



# 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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or international visitor with little knowledge of the details of Australia's history would find the early chapters and their references to missions, reserves and assimilation difficult to follow without the historical context which is not provided until the final chapter on Resistance and Reconciliation. For contemporary Indigenous readers, on the other hand, asserting an Indigenous voice in the chapter "Who are We?" makes a forceful beginning.

Another problem with the book is the awkwardness of language that can't make up its mind. The "authorial" voice swings awkwardly from "we" and "us" to use of the third person, particularly when talking about Torres Strait Islanders. There are some particular comments that result from this odd voice. "We have always been artists" (p. 48), is nothing more than a motherhood statement. Over use of simplistic generalisations also leads to some confusing passages as for example where the statement that "sadly only a small number of our languages are spoken fluently today" (p. 23), is almost immediately followed by the assertion that "Indigenous Australians are among the nation's most skilled users of language" (p. 24). In the first chapter the contradictions are included in the same sentence! "No other continent on earth has this level of homogeneity, and we are unique among the world's hunter-gatherers for the sheer complexity of our social organisation and religion" (p. 5). Homogenous and complex? You can't have it both ways.

The book is, by its very title, "little", so it is inevitable that things will be left out and we will all have our own examples. I was surprised there was no mention of the films *Ten Canoes* and *The Tracker* or of *Imparja* television or the Redfern speech. Everyone will have favourite artists they would have liked included. There will be stories with which we are familiar, and others where we want more detail – and the positive aspect of this book is that it will direct us towards more things to be discovered. Although we have come to dread the next book of lists (another "1000 things to do before we die"), given the all encompassing nature of this book and its multiple audiences, some lists might have been useful. They would have helped direct our further reading or viewing. Similarly a glossary would be useful, particularly for visitors. There is no explanation, for example, of what an "ILUA" stands for or means.

I have been critical of this book and I don't want to be. It is an incredibly useful small reference book and I can see it being widely bought and used – particularly in schools. But it's a pity that it has not been more carefully edited and that the purpose, audience and authorship have not all been more seriously considered.

Together with the *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia* and, dare I say it, the *Lonely Planet Guide to Indigenous Australia*, this book will serve the important purpose of collating information on Indigenous Australia in a short and simple reference

book, sending readers off to investigate more, and in both those ways play a part in fostering understanding and reconciliation.

## ARLATHIRNDA NGURKARNDA ITYIRNDA: BEING-KNOWING-DOING: DE-COLONISING INDIGENOUS TERTIARY EDUCATION

Veronica Arbon

Post Pressed, Teneriffe, QLD, 2008, ii+194pp, ISBN  
978 1 921214 40 0

Reviewed by Jan Stewart

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This is a scholarly publication that shows how Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational stakeholders can begin to understand and work towards the necessity of reconciling differing ways of knowing in a research and education setting. Arbon has gone about this by informing others of how Indigenous perspectives and knowledge of everyday living frames and guides what learning means in a more holistic sense, which is different to past and present Western ideas of formal education. Arbon has spoken about meaning making coming from the experience of "being, knowing and doing" as have other Indigenous writers such as Martin (2008) in talking about outsiders to community. Arbon's is not representative of an essentialist viewpoint of Indigenous belief but has drawn on a differing personal taste in the mouth; an attitudinal shift stemming from the alternative ways Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are perceived.

The existing situation on which Arbon has based this book is that any work done towards reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing in an effort to include Indigenous people in today's world more fully, is still overshadowed by "those who know best". She maintains that the resulting imbalance continues to tilt the scales in favour of Western approaches to knowledge and sustains a lack of any real change. The central challenge for Arbon has been to question and counteract the "continued submersion of and resistance to Indigenous authority" in matters academic. In an attempt to gain a more equitable mix of knowledge bases for educators to draw upon, she has critically re-examined what is lacking in the decolonising

process for staff and Indigenous students in curriculum change and Indigenous employment in the context of the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

The richness of this text lies in how Arbon has built her viewpoint from personal experience and 25 years working in Indigenous tertiary education. It is not presented as a singular and generic version of "Indigenous knowledge" per se from one who "knows" but is established from inheriting and further developing a genuine and close relationship with her country and people. She has situated her writing and ideas, both introducing and concluding this text within the way she lives her daily life. This connection is emphasised throughout with the aid of her language (the intrinsic nature of Indigenous connection), which permeates the text to show how views should situate future scrutiny of educational directives.

Hence Chapter 1 outlines her position within country as a basis for posing vital and necessary questions about often unwavering attitudes and perceptions that continue to direct tertiary educational objectives in research and pedagogy. The "brick wall" for Indigenous people is the refusal of mainstream education to acknowledge the possibility that alternate approaches and ways of knowing can be as valid, rigorous and sustainable as those encased in the classical Western canon, which isolates and protects the belief of what formal education *is*. She has proposed that Indigenous scholars need to be vigilant in working extra hard to build on the bank of research and learning that serves to articulate and promote Indigenous knowledges and authority. Accordingly, her work is grounded in the language of her country. In the *Arabana wangka* (her language), *ityirnda* is the term for Arabana ways of doing including art, imagery, technology, traditions and ceremonies, land management practices, social organisation and social controls. She says that, "Arabana ways of doing also include writing, researching, filming, learning and all other activities that affirm our identities in new old ways" (p. 48).

In Chapter 2, Arbon has immersed the reader in the ontologies of her people, the Arabana of the central Australian desert, and the Ularaka, the Arabana cosmology, knowledge and philosophy. She describes what it is like "to be" as Arabana, "to know" as Arabana and "to do" as Arabana to base her own understandings of what she does as an Indigenous educator and researcher. She believes that her cultural stability is embedded within the future sustainability of such ontologies. Chapter 3 is an outline of the place of Indigenous tertiary education in Australian history and its fight for survival after emerging in the 1970s from the threat of being completely smothered in the general invisibility

of Indigenous existence. It covers access to the mainstream, supported learning and curriculum additions. This development is representative of the history of the present Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

In Chapter 4 the history of Batchelor Institute is linked with colonialism and it shows the Institute's resistance, against the odds to neo-colonialism, while Chapter 5 describes and highlights the differences between Western knowledge traditions and Indigenous approaches. Arbon has stepped back from the specific instance in Chapter 6 and has re-examined the broader issues of Indigenous challenges to research and pedagogical issues. These involve questioning and attempting to change the ingrained practices that have blocked or negated participation of Indigenous peoples in their life directions. Such research and teaching practices and their inherent attitudes isolated and relegated Indigenous people to the fringes of decision making, and which often resulted in the creation of grand narratives we recognise today; for example, the blanket victim status of Indigenous Australians. She has then introduced the Arabana ways of "doing research" as a backdrop for how the Batchelor Institute approached the irrelevance of Western belief systems in curriculum matters, which she has related in Chapter 7. Covered in Chapter 8 is how those curriculum matters flow into Indigenous employment generally, then at the Batchelor Institute specifically.

Chapters 9 and 10 have placed emphasis on the importance and responsibility of the roles of Indigenous staff in understanding what they are actually facing in the academy regarding resistance and decolonisation so to better engage with making change. In the final chapter, Arbon has returned to her background knowledge of Arabana country in reviewing the key questions introduced in Chapter 1 and offers the various "doable" ways in which Indigenous people can be consciously monitoring their attitudes and actions towards making change.

Arbon has begun and ended by situating herself within her knowledge base; she has spoken from which she knows, talking from rather than about others. Certainly she has spoken from the advantage of her keen sense of place denied to many Indigenous Australians who continue to suffer feelings of placelessness and its repercussions. Nevertheless, emphasised throughout the book has been the need to strengthen Indigenous authority in all matters of research and educational significance and Indigenous cultures provide that necessary background from which to work. There are those in research, teaching and learning and the bureaucracy, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are working to highlight that authority among Indigenous stakeholders (Herbert, 2003; Stewart,

2009). Although Arbon's reference is the Bachelor Institute of Tertiary Education, an Indigenous institution, it holds many lessons for how Indigenous students needs and aspirations can be incorporated into any tertiary establishment; in fact, how it could enrich the academic lives of all students and staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Some readers might find the constant use of Arabana language and terminology in the text to explain philosophies and practices a little distracting by having to continually return to the glossary and Arbon's previous explanations. However, I feel that the extra time needed to explore Indigenous worldviews is time well spent for a progressive decolonisation process and reconciliation generally. Often the crux of the problem between many stakeholders is the misunderstanding and therefore misinterpreting of differing ways of knowing and operating and is the obstacle to positive and effective communication.

Arbon sees "bothways" education as still difficult to achieve. Perhaps Western attitude is partly that the holistic nature of Indigenous ways removes the levelling field for universal comparison of approaches and standards. There is much nervous hesitation in moving out of the comfort zone and exploring alternate ways of achieving similar results, if not with exactly the same attitudinal slant on those results. If we have to change the world then the job is even more monumental than merely changing the institutionalised Australian attitudes and practices of academia; however, it is a fight that is occurring within many nations by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders. Canada and New Zealand are two such countries that Australian scholars collaborate with and whose progress is keenly watched. Perhaps a somewhat pessimistic view might be that world-wide Western hegemony regarding formal education is impenetrable but the staunch battle for change is also untiring like a dog gnawing at a bone.

On a more optimistic note, I recommend this text to any person interested in this challenging and vital dilemma of instilling Indigenous authority. Arbon has approached a topic that although is "frighteningly difficult" begins at home, the ground roots of Indigenous knowledge. She has asked the question of herself and others "How do we take power and interpret for ourselves?" and then has proceeded to offer and demonstrate just how this might be achieved. It is a text that is much needed in the limited bank of research surrounding mainstream Indigenous tertiary education in Australia, in which Indigenous perspectives and knowledge continue to be largely ignored.

## References

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## BUREAUCRATS & BLEEDING HEARTS: INDIGENOUS HEALTH IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Tess Lea

University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2008, vi+276pp, ISBN 978 1 921410 18 5

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Right from the beginning, *Bureaucrats & Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia* cleverly captures the readers' attention when she describes the sacred experience that the Indigenous health bureaucrats undergo in their cross cultural training initiation process. You can almost feel the salt ocean spray on your face from Darwin Harbour, smell the muddy mangrove roots and visualise the camouflaged mud crabs crawling at your feet. The book is based on an ethnography of the Territory Health Services which is now known as the Northern Territory Department of Health. The key message of the book is that the Public Health Bureaucracy in the Northern Territory is peopled by health professionals, practitioners, researchers and policy officers who generate forms of bureaucratised information about Aboriginal health and welfare in that region.

Lea has presented the book in three major parts. In the first part Lea brings attention to the settings in which bureaucrats (called "the helping white") are fortified with cross cultural knowledge and expectations and then mobilised into action to play their part in improving the plight of Indigenous health and welfare in the region. In the second part Lea focuses on how these bureaucrats, when established in their areas of employment, are then trained in bureaucrat speak and taught how to be the right type of white person that will be well received in Aboriginal communities. All the while these new bureaucrats are supported by government