



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.

are, he contends, “a product of our contemporary moment when forms of race-thinking have gained a new legitimacy as if they were ideology-free. The new authority of such views has been fused with neoliberal notions of personal responsibility so as to be able to confidently locate culpability in the pathology of the primitive” (p. 207).

Healy attempts to write a new history, a modest cultural history, which is how Healy puts it. Its subject matter is Aboriginality which is borrowed from Marcia Langton’s (1993) ‘*Well, I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television*’. Aboriginality is concerned with the “intercultural space of Aboriginality”. This refers to the way ideas about Aborigines and Aboriginality are culturally and textually produced, with little or no reference to the actual life experiences of Aboriginal people. *Forgetting Aborigines* consists of five essays (chapters), an introduction and conclusion. After the introduction to the main concept, arguments and themes, there are essays on television, art, heritage, museums and tourism, all key sites for the cultural production of Aboriginality. Throughout *Forgetting Aborigines* Healy directs the reader towards an understanding and appreciation of the ways in which public remembrance involves the forgetting real people, actual encounters, and messy and ambivalent histories. Healy argues, throughout these essays, that it is important to remember past habits of forgetfulness, that is to say that we (non-Indigenous and Indigenous) stop forgetting our forgetfulness and thus engage more directly with our messy, ambivalent and shared histories.

Much of the conceptualisation and argumentation in *Forgetting Aborigines* has resonance with international memory studies and could be used as a way of comparing the way in which Australia memorialises its past and the way in Europe does, for example. There is much in common and shared in the ways in which events are remembered and forgotten. When Healy makes comments, such as the “endless (re)discoveries of, and about, Aborigines are only possible because non-indigenous Australians forget their own forgetting”, there is a possibility that this insight might puzzle and challenge non-Indigenous Australian readers; yet, as a non-Indigenous Australian in Europe such a characterisation of remembering and forgetting reverberates with its emphasis, publicly through memorialisation, on remembering particular events especially the destruction of European Jewry to the (almost amnesic) denial of the near destruction of Sinti and Roma peoples, for example. On the other hand memorialisation can effect closure, seal the past, so we can emerge whole in an unblemished and amnesic present.

Forgetting Aborigines enables, as I indicated earlier, a more nuanced and complicated reading

of texts such *Bad Dreaming* and *The Politics of Suffering*, which in itself is a sufficient reason for reading (purchasing) it. It also enables a reader like me, travelling through Western and Central Europe to appreciate, often in unexpected ways, the remembrance and forgetting which is inscribed on the landscape and the cityscapes of major cities and smaller towns. But *Forgetting Aborigines* is not an easy read, made harder by the use of jargon and a tendency to engage in what seems at times a conversation with a group of mates. At times it discloses what I perceive to be a peculiar provincialism of scholars from the south east of Australia, especially Melbourne, and its affected use of Koori to represent a homogenous group of Aboriginal people. Notwithstanding my position, a Canberra based historian, this is a welcome book which should stimulate further work and interest on Australian cultures of memory in respect to Aboriginality. An added bonus is the illustrations, including various artworks, film stills, museum artefacts, photographs, tourism posters which also greatly enhance Healy’s argument.

■ References

- Langton, M. (1993). *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...: An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*. Sydney, NSW: Australian Film Commission.
- Nowra, L. (2007) *Bad dreaming: Aboriginal men’s violence against women and children*. North Melbourne, VIC: Pluto Press.
- Sutton, P. (2009). *The politics of suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus*. Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Publishing.

THE CITY’S OUTBACK

Gillian Cowlshaw

University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009, vi+264pp, ISBN 978 1 9214 108 7

Reviewed by Neil Harrison

Department of Education, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, 2109, Australia

Gillian Cowlshaw is adamant from the outset of *The City’s Outback* that she is not going to offer solutions. Rather, her task in this ethnography is to observe the lives of Aboriginal Australians living in Mt Drutt, a Western suburb of Sydney. She argues that their everyday lives have previously been concealed from the urban majority, and are “known mainly through shocking images, worrying statistics and concerned discourses that flood the press” (p. 3). To this end, Cowlshaw climbs in her car in

“cosmopolitan” Glebe (she has adopted the term “cosmopolitan” in her writings to refer to the divide in attitudes and values between white people living in the trendy inner city suburbs, and those living in rural areas of Australia), an inner suburb of Sydney and travels out to Western Sydney to collect her data for a slice of Aboriginal life in Mt Druitt. She tells us that the residents of inner Sydney only know Mt Druitt as they drive past on the motorway to stay at their weekend retreats in the Blue Mountains.

The author is assisted in her collection of data by a long-term Aboriginal friend Frank Doolan. He appears on the cover of the book, he assisted the launch and is the one who makes the stories possible as he introduces her to key informants in the community. Doolan is a paid go-between although as Cowlshaw indicates, such payment is questionable given that he loses most of his dole owing to the additional income. We learn quite a deal about their relationship, how it got off to a rocky start in Bathurst in 1981 when Doolan was a student in Cowlshaw’s Aboriginal Studies class.

There are a host of pitfalls to be managed by an author of ethnography about the lives of Aboriginal people, not least of which is the potential to misrepresent them in a homogenous image of Mt Druitt. Cowlshaw, however does a clever job at producing loose ends and consequently the people she writes about do not become effects of a stereotypical group. Indeed she raises a crucial question in respect to her purpose of telling the stories of Aboriginal people in the area; how would the stories of these people relate to the “history wars” that have previously pre-occupied sections of the Australian public? Cowlshaw emphasises that “here in Mt Druitt academic discourses are arcane and foreign, while violence and tragedy are intimate and familiar. There is no talk of invasion, massacre or genocide here, just stories of what happened to one’s family” (p. 91). Her ethnography documents the politics of Sydney rather than the politics of race and colonisation; this being a major departure from her previous work in north-western New South Wales. And in doing so, she does an admirable job at traversing the line between telling romantic tales of Sydney’s outback, and pathologising it.

However, there will be some readers who are irritated by her ambivalence and apparent reluctance to take a position in her writing. In restricting her writing task to interrupting the construction and reproduction of shocking images and inflamed discourses, she sells her story short, and as a consequence her study is more aligned with the non-Indigenous ethnographies and anthropologies of the 1990s, perhaps shackled by the revelations of James Clifford and others, of which she is aware. Because of its limited focus, it ultimately runs out of steam even when we reach the final section on

“fixing the past”, where it ends up looking tired and aimless. Whether Cowlshaw likes it or not, her cosmopolitan audience will read the book because they want to learn what she has to offer in terms of solutions and relationships. After all, the book raises most of the big issues including health, the Stolen Generations, the role of welfare agencies, the role of elders in the community, housing, questions of white and Aboriginal identities, land rights and education. And yet the book fails to be “quarrelsome and awkward” about any of these issues.

She has been around for a long time and is in a position to draw some conclusions about what is going on in Australia. She certainly did this in her politically astute paper on Black-White relations in Bourke, New South Wales (Cowlshaw, 2006; also 2004). So I was expecting a little more of this rather than the very tentative and conservative style that she adopts for *The City’s Outback*. She does however, make a bold bid for non-Indigenous people to speak up in the political climate that has developed over the past 20 years, but again she shackles her own attempts to actually say anything of ongoing significance by the end the book. I was surprised to read how Cowlshaw reflects on her own position in the book as being “quarrelsome and awkward” (p. 226). There is little evidence of this. There is, however, no doubt that Cowlshaw is a skilled academic writer and her ability to draw together and apply contemporary theory to everyday relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has long been a thrilling aspect of her work.

The City’s Outback will put the lives of Aboriginal people in Mt Druitt on the map for a small number of cosmopolitan Sydneysiders. But given Cowlshaw’s own admission that these people probably do not want to “be there”, perhaps she answers her own question regarding why anthropologists have traditionally stayed away from doing their own studies of the area. Mt Druitt is in their backyard; it is familiar and known. The places in the Northern Territory where Cowlshaw has also worked are like another country to most people in Sydney and Melbourne, and are intriguing and mysterious. They feel that they already know enough about Mt Druitt.

While I have so far focused on issues, the book is primarily concerned with the lives of people like Barney, Annette and Tina Jones. A group of friends and myself sat around the kitchen table recently discussing the impact of these voices – their stories remained passive and uninspiring, cut loose from any meaning they might usually have in the context of Mt Druitt. And I think herein lies the problem for the author of this book. The stories of most people interviewed remain divorced from the suburban context in which they live because Cowlshaw has spent insufficient time getting to know the area and what happens there from day to day. By the end of

the book, we know very little about the area in which the informants live, while Cowlishaw constantly questions why people in Sydney know so little about their own backyard. On the other hand, she spent years getting to know the town of Bourke and its people and this is reflected in the confident and balanced writings about this well known regional town in New South Wales.

There are enormous differences between the lives of the citizens of inner Sydney and of those living in the west of the city. Since I moved there three years ago, I rise each morning to news of the *sordid* and *scandalous* activities of people living in the west; another murder, a car chase, a drug bust or a drowning. Indeed, Mt Druitt has become a metonym for Sydney's wild west. Cosmopolitan Sydney is scrutinising daily what its western inhabitants are doing, albeit from the safe distance of the inner city and northern beaches. It is the Foucauldian panopticon par excellence; even "an obscene and pornographic spectacle" as described by Marcia Langton (p. 227). Perhaps the people of Mt Druitt would prefer to be left alone, and escape the ongoing scrutiny by media, academics and other outsiders. As Cowlishaw indicates, theirs is largely an existence rooted in family concerns, not in national politics and policy.

Will the author's attempt to interrupt the gross and over dramatised misrepresentations of Indigenous people make a difference to how the cosmopolitans themselves view Sydney's outback? Perhaps our relationships are to be developed through talking rather than through education and understanding. Indeed, it is time that education faced-up to some detailed analysis of its contribution to the lives of Indigenous people in Australia. We often read how education is perceived to be the "whole key" to unlocking a group's access to social and material capital and yet the 50 years of formal Australian schooling available to Indigenous people has provided few benefits, and perhaps with more problems to overcome. Frank Doolan (p. 209) captures the challenge in his exclamation "I know my mob are approachable so why can't whites get through to them?"

■ References

- Cowlishaw, G. (2004). *Blackfellas, whitefellas and the hidden injuries of race*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cowlishaw, G. (2006). Cultures of complaint: An ethnography of rural racial rivalry. *Journal of Sociology*, 42(4), 429-445.

THE LITTLE RED YELLOW BLACK BOOK: AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

Bruce Pascoe with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 2008, 1+139pp, ISBN 978 0 85575 61 54

Reviewed by Judith Powell

Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads, PO Box 183, Gympie, Queensland, 4570, Australia

The Little Red Yellow Black Book is a revised and expanded version of a 1994 publication by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and takes on the enormous task of being, as the title suggests, "an introduction to Indigenous Australia". The book is a small format, glossy publication of under 150 pages and provides a remarkable survey of the issues, histories and personalities of Indigenous Australia. It is unclear exactly who the audience is: the unnamed authors indicate that the purpose of the book is "so that all Australians (and visitors) might learn of our connection to this land in the hope that we might prosper together as a nation in full knowledge and acceptance of our shared history" (p. 2). This is a grand purpose, only partly realised.

The book is divided into four main sections: Who are We?; Culture and Sport; Participation and Governance; Resistance and Reconciliation. Each section includes a number of chapters and within each chapter there are break-out boxes with case studies, short biographies or details of particular issues. High quality illustrations add to the visual interest. Two large scale maps are included at the end of the book, but more detailed maps would greatly assist the reader, particularly visitors. Not everyone will be familiar with Ernabella, the Riverland, Lockhardt River and other places mentioned throughout the text. The format allows the reader to dip into sections and move around in a style reminiscent of a website, but some of the cross references are odd and it's unclear if they are editing errors.

The attempt to write a book for everyone is a bold one, but is one of the book's problems. By writing for everyone they have can end up writing for no one, and the language swings from clear and simple to complicated and bureaucratic. A primary school student