



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*.

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DISCIPLINING THE SAVAGES, SAVAGING THE DISCIPLINES

Martin Nakata

Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007, viii+247pp,
ISBN 978 0 85575 548 5

Reviewed by Nancy M. Williams

*School of Social Science, University of Queensland,
Brisbane, Queensland, 4072, Australia*

This is an important book. It is a philosophical work by an outstanding scholar and comprehending the dimensions of its argument is essential for anybody who is engaged in research or education that involves Indigenous Australians. Its author, Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander, holds a Professorial Chair and is Director of the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology in Sydney. His PhD was awarded in 1997 by James Cook University, and he has published and spoken widely since 1991 on the experiences of Indigenous learners at all levels of engagement with non-Indigenous educational and research institutions. *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines* is not an easy read, but there is no indication that Nakata expected it would be: "one of the goals of this book is to persuade the reader that understandings of the Indigenous position must be 'complicated' rather than simplified through any theoretical framing" (p. 12). In meeting the challenge of engaging with Nakata's intellect and the precise manner in which he guides the reader through the legacy of colonial imperialism and its shadow on the disciplines of the academy, we are led to understand the complex nature of what he defines as the "cultural interface" and, finally, that opportunities and outcomes for Australian Indigenous people could be improved if education issues, especially those in the higher education sector, were approached through an Indigenous standpoint theory. A critical feature of the standpoint theory is that it is a method of enquiry.

The book begins with Nakata's account of three generations of his family's history in the Torres Strait and his own journey through schooling there and on the mainland to his eventual PhD research and ends with a consideration of the position of Indigenous students toward the end of the third decade of Indigenous higher education. In his concluding remarks he addresses himself to teachers and learners in Indigenous higher education and says, "There is no doubt that my experiences growing up in a remote Island community towards the end of an era of paternal exclusion coupled with my educational history and university experience have shaped my thinking in relation to the project of Indigenous education" (p. 222). Among other things, the book is

an intellectual autobiography that compels the reader to comprehend an Islander learner's experience as political and to infer that it is the same for all Indigenous learners. To read the book in its entirety from Nakata's introduction through his concluding remarks is the surest way to comprehension because the logic of his analysis emerges from his own experiences as an Islander learner and educator.

Nakata has identified a number of themes and arranged them in three parts. Part 1 examines the way Islanders were portrayed in 1888 by a missionary of the London Missionary Society in *Among the cannibals of New Guinea* (MacFarlane, 1888), and by the scientists of the 1898 *Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait* (Haddon, 1901-1935). The missionaries saw Islanders as people in a timeless past and with no active role in the present, and the Cambridge expedition scientists characterised them as people in a lower stage of development than people of the West.

Chapter 7 of Part 1 is a penetrating history of the administration of the Torres Strait Islands by successive colonial bureaucracies that dealt with Islander people as "overgrown children" and as "dependents of the state" who needed protection from "outside influences". It is an excellent political history of the region dealing with the interplay of church, government, and commercial interests from 1880 to the present, when political autonomy has become a possibility.

Part 2 focuses on texts in the field of education. Beginning with a reference to the general acceptance until the 1960s that Indigenous Australians' intelligence was less than that of white Australians, Nakata examines texts in the discipline of education from the early 1960s to the present. He attributes the shift to regarding Indigenous children not as less intelligent than the "general community" but as disadvantaged members of it as part of the "post-Second World War human rights discourse that underpinned global decolonisation, rather than as any outcome of educational research" (p. 156). Nakata surveys the three main areas of research on education in the Torres Strait – history, language, and culture – during the past 25 years and he finds that previous theoretical premises and assumptions have persisted in the published results in each area and also that there has been little improvement as measured in educational outcomes. He then scrutinises the emergence of an area of research and a body of literature beginning in the 1980s variously called "Traditional Knowledge", "Traditional Ecological Knowledge", or similar terms, and, more recently, "Indigenous Knowledge". He finds a contested space between the Western knowledge system and the Indigenous knowledge system characterised by a difficult space of translation between Indigenous Knowledge experts and scientific experts on the ground and a larger intellectual discourse that is consistently framed by Western categories of classification.

In Part 3, charting “a new way forward,” Nakata characterises the “Cultural Interface” as the “lived space” where Islanders make and remake themselves as they deal with competing and changing traditions. This is a conceptualisation that “challenges the simple binary construction of Islander people as cultural ‘others’ and ruptures theorising of ‘problems’ as arising out of ‘clashes’ between traditional and Western values” (p. 12). On the basis of this conceptualisation, Nakata presents a standpoint theory as a schema for future exploration of the space where the disciplinary and knowledge practices of the persisting colonial regimes interact with those of Indigenous Australians. Nakata describes in his concluding remarks how employing this schema would benefit Indigenous learners, particularly those in higher education.

MacFarlane (1888), the missionary who wrote *Among the cannibals of New Guinea*, saw his role and the introduction of Christianity, as did all subsequent missionaries, in a positive light. But, as Nakata observes,

MacFarlane’s mission, to save the souls of the Islanders through Christian guidance, came quite clearly from his own worldview. What his missionary view did not include, of course, was crucial: this was the lived reality of Islanders in all its complexity, with its own history and its own goals ... they sowed the seeds which would change the mental landscape ... for they brought with them, again ready-made, a set of philosophical principles – a new explanation of the universe; a new way of seeing the world; a new point of view (p. 25).

At the same time they were changing the landscape irrevocably.

Nakata’s description and analysis of the methods and published results of the Cambridge Expedition are detailed and include the topics the expedition’s scientists labelled linguistics, psychology (including vision, visual acuity, visual powers, colour nomenclature, and illusions), physiology (hearing, smell, taste, reaction times, touch, thresholds of pain, size-weight illusions, and blood pressure), and anthropology. Nakata’s examination of the scientists’ methods and their analyses is thorough (one is tempted to say relentless) and amply justifies his conclusion that sometimes in spite of the evidence they themselves reported, the scientists consistently framed their findings in ways to support the prevailing European assumption that Torres Strait Islanders were in all the ways they measured (sometimes by methods they themselves acknowledged were flawed), inferior to whites. Nakata asks, since the findings in these voluminous reports are so inaccurate (not to say inaccurately conceived), should they not be proscribed? Should Islanders be warned not to read

them? On the contrary, Nakata says, they should be basic reading for Torres Strait Islander students: “What better way for them to develop critical reading skills, to gain some understanding of systems of thought and knowledge production and to anchor down a Torres Strait or Indigenous standpoint in students’ analyses of systems of thought and knowledge” (p. 195). He also remarks that the information therein “is really only interesting for what it says about the viewpoint of the scientist who developed it – a viewpoint which ... it describes very well” (p. 75). The same might be said of any outsider’s writing about “others”.

Examination of policy and practice in the education of Islander students leads Nakata to conclude that, “Just as the early literature inscribed Islanders as ‘lost souls’, ‘savages’, and child-like’, the educational literature of the 1980s and 1990s continued the same mode of abstracting to another disciplinary plane the material realities and conditions of the Islander” (p. 177). Such a “culturalist” view of Islanders that treats them as an undifferentiated population and ignores internal differences is reflected, for example, in the 1989 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989). Even bilingual programs tend to ignore the “fact that English language communities come from and still are part of an oral tradition”, and they also inadequately explore “the value of complexities in the lifeworld of Islanders in their everyday communication” (pp. 176-177). Nakata finds that this “culturalist agenda has become practice among education experts who have taken up positive aspects of the myths of their discipline and, in turn, constituted new knowledge without any knowledge of the Islander people ... that continues to silence the standpoints of the Islanders. As ‘culture’ continues to be deployed today without a critique of underlying theoretical schemas, the various forms of representation of the Islander will effectively continue as a fundamental part of the problem as [well as] a fundamental part of the solution” (p. 181).

Some writers have said Indigenous Knowledge and Western scientific knowledge arise from such disparate cosmological, epistemological, and ontological grounds that they cannot be reconciled. Noting that and also the current widespread interest in Indigenous knowledge systems, Nakata asks what we need to consider when Indigenous Knowledge “is brought into relation with the disciplines in the academy” (p. 183). His concern is that because Indigenous Knowledge has inevitably become commodified, attempts to integrate it into research or management activities may reify a dualism and ignore the social contexts in which the knowledge is created, maintained, and transmitted. Nakata acknowledges that recording and preservation of endangered knowledge is urgent and important for Indigenous communities, although he suggests that “knowledge recovery led by Indigenous communities would not look the same as that led by scientists,

development technologists and conservationists – even when participatory” (pp. 186-187). Moreover, attempts to integrate Indigenous Knowledge and scientific systems of knowledge rarely deal in any critical way with the distinctions between the two as systems and thus do not make explicit the contested space in which they interact. This leads Nakata to argue that, “addressing the theoretical underpinnings of practice is critical to any substantive understanding of knowledge systems” (p. 187). “In incorporating understandings of Indigenous Knowledge into curriculum areas, in asking our students to read accounts of it, or to discuss its potential applications in a range of professional contexts, or use it in applied ways, it must be acknowledged that we are screening it through a filter that positions it to serve our educational objectives, and which draws on our own prior theoretical investments in knowledge and knowledge practice” (p. 192).

It is immensely important to comprehend the complexity of the interactions that take place at the cultural interface as the basis of Nakata’s way forward. Explaining the position of Islanders requires rethinking of the space in which Islanders interact with others and then a deeper consideration of the ways in which the specificities of Islander experience are constituted in that space. Nakata investigates this space under descriptive headings – “Understanding complex trajectories at the interface”, “Islander positions in theories”, “Understanding continuity and discontinuity as a framework for the political space”, “Locating Islander agency”, “Incorporating everyday experience into theory” – that guide the reader through the multilayered, multifaceted interface and lead to the final section, “Towards an Islander standpoint”.

Construction of an Islander standpoint theory requires the recognition of the contested nature of Islander perspectives and narratives, but it can “never be reduced to the inclusion of Islander content, or the expression of Islander opinion through data, survey, consultation or advisory processes. These may provide the content but any Islander standpoint needs to emerge in the process of analysis ... It is much more about understanding and explicating the complex positioning that is constitutive of Islander experience at the Interface as the playing out of the constant struggle for meaning, the contestation over meaning; it is about the various readings that can be applied to give the experience meaning in a way that makes sense to those involved in understanding Islanders” (p. 212).

What an Indigenous standpoint theory would look like and how it might be conceptualised is a task that responds to the question implicit in the many dimensions of the cultural interface – standpoint does not refer to a particular social position, but is an engagement with the kinds of questions found there. Nakata says,

For Indigenous students, academics and researchers, standpoint theory in my mind is a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible ‘the corpus of objectified knowledge about us’ as it emerges and organises understanding of our lived realities. I see this as theorising knowledge from a particular and interested position – not to produce the ‘truth’ of the Indigenous position but to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understanding of Indigenous people is caught up and implicated in its work (p. 215).

This objective makes stringent demands on Indigenous students, as Nakata warns: “That means finding a way to explore the actualities of the everyday and discover how to express them conceptually from within that experience, rather than depend on or deploy predetermined concepts and categories for explaining experience. For Indigenous students this requires the development of complex analytical and writing skills” (p. 215).

Nakata argues that the need is for

a theory that as its first principle can generate accounts of communities of Indigenous people in contested knowledge spaces, that as its second principle affords agency to people, and that as its third principle acknowledges the everyday tensions, complexities and ambiguities as the very conditions that produce the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions. In these ways we can deploy an Indigenous standpoint to help unravel and untangle ourselves from the conditions that delimit who, what or how we can or can’t be, to help see ourselves with some charge of the everyday, and to help understand our varied responses to the colonial world (p. 217).

Nakata’s concluding remarks are directed to “specific academic issues associated with the inclusion of ‘Indigenous’ content into the disciplines [of higher education] and the position of Indigenous students and academics [including how] to assist students so that their educational experience is of intellectual engagement with the content and methods of the disciplines in the light of their own experiences of being Indigenous, rather than of retreat into intellectual separation and isolation” (p. 218).

However, considerations other than how to make Indigenous knowledge part of more inclusive curricula need reflection before a discussion of teaching and learning issues associated with Indigenous Knowledge at the higher education level can take place. Unsurprisingly, Nakata identifies these considerations as dealing with “the location of Indigenous learners at the Cultural Interface” (p. 219). Although the

backgrounds of Indigenous teachers and learners are varied, there is nevertheless much that they share in their view of themselves in colonial Australia. "But Indigenous students and academics are also grounded in Western disciplines, through historical experience, through Christianisation, through the English language [and all that that entails]" (p. 220). As a result,

Indigenous students often feel the contradictions and tensions within having to align to one or the other, especially when they see weaknesses in examples and arguments on both sides of the divide ... How are students to suspend accepted thinking in one area without suspending allegiance to Indigenous interests? Can they take up other positions without being tagged either essentialist or assimilationist? If so, what are they? Not opening up theoretical propositions for more complicated discussion means that the dynamics of the Cultural Interface are sutured over in favour of the Western order of things and its constitution of what an Indigenous 'opposition' should be (p. 221).

Nakata believes that, "Currently professional preparation is inadequate in terms of equipping graduates to work the relevant elements of two knowledge systems together in the interests of better practice" (p. 222).

Nakata's concluding comments should be endorsed by anybody teaching Indigenous students or teaching courses that include Indigenous content: "The important thing, in my view, is not to be deluded about what we can achieve in higher education in relation to controlling Indigenous content or in shaping knowledge and practice to be uniquely and identifiably 'Indigenous' ... It is important ... that those concerned with the teaching of Indigenous content or issues in the disciplines orient students to approach this knowledge, not as the facts of Indigenous realities but as the context that provides the conditions for intellectual reflection and engagement with contemporary Indigenous issues" (p. 225).

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ROB RILEY: AN ABORIGINAL LEADER'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Quentin Beresford

Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006, xvi+374pp, ISBN 0780855755027

Reviewed by Nathan Woolford

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 4072, Australia

Indigenous Australia seems to fall on and off mainstream Australia's radar. Perhaps it is the Reserve mentality; if we can't see them we don't have to worry about them. However, modern media has changed all this – the treatment and conditions of Australia's Indigenous peoples can no longer be hidden or ignored. What began with Jim Hagan's famous 1976 speech to the United Nations on the treatment and conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, engaging the world's media, was a signpost to many Aboriginal activists of the time. One of those young activists was Rob Riley. He was to become one of the most outspoken Aboriginal leaders to emerge in the late 1970s. However, as Beresford thoughtfully charts in this book, the significance of Riley's life and contribution cannot be understood without understanding the defining experiences of his childhood.

In the mid-1950s Rob Riley was taken from his mother at six months of age and placed into the care of Sister Kate's. Sister Kate's was a cottage home for Aboriginal children with fair complexions, or "quarter-castes". The children were to be biologically and culturally assimilated following the policies of the state of West Australia, and famously espoused by a former Protector of Aborigines in West Australia A.O. Neville. In practical terms, for children at Sister Kate's this meant they were to be denied all contact with their families and their Aboriginality denied.

Rob Riley's time at Sister Kate's was to profoundly influence him the rest of his life. When Riley asked why no family visited him he was told by staff that he had no family and was an orphan, and further, was belted for asking. Although Aboriginality was a taboo topic at Sister Kate's when the children attended the local school they could not escape the racist taunts, creating an "us" and "them" mentality. And at the age of nine he was sexually assaulted by three other boys at Sister Kate's. It is hard to understand the trauma the assault must have caused to Riley when the other children, "Homies", had become his family.

In 1964 Robert Riley's mother Violet visited him at Sister Kate's. Violet then spent the next two years