that blacks dominate track and field challenged. Black competitors, cast as “natural” athletes, stand in for the narratives of dominance and or survival. They invoke the imaginary of “ancient” cultures whose competitors are about to take their place in the modern world. Dissidents who seek to tell another story are sidelined. Indigenous protestors to the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, Australia, were permitted to maintain a fire (flame) in the King’s Domain gardens under the banner of the “Stolenwealth Games” in acknowledgement of the suffering of Aboriginal children removed from their families (Ker, 2006).

The “hushing” of dissent indicates that being a public figure carries with it the clause of “dignified silence”. Harry Edwards (1969), athlete and scholar, argued that the dignity attributed to black athletes is historically located. African slaves were constructed as being happy with their lot. It suited white sensibilities to conceive of the black man as a simpleton (Edwards, 1969). Similarly, Indigenous peoples are expected to be passive or unseen to an international audience. As soon as the 2006 Commonwealth Games were completed the flame was extinguished.

Freeman’s parading of the Aboriginal flag at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Canada generated a storm of controversy for expressing a dual black/white identity (Given, 1995), an indication of the suppression of difference. The more black stars remind people of the oppressive realities of black life the less they are accepted as role models (Marqusee, 1995, p. 10). The African American track and field athletes, Carlos and Smith, who won first and third respectively in the 100m final at 1968 Mexico Olympics paid a high price, observes Marqusee (1995, p. 21), for their show of solidarity on the victory dais. Their mistake was to shun individual victory and national glory in favor of solidarity, which amounted to a repudiation of the US (Marqusee, 1995, p. 21). Sports’ egalitarian ethos is overlaid with hierarchies through which the dominant culture mirrors its own values (Marqusee, 1995, p. 7). It is in this context that the Indigenous athlete, who enters the arena as the exemplar (native), is expected to pay homage to the “empire” for the opportunity to compete and to take up the slack in undoing entrenched oppression and inequity in institutional settings.



The bio-politics of performativity and the athlete role model

In *Bodies that matter*, Butler (1993) argues that the materiality of the body is negated. Performativity, which is the vehicle through which ontological effects (the nature of being) are established, will allow insight into the materiality of the body. The naming of bodies is at once the setting of a boundary and the repeated inculcation of a norm (Butler, 1993, p. 8). To draw on performativity is to enquire into which aspect of discourse has the capacity to produce what it names or to replicate the norm. In her critique of the bio-politics of sex (as regulatory) Butler asks in "Extracts from gender as performance" (Osbourne & Segal, 1994) under what discursive and institutional conditions do certain biological differences become the salient characteristics of sex? What is the mechanism, which bodies matter and how are they animated? (Osbourne & Segal, 1994). The ability to impregnate and to reproduce offspring puts fertile bodies at the centre of the politics of sex to the exclusion of frail, ambiguous, infertile bodies. As such, the objective is to make problematic reproduction, as performativity, to the sexing of the body. The male athletic body (symbolising strength and power) and its counter the frail bony body of the female model in high fashion represent the height of sexual desirability in popular culture. The bio-politics of desire then is not only racial in origin it is also culturally located and gendered.

Bio-politics has broad application. Zylinska (2004) employs bio-politics to examine immigration. According to Zylinska, the body of the host community looks after its boundaries and protects it against parasites that might want to invade it. In terms of the central questions of which bodies matter and why, she claims that the process depends on a truth regime already in place, a regime that classifies some bodies as genuine and others as inauthentic (Zylinska, 2004, p. 526). In the bio-politics of race, the (black) body is subject to racial constructs embodied in power, endurance and strength. Fast twitch muscles are consistently attributed to African American athletes as a means to explain their "dominance" in track and field events. Entine (2000) insists that athletes of African American origins are genetically predisposed to inheriting fast twitch muscle fibres thereby enabling them to dominate in running events. The assumption of black athletic dominance suits both black and white fantasies about physiological excellence being a legitimate foundation for progress. Essentialist frameworks of innate physical difference may be inscribed into cultural norms about inclusion, social mobility and indeed learning. Bodies that matter in the bio-politics of the Indigenous athlete/role model are arguably assimilated, successful, fit, compliant and united bodies, less so female bodies and old or damaged bodies.

Similar to the construct of African American athletic dominance, Indigenous athletes are constructed in popular narratives as dominant; embodying a particular style of performance built around excitement, magic, vision, bursts of speed, and doing the unexpected or the unimaginable (Coram, 2007). Attributing a "unique" style of performance to the Indigenous athlete opens the door to the consideration of cultural formations that reflect Indigenous models of learning style. According to Harris (1990), Indigenous learning is indirect and takes place in a group setting; the counter to imperial learning grounded in rote and recall. Drawing on the notion of indirect learning it may be claimed that young people absorb assumptions about their "place" in society. If the attention given to the black athlete in US popular culture is anything to go by, there are important lessons for ensuring that young blacks in Australia are not "channelled", as critical scholars (Lapchick, 1995; Messner, 1994) refer to it, into sport by well-meaning teachers, coaches, parents and the like.

■ The making of the Indigenous athlete/role model

An accepted premise in popular discourse is that Indigenous athletes are "special". The following comment drawn from an AFL information sheet attests to this belief: "Their presence has grown enormously in two decades. Their ball handling and evasive skills have thrilled many crowds. Their achievements have made them role models for other Aborigines" (Australian Football League, 2002). In the article "Aboriginal AFL boom" Niall (2000, p. 3) represents the standards of Indigenous efficacy in terms of audience appreciation of their "exhilarating gifts", their "special qualities". Indigenous athletes are said to be endowed with natural gifts especially pace in sports narratives. This is captured in the following comment attributed to a football "insider": "He's the best Aboriginal player I've seen, this boy. He'll take football to another level. Speed, hardness, he's got more brilliance than Daniel Wells" (quoted in Russell, 2004, p. 36). The notion of Indigenous pace/speed is entrenched or at the very least accepted by the AFL community including the coaching fraternity. For example, "Terry Wallace [AFL coach] believes that the burgeoning of Aboriginal players in the AFL can only continue. The game is now speed, run and carry and the indigenous boys have got it in volumes" (Blake, 2004, p. 4).

Quite apart from being deeply paternalistic, in the essentialist framing of "Indigenous boys having got it in volumes" (they are all the same) such celebratory narratives do not displace the persistence of underhanded depictions in popular print content. There is a flip side in the rush to talk up the "gifts" of Indigenous athletes and that is to imply the need for caution surrounding the undisciplined nature of Indigenous athletes. This is reflected in the following

assertion relating to the recent recruitment of "hard man" Byron Pickett to the Melbourne Football Club: "Laud Byron: Melbourne is glad to have employed the sometimes undisciplined but gifted Byron Pickett" (Baum, 2006, p. 5).

Indigenous athletes are constructed in essentialist terms; embodying distinctive traits that are sought after by the AFL. This is represented in the following narrative: "Their instant reaction is to use their speed and bounce the ball. You can see Michael Long there every time. I think they're a team of Michael Longs" (former AFL Chief Wayne Jackson commenting on young men in the Northern Territory, cited in Linnell, 1997, p. 8). League representatives, in admiring the "instant reactions" of Indigenous men, set the barometer for opportunity in Australian sport much like Entine's construct of the fast twitch fiber presumed to be genetically encoded in the African athlete. For Entine the presence of the successful black athlete serves the basis for celebrating race difference. In light of presumptions about Indigenous athletic performance, it is not surprising that the AFL promotes Indigenous presence in the national code through the creation of pathways. In 1997, the AFL introduced the Kickstart Program to provide a pathway for Indigenous youth in the Northern Territory into the AFL (Linnell, 1997).

The creation of Indigenous pathways, positively intended, has important implications for Indigenous social and economic mobility especially as the realities of competition are likely to be glossed over in popular culture. Rarely, is it mentioned that few aspirants enjoy a career beyond five years or that restrictive conditions surround Indigenous participation (Coram, 2004, 2007). Stereotypes about Indigenous abilities suggest that they are likely to be recruited to fill a niche role – that is to kick impossible miracle goals – to create "magic". Moreover, Indigenous inclusion in the elite code is a recent phenomenon. Until recently, a number of AFL clubs did not recruit Indigenous athletes such as the Hawthorn Football Club on the basis that "they are creative spirits" who cannot be relied upon (Coram, 2007). The presumption of Indigenous efficacy for sport as a pathway to employment has the endorsement of Indigenous leaders. The former Chairman of the now disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Geoff Clark, is quoted as saying: "Aboriginal talent was still largely untapped and that with better infrastructure and talent programs the proposition of Indigenous players in the game could double. Other States could produce more players ... Victoria is untapped" (Niall, 2000, p. 3).

The celebration of "Aboriginal talent" can be viewed as a representation of channelling. Institutions are encouraged to broaden their processes and Indigenous young people to think about sport as an option for opportunity. Further reading of popular media culture suggests the imprint of a natural progression into sport for black youth. Indigenous progression toward

sport arguably is conveyed through the representation of Indigenous "worth". The former AFL team coach Robert Walls (2006) declares in reference to the emerging presence of Indigenous athletes in the elite code of Australian Rules football: "they have proved their worth" in part through their "magical and mischievous qualities". By implication, worth asserts the acceptance of Indigenous people into sport in the vein of the "floodgates are about to open".

The presumption of Indigenous high performance in Australian football is noted in research examining the context of Indigenous participation through analysis of positional segregation in the Australian Football League (AFL). Through a systematic reading of all positions assigned to Indigenous athletes for the entire 1998 AFL season it was found that Indigenous athletes most frequently occupied non-thinking or instinctive positions requiring "bursts of speed" and or "turn of pace" – changing direction (Hallinan et al., 1999). A significant finding was the absence of Indigenous athletes in key positions requiring leadership and discipline. These findings supported the hypothesis that race stereotypes about black athletic performance and the absence of intellect influence the positions assigned to Indigenous athletes.

Cultural and racial differences marked not just by physical but also by cognitive/emotional quotients underpin the construct of Indigenous sporting acumen. The applauding of Indigenous athletes frequently coincides with their critical attention. Typically, Indigenous athletes are constructed as "troubled". The tabloid headline in reference to the former "footy strongman" Robert Muir entitled "Mad dog Muir: Sex, drugs, violence" (Birnbauer, 2004) epitomises the archetype of Indigenous athletes leading pathological lives. Although this article is sympathetic to Muir and his struggles in retirement, it reaffirms the stereotype of Indigenous pathology through reference to his alcoholism and violence. This in turn brings to light the contradictory underbelly in seeking to apportion role model to the athlete who is held up to public scrutiny.

Organised violence is central to the culture of the AFL. However, some narratives depict the on-field aggression of Indigenous athletes in an Indigenous-specific and or racial context. Following a series of heavy on-field clashes the player Byron Pickett was constructed as dangerous, which was achieved in part by listing his "hits" on opponents. The byline read: "Byron Pickett is known as the AFL's human cannonball and he more than lives up to his reputation" (Gullan, 2003, p. 110). Pickett's Aboriginality is made clear through a pictorial revealing his mouth guard adorned with the Aboriginal flag and a "noble savage" like cartoon of a traditional Aborigine dressed in loin cloth and holding a spear (Gullan, 2003, p.110). To trivialise traditional Indigenous culture in a cartoon is pernicious since the "playful" style of the cartoon allows for an out from

accusations of bigotry. The portrayal of Pickett as a "human cannonball" is significant given that he was named as an ambassador to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literacy and Numeracy Program launched by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, in 2000. The strategy, which aims to lift school attendance rates, address hearing and health problems that affect educational performance, train more teachers for Indigenous communities and apply transparent measures of success, cites the patronage of ambassadors recruited from members of the Indigenous community including Indigenous athletes (Howard, 2000).

Indigenous "learning" and the role model in Indigenous education policy

To appreciate the Indigenous athlete role model it is crucial to explore Indigenous cultural frameworks for learning and Indigenous policy documents. According to Harris (1990), Indigenous learning is shared, indirect and takes place in an informal group setting. Harris (1990, pp. 38-39) identifies five Aboriginal styles of learning relating to observation or imitation, real life, trial and error, context-specific skills and personal orientation not information orientation. Harris was concerned not so much with learning in the classroom but informal learning that occurs outside of the school setting. Though it is accepted that there is a need to "move on from learning style" developed by Steve Harris in the 1970s (Malin, 1997) it is conceivable that styles of learning related to observation and person orientation inform role modelling to young people particularly in the context of sport. If popular culture promulgates the athlete as the ideal model for learning then it is possible to presuppose, given the marginalisation of Indigenous youth in education settings and the persistence of stereotypes of the absence of Indigenous intellect, that the young "learn" that their entry into sport for example is "natural". This is to assume that the athlete as a representative of popular culture has the capacity to instil desire in the pursuit of a pathway to social and economic mobility.

The construct of the role model has been in place in Indigenous education policy for some time. *Yalca: A partnership in education and training for the new millennium* (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated & Office of School Education, 1990), the Koorie Education Policy document negotiated between the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and the Office of Education Victoria, lists the strategy of the Aboriginal Mentor Program (AMP) operating pilot programmes in regional cities. The aim of the programme is to increase the participation of Koorie students at all levels of education through the development of a supportive culturally relevant learning environment (1990, p. 14). *Partnership in Education* (1990, p. 14) documents

that "the concept of a mentor as an extension of the cultural learning styles of Koorie people is new to the Victorian education system".

At the centre of the Indigenous role model concept is the community setting where elders or community leaders facilitate discussion with young people. The Indigenous Mentor Scheme (IMS) established by the Victorian branch of the now-disbanded national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission links older with younger members of the community (Indigenous sport program, n. d.). This is consistent with self-governance (self-determination) that is to institute Indigenous practice for change – the cornerstone of Indigenous education policy (Schwab, 1996).

The role model is consistent with leadership. This is captured in organisations established in support of the broad base building of Indigenous leadership programmes. The Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC) established in 1999 has as its mission to engage with young people and to train the next generation of Indigenous leaders (Dodson, 2003). The aims of the AILC are to:

- foster the development of leadership ability and the skills of Indigenous peoples, conduct educational and experiential courses and seminars in leadership and professional development;
- develop materials for education and training in leadership;
- promote indigenous leadership skills and ability; and,
- create forums for indigenous people to share ideas, experience and skills (Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre, n.d.).

AILC is relevant to Indigenous role model programmes because the underlying objective is to self-govern and to decide what works "best" for Indigenous youth in communal efforts to create change.

Role model (or mentor) programmes have been strategic in drawing athletes to programmes. The Indigenous Ambassador's Program (IAP), which recruits members of the community from all "walks of life" including academics and sports stars, sets as its aim to: "promote the importance of education, literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students and their parents" (Indigenous Ambassador's Program, n.d.). Of concern is the fact that one of the 18 ambassadors named in the IAP, an athlete, was charged with rape (Wilson, 2004a). This is not a question of the suitability of an Indigenous athlete engaging as a role model but of the contradiction surrounding the ambassadorial role attributed to an athlete with at the very least a history of questionable conduct.

In 2001, the Victorian Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation (VAYSR) introduced the Role Model Program

(RMP) to Indigenous young people in Victoria (Coram, 2004). This programme is built around workshops in which Indigenous athletes, who undergo training to be a role model, facilitate discussion around life skills, goal setting, and encourage young people to participate in sports activities. The programme incorporates community time where young people, role models and members of the community share in a sense of mutual belonging.

Institutions such as the AFL contribute to the training of athletes. For instance, the AFL supports the Role Model Program administered by VAYSR by releasing athletes from their obligations as AFL athletes to undergo role model training under the auspice of Athlete Development Australia (ADA). By virtue of their status in popular culture, the role model initiative relies on "profile" to create interest in young people. The athlete is the lynch pin for drawing young people, which Indigenous administrators understand and indeed "tap" into (Coram, 2004). In a global world of heroes and celebrity, the mythic figure of the sporting hero plays a significant role in gaining the attention of young people.

Given the recruitment of Indigenous athletes to RPM primarily from the AFL it is implicit that role models are mostly male. Consequently, male role models outnumber female role models. In two fieldtrips to observe Indigenous athletes engage with young people in 2003-2004, I observed two female role models compared to 12 male role models. In follow-up conversations with administrators, it was apparent that administrators are keenly aware of the need for female role models and for role models from fields other than sport (Coram, 2004).

A common objective to the role model initiative is positive intervention but the organisation of role model programme is likely to differ across global and local contexts. That is to say, essentialist assumptions about the black athletic body underpin constructs of Indigenous athletes whereas cultural formations influence the contours of programmes to suit local needs. Administrators take advice from community leaders in terms of what is needed most and what will be most effective (Coram, 2004). Aspects of the role model are consistent with Indigenous frameworks for learning. Indigenous administrators place great value on sharing and storytelling in an effort to establish common identity between role models and young people. Young people "work" in pairs as do the role models in workshops to ensure that no one is left out. Moreover, community elders may be present in support of young people and to ensure that cultural etiquette and practice are observed such as not looking directly into the eyes of a person speaking (Coram, 2004). Shared learning is intended to reflect Indigenous perspectives for change. In other aspects related to role model programmes, young people are encouraged to "have a go" at kicking a football, bouncing a basketball

and kick boxing, for example, with the emphasis on having fun. This puts the body at the centre of the biopolitics of performativity in terms of the athlete role model and the responses of young people to mimic them. It also begs the question of what it is that young people see and learn.

■ The dichotomy of the damaged hero

Contemporary sports stars are constructed as villains, fools and heroes (Lines, 2001). Growing media intrusion signifies the contemporary sports star as a damaged hero. The dichotomy of heroes and heroines as celebrity creates the current dilemma as to whether sports stars can or should be worthy role models for young people (Lines, 2001, p. 292). In light of this, the celebrity of the Indigenous athlete must be weighed up against their critical attention in the mainstream press since their archetypal representation is of leading pathological lives.

Off-field activities of athletes especially those that breach social mores such as public drunkenness fill the pages of the mainstream press. Elite athletes, who have been "caught" drink driving or charged for brawling in public places typically result in their respective clubs scurrying to minimise the damage to reputation and standing in the community through expressions of regret and acknowledgement of the impact on young people. The offending athlete is required to undertake community work as penance. The dichotomy of the damaged hero, noted by Lines in the British context, is reflected in Australian media content. In 2004, two cases of gang rape involving Indigenous AFL athletes have become known. One is reported to have paid compensation to the victim (Wilson, 2004a).

Drink-driving offences for Indigenous AFL athletes were reported in 2004 with one offender agreeing to support the launch of an Indigenous lighthouse for homeless Indigenous people (Webster, 2004, p. 3). In 2004 the winner of the Norm Smith medal for the best player in the AFL grand final, Byron Pickett, crashed his car as a drunk driver (Wilson, 2004b). This is worth noting because the recruitment of Pickett to the national literacy and numeracy initiative introduced in 2000 raises questions about the contradictory location of the role model. This is not to criticise Pickett but to question the positioning of Indigenous athletes as agents of change mediated through the investiture of role model programmes. Nevertheless the attribution of role model status to athletes, whose private lives become public consumption, calls into question the mode of learning invested in the athlete/role model. It remains, in any case, that the role model cannot adequately stand in for the verities of institutional practice in education.

The task of diverting "at-risk" young people calls for an examination of the role model. MacCallum and Beltman (1999, p. 1) draw on Yancey (1998) to define

role model in the sense as exemplary or worthy of imitation. Contrary to the notion that celebrity role models infuse positive responses in young people, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) contend that the influence of superstars is likely to be demoralising (cited in MacCallum and Beltman, 1999, p. 29). Celebratory role model discourses are forked because the real conditions that have produced these relationships are excluded. Role models may produce anxiety in young people about their prospects of being able to live up to the perceived successes of role models. This contradicts an earlier study by Castine and Roberts (1974) who found through survey of young people that they select sports people as role models in preference to teachers and parents. They interpreted the preference for role models compared to teachers as a rejection of authority.

■ The silences of selection and the strategic compromise

The selection of the role model is a political process that is grounded in the historical (Houston, 1996, p. 148). Role models cannot be held accountable for the messages they give out and yet they have this enormous cultural authority (Houston, 1996, p. 157). There is a deep moral faith surrounding the role model but faith is not good enough (Houston, 1996, p. 148). Houston's analysis reveals the shallowness in relying on messages delivered in the popular imaginary of sporting iconoclasm in place of structure as a conduit for renewed learning.

The role model is typically viewed as an antidote for members of communities seen as diseased (Britzman, 1993). The uncritical acceptance of goodness and morality attributed to the role model prevents any critical discussion of how morality is constituted (Britzman, 1993, p. 38). In addition to this, role models are selected on the basis of cultural relevance. That is, role models are selected on the basis of shared cultural or racial origins as the basis of interventions aimed at altering the lives of "at-risk" youth. The purpose of the role model is to provide an example of personal success achieved within the laws and customs of the main culture. Furthermore, the selection of the role model is complicated by the fact that most are male an implication of which is that the female population plays a passive role (Marqusee, 1995). Clearly, a major silence surrounding the role model particularly in the context of sport is the attention paid to young men as if they are in need of more "urgent" care (given their traditional status of "bread winner") compared to young women.

Role modelling is referred to as mimesis or imitation. For Taussig (1993), mimesis entails the capacity to be like and to be different. He argues that mimesis represents both continuity and transformation through performing bodies. It is not a blue print for action but rather the ability to cope with change and continuity at

the same time. Mimesis is explicitly tied to the body and through mimesis people can dramatise and negotiate understandings of themselves and others. If as Taussig (1993) claims role modelling can be understood in the context of performance then it stands that the black athlete/role model invokes narratives not only of gendered constructions of masculinity (power and strength) but also racialised constructions of animalism and sexuality. This is significant since Taussig essentially interprets mimesis as transformative yet the black body typically seen in such rigid terms (in matters of performance) can hardly be treated as transformative especially in the context of learning.

Critical scholars in contrast are inclined to treat mimesis or mimicry as a blueprint for assimilation, for being little more than a compromised version of the dominant culture.

For Bhabha (1994) mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable "other"; a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Mimicry is a strategy of desire – to guide the excluded toward social acceptance (Bhabha, 1994, p. 130). Mimicry is a problem of colonial subjection, of black semblance, a less-authentic replication of the dominant other (Bhabha, 1994, p. 131). Drawing on the work of Bhabha, Crichlow (1999) takes the view that the role model functions as a strategic compromise in moving between resistance and dominance without disrupting the existing order. There is the appearance of levelling the playing field but only through the production of a subject of difference that is almost the same (Crichlow, 1999). Imagined identity attributes are artificially fused. The role model performs more so an officially designated expectation and less so a counter-position of resistance and transformation (Crichlow, 1999, p. 13). It is politically important to challenge the assumption that the model can make a difference and to examine not only how conventional role model discourses helps to sustain inequality but also how its limitations reveal subversive possibilities in role model relationships (Crichlow, 1999, p. 24). Bhabha establishes, which Crichlow and Dyson build on, the core argument that colonial mimicry is the original desire "to be like" in this case to be like the colonial master but never quite the same. It is at this point that the "tragedy" comes to light since it is the role model who implores young people to try to succeed in a culture that requires winners and losers.

■ The logic of domination

To identify with role models means that students are susceptible to losing their own identity. According to Morgan (1996) role modelling is a powerful pedagogical device but not in ways supportive of young people. Role models constitute a sell-out to the patriarchal establishment (Fisher, 1988, p. 211). Heroes foster a dangerous illusion given as capitalist and patriarchal

structures prevent success for all. The liberal emphasis on the role model sets up women for cooption in place of justice. Role modelling perpetuates the logic of domination of looking up rather than around. Role modelling is like falling in love, a kind of romanticism with moral faith (Fisher, 1988, p. 220). Faith does not give knowledge of the future, nor of knowledge of how to overcome the difficulties that divide. One should look to teachers who can be held accountable as opposed to role models who cannot. Black role models serve as powerful symbolic reference points that camouflage processes of discrimination. They convey the simple message that they have overcome thereby acting as living symbols of the equal opportunity process (Guinier, 1997, p. 76). Black role models are expected to be quiet. Young people must know implicitly that success does not erase race history yet this is precisely what the role model is expected to do.

■ Conclusion

The appeal of the Indigenous athlete/role model to learners alienated from or within the mainstream suggests an interesting pedagogic tension for understanding the cultural contexts of Indigenous learning and the relationship of the athletic body to this. Critiques surrounding the role model noted elsewhere suggest important considerations for the Indigenous context in Australia. The role model functions to limit the expression of solidarity and can increase anxiety in youth about their ability to "perform". Considerable faith is invested in the role model to initiate change. However, the role model embodies contradictory meanings on the possibilities for success in capitalist societies. The easy acceptance of the role model works to bypass the realities of competition, which is paradoxically to ensure the status quo. Individualism is at the core since structural impediments to achieving social and economic equality are overlooked in the privileging of the athlete as a model for opportunity.

The construct of the athlete as role model hides the frailty of what is on offer, in reality little more than an inducement to emulate or be like the role model. In this context, it can be said that role modelling perpetuates the civilising mission. The implications for Indigenous learning are such that the onus for change has circumvented institutional practice to young people themselves. Liberalism means that the oppressed, the marginalised have little option but to accept the dictates of the dominant culture including the understanding that role models have sufficient power to bring about meaningful change. Essentialist narratives depicting the physical prowess of Indigenous athletes in popular culture bring to light not only the silences surrounding performance but also more importantly the not so soft, sell about where opportunity lies for Indigenous youth. The athlete role model is read by young people as an example of success in the dominant culture. This

is to mark the formation of desire in the making of learning through popular culture.

■ Acknowledgements

I am most appreciative of the insightful and helpful comments to come out of the review process, which were integral to setting the context to the article. Many thanks.

■ References

- Armstrong, E. (1996). The commodified 23 or Michael Jordan as text. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13(4), 325-343.
- Attwood, A. (2000, 16 September). The athletes and performers finally take centre stage. *The Age*, p. 3.
- Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC). (n.d.). *About the AILC*. Retrieved 3 Jan, 2003, from <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/ailec/whatis.htm>.
- Australian Football League. (2002). *Australian Football League information sheets: Influence of Aboriginal players*. Retrieved 3 October, 2006 from <http://www.afl.com.au/Season2007/News/NewsArticle/tabid/208/Default.aspx?newsId=2539>.
- Baum, G. (2006, 29 April). Laud Byron: Melbourne is glad to have employed the sometimes undisciplined but gifted Byron Pickett. *The Age*, Football p. 5.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Birnbaumer, W. (2004, 12 April). Mad dog Muir: Sex, drugs, violence. *The Age*, pp. 4-5.
- Blake, M. (2004, 27 March). A man of his people. *The Age*, p. 5.
- Blucher, P. (2004, 2 June). White's voyage from troubled youth to role model. *The Age*, p. 22.
- Britzman, D. (1993). Rolling models: Gender and multicultural education. In S. Bilken & D. Pollard (Eds.), *Gender and education: Ninety-second yearbook of the national society for the study of education* (pp. 25-42). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Castine, S., & Roberts, G. (1974). Modeling in the socialization process of the black athlete. *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 9, 59-74.
- Coram, S. (2004). *The relevance of Indigenous role model policy utilizing elite Indigenous athletes to Indigenous education policy: A critical race approach*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria.
- Coram, S. (2007). *The real and the unreal: Hyper narratives of Indigenous athletes and the changing significance of race*. Melbourne, VIC: Common Ground.
- Crichlow, W. (1999). Be like who? The end of the innocent role model in higher education. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 15, 13-38.
- Dodson, M. (2003, 23 September). How an Indigenous leader should look and sound today. *The Age*, p. 11.
- Dyson, M. (1993). Be like Mike: Michael Jordan and the pedagogy of desire. *Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 64-72.
- Edwards, H. (1969). *The revolt of black athlete*. London, UK: The Free Press.
- Entine, J. (2000). *Taboo: Why black athletes dominate sport and why we're afraid to talk about it*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.

- Fisher, B. (1988). Wandering in the wilderness: The search for women role models. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13, 211-233.
- Given, J. (1995). Red, black, gold to Australia: Cathy Freeman and the flags. *Media Information Australia*, 75, 48-55.
- Guinier, L. (1997). Of gentlemen and role models. In A. Wing (Ed.), *Critical race feminism: A reader* (pp. 73-80). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Gullan, S. (2003, 23 August). King of the hit parade. *Herald Sun*, pp. 110-111.
- Hallinan, C., Bruce, T., & Coram, S. (1999). Up front and beyond the centre line: Australian Aborigines in elite Australian rules football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 34(4), 369-382.
- Harris, S. (1990). *Two-way Aboriginal schooling: Education and cultural survival*. Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Hoberman, J. (1997). *Darwin's athletes: How sport has damaged black America and preserved the myth of race*. Boston, MA: Houton Mifflin.
- Houston, B. (1996). Role models: Help or hindrance in the pursuit of autonomy? In A. Diller, B. Houston, K. Morgan & M. Ayim (Eds.), *The gender question in education: Theory, pedagogy and politics* (pp. 144-160). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Howard, J. (2000, 29 March). *Practical steps to improve Indigenous education* [Media release]. Retrieved 23 September, 2007, from <http://www.pm.gov.au/media/release/2000/IndigenousEducation2903.cfm>.
- Indigenous Ambassador's Program (IAP)*. (n.d.). Retrieved 3 January, 2003, from www.dest.gov.au/schools/indigenous/ambassadors.htm.
- Indigenous Sport Program (ISP)* [Brochure]. (n.d.). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Active Australia, Australian Sports Commission: Author.
- Ker, P. (2006, 25 February). Protestors to set up camp in no-go zone. *The Age*, pp. 1-2.
- Lapchick, R. (1995). Race and college sport: A long way to go. *Race and Class*, 36, 87-94.
- Lines, G. (2001). Villains, fools, or heroes? Sports stars as role models for young people. *Leisure Studies*, 20, 285-303.
- Linnell, G. (1997, 4 August). AFL aiding in search for next Michael Long. *The Age*, Football, p. 8.
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 91-103.
- MacCallum, J., & Beltman, S. (1999). *Role models for young people: What makes an effective role model program. A report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme*. Hobart, TAS: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
- Malin, M. (1997) Theorising Aboriginal education: Moving on to...what? *Education Australia*, 35, 6-9.
- Marqusee, M. (1995). From role model to Mohamed Ali. *Race and Class*, 36, 1-29.
- Messner, M. (1994). Sports and the politics of inequality. In M. Messner & D. Sabo (Eds.), *Sex, violence and power in sports: Rethinking masculinity* (pp. 128-149). Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Morgan, K. (1996). The perils and paradoxes of the bearded mothers. In A. Diller, B. Houston, K. Morgan & M. Ayim (Eds.), *The gender question in education: Theory, pedagogy and politics* (pp. 124-134). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Niall, J. (2000, 5 March). Aboriginal AFL boom. *The Sunday Age*, News p. 3.
- Osbourne, P., & Segal, L. (1994). Extracts from gender as performance: An interview with Judith Butler. *Radical Philosophy*, 67, 32-39.
- Russell, D. (2004, 8 August). The new king Richard. *The Sunday Age*, p. 36.
- Schwab, R. (1996). *Having it "both ways": The continuing complexities of community-controlled Indigenous education* (Discussion Paper 111). Canberra, ACT: Australian National University, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Silvester, J. (2004, 22 May). Magic turned tragic: When the smallest cog paid the highest price. *The Age*, p. 6.
- Taussig, M. (1993). *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of senses*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated and Office of School Education. (1990). *Yalca: A partnership in education and training for the new millennium*. Melbourne, VIC: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Walls, R. (2006, 6 May). Syd magic usher in the magicians. *The Age*, Sport p. 2.
- Webster, A. (2004, 22 May). Saints and a hard man helping homeless kids. *The Age*, p. 3.
- Wilson, C. (2004a, 8 May). Why football needs women. *The Age*, p. 5.
- Wilson, C. (2004b, 17 October). Pickett incident hurts image as role model. *The Sunday Age*, p. 6.
- Yancey, A. K. (1998). Building positive self-image in adolescents in foster care: The use of role models in an interactive group approach. *Adolescence*, 33, 253-267.
- Zylinska, J. (2004). Judith Butler and the bio-politics of immigration. *Cultural Studies*, 18(4), 523-537.

■ About the author

Dr Stella Coram is a Research Associate in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Melbourne. She is the author of *The real and the unreal: Hyper narratives of Indigenous athletes and the changing significance of race* (2007, Common Ground).