TALKING YOU TALKING ME TALKING ABORIGINE.

A paper by

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for the conference

International Forum on Education in Correctional Systems in Australia.

"Learning for New Life – Not Just Doing Time"

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by

Dr. Pam Johnston

A Letter to a Teacher…

Dear Sir/Madam,
Before you take charge of the classroom that contains my child, please ask yourself why your are going to teach Aboriginal children. What are your expectations? What rewards to you anticipate? What ego needs will our children have to meet?
Write down all the information and opinions you possess about Aborigines. What are the stereotypes and untested assumptions that you bring with you into the classroom? How many negative attitudes towards Aborigines will you put before my child?
What values, class prejudices and Norma principles do you take for granted as universal? Please remember that 'different from' is not the same as 'worse than' or 'better than' and the yardstick you use to measure your own life satisfactorily may not be appropriate for their lives.
The term 'culturally deprived' was invented by well-meaning middle-class whites to describe something they could not understand.
Too many teachers unfortunately, seem to see their role as rescuer. My child does not need to be rescued, he does not consider being Aboriginal a misfortune.
He has a culture probably older than yours, he has meaningful values and a rich and varied experimental background.
However strange or incomprehensive it may seem to you, you have no right to do or say anything that implies to him that is less than satisfactory.
Our children's experiences have been different from those of the 'typical' white middle-class child for whom most school curricula seem to have been designed.
I suspect that this typical child does not exist except in the minds of curricula wishers. Nonetheless, my child's experiences have been as intense and meaningful to him as any child's.
Like most Aboriginal children his age, he is competent. He can dress himself, prepare a meal for himself, clean up afterwards, care for a younger child.
He knows his surrounds all of which is his home, like the back of his hand.
He is not accustomed to having to ask permission to do the ordinary things that are part of normal living.
He is seldom forbidden to do anything, more usually the consequence of an action are explained to him and he is allowed to decide for himself whether or not to act. This entire existence since he has been old enough to see and hear has been and experimental learning situation arranged to provide him with the opportunity to develop his skills and confidence in his own capabilities. Didactic teaching will be an alien experience to him.
He is not self-conscious in the way many white children are. Nobody has ever told him his efforts towards independence are cute.
He is a young human being energetically doing his job, which is to get on with the process of learning to function as an adult human being.
He will respect you as a person, but he will expect you to do likewise to him.
He has been taught, by precept, that courtesy is an essential part of human conduct and rudeness is any action that makes another person feel stupid or foolish.
Do not mistake his patient courtesy for indifference or passivity.
He doesn't speak standard English but he is in no way 'linguistically handicapped'. If you will take the time and courtesy to listen and observe carefully, you will see that he and the other Aboriginal children communicate very well, both among themselves and with other Aborigines.
They speak 'functional' English, very effectively augmented by their fluency in the silent language, the subtle, unspoken communications of facial expressions, gestures, body movement and the use of personal space.
You will be advised to remember that our children are skillful interpreters of the silent language. They will know your feelings and attitudes with unerring precision, no matter how carefully you arrange your smile or modulate you voice.
They will learn in your classroom, because children learn involuntarily. What they learn will depend on you.
Will you help my child to learn to read, or will you teach him that he has a reading problem? Will you help him develop problem-solving skills, or will you teach him that school is where you try to guess what answers the teacher wants?
Will he learn that his sense of his own value and dignity is valid, or will he learn that he must forever be apologetic and 'try harder' because he isn't white"
Can you help him acquire the intellectual skills he needs without at the same time imposing your values on top of those he already has?
Respect my child. He is a person. He has a right to be himself.

Yours very sincerely
An Aboriginal Parent.[1]

[1] Koori Mail, February, 2001, who say "while the author of this letter is unknown, and it has been reprinted before, the message that it seeks to convey is just as relevant today to the educators of our children and those whose job it is to plot the path for their future."

In an attempt to establish a picture of Indigenousness in Australia I will refer first of all to a number of statistics which I am sure have been heard and seen many times over the last few years in print and through the electronic media. I think these statistics are the most accessible way that I can illustrate what I want to present next. I am going to address first of all, the issue of the systematic discrimination of Aboriginal people since the time of colonisation, that is from the time of Captain Cook of England's arrival, to the present. I will also address the issue of the identity and the constructed identity and history of Aboriginal people since the time of colonisation. Finally I will talk about education and offer some strategies that I have developed, for comment.

In speaking of the education of Aboriginal people within prisons and beyond, my conceptual framework would be remiss if I did not explore these areas of discrimination and racism. By addressing issues of discrimination and identity I will hopefully, go some way towards illustrating an Aboriginal social reality and an Aboriginal perspective which impacts on Aboriginal receptivity to education as it is offered in a prison setting, and beyond.

The discrimination of Aboriginal people in our society is probably best reflected as I've already stated, in the statistics available through the Australian Bureau of Statistics in a number of comparative areas between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social realities. Estimates of the Indigenous population as at 30th June 2001 were

New South Wales	121,142	(28.4% of pop.)
Victoria	24,586	(5.8% of pop.)
Queensland	118,749	(27.8% of pop.)
South Australia	24,313	(5.7% of pop.)
Western Australia	61,505	(14.4% of pop.)
Tasmania	16,644	(3.9% of pop.)
Northern Territory	56,364	(13.2% of pop.)
Aust. Capital Territory	3,589	(0.8% of pop.)[2]

On 1st March 2000, there were 4,080 Indigenous prisoners in Australia (20% of the Australian prisoner population). The national rate of imprisonment for Indigenous persons was 1,755 per 100,000 adult Indigenous population. New South Wales recorded 1,815 Indigenous person per 100,000 adult Indigenous population. Nationally, the Indigenous rate of imprisonment was

[2] Year Book Australia 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Number 83: pp.134-6.

15 times the non-Indigenous rate. The highest ratios of Indigenous to non-Indigenous rates of imprisonment were recorded in Western Australia and New South Wales with Indigenous imprisonment rates 20 and 14 times the non-Indigenous rates respectively.[3] Some other statistics to absorb are:

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Life expectancy	56.9 years	75.2 years
Infant Mortality	15.2 per 1000	5.0 per 1000
Total Fertility	2.2 per 1000	1.8 per 1000
Under 30	68.1	43.7
Living in major urban Areas	30.3	62.7
16 Year Old Students	57.0	83.5
Bachelor Degree	2.0	10.4
Unemployed	22.8	9.3
Employed as Labourers	24.3	3.7
Household income per Capita	158	310
One parent family	29.6	14.5
Renting housing	63.8	27.1[4]

As you are aware, these statistics are referred to again and again in many different areas, as already noted, and are depressing for their lack of variation from year to year. They are the sums that illustrate the day to day reality of possibility and hope for Aboriginal people and they are the sum of the experience and conclusions of many Aboriginal people who end up in the prison system. The statistics name a history of discrimination that appears to be accepted by non-Indigenous Australians and which is impacting on generations of Aboriginal people. I draw on the work of Philomena Essed for a definition of racial-ethnic prejudice and discrimination which is applicable in Australia:

[3] Year Book Australia 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Number 83: pp.473-4.

[4] Year Book Australia 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics, No.83 : Chapter 11, Crime and Justice, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Number 83, p.473
See also Draft Indigenous Education Policy, Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute (AEVTI) and Department of Corrective Services Aboriginal Policy

Racial-ethnic prejudice is an attitude; an element of common sense, based on false generalisations of negatively valued properties attributed to racial-ethnic groups other than one's own. Common sense should not be understood as a product of deliberate, systematic, and consistent thought. It is derived from and designed to cope with the routine activities of everyday life. Common-sense notions about racial-ethnic groups and related issues enable an understanding of and communication about racial-ethnic matters in the ordinary flow of daily activities….

Racism is transmitted through acts generated from a social attitude that takes the legitimacy of the racial-ethnic social order for granted. These acts, defined as ***discrimination****, (re)produce the racial and ethnic inequalities of the social structure. Put another way, discrimination includes all acts, verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal, that result in negative or unfavourable consequences for the dominated racial-ethnic groups, in particular. Thus, racial discrimination is defined in terms of acts and their* ***consequences*** *even when actors do not intend or realize, let alone pursue, the social consequences of their actions.*[5]

Many Aboriginal people who end up in prison (although I don't say all) regardless of the crime/s they may have committed, believe that it is discrimination against them as Aboriginal people that is the reason for their being imprisoned. If we examine the statistics and the conclusions/inferences about Aboriginal people that have been drawn from the statistics presented, this Aboriginal viewpoint is not unreasonable.

Dispossession and despair have their own culture, their own theory and their own psychology. Colonisation has created it's own myths,[6] and its own history for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The myths surrounding Indigenousness were created by observer Europeans who also placed history, now, then, and pre-time, as European.[7]

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[5] Philomena Essed, *Diversity, Gender, Colour and Culture* translated by Rita Girgour, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996, pp. 10-11. See especially ch. 1 'Common sense and the "other": From paternalistic to competitive racism'.

[6] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, Noonday Press, New York, 1990. Myth, wrote Barthes, is a mechanism which produces a distorted, deformed knowledge, a knowledge "deprived of memory", "half-amputated", but still alive (122). This knowledge is presented as 'the real', as fact, as certain. But while it may have an element of truth, it is also a "dream". Mythical speed is "frozen speech" (125), a "magical object" from which history has been emptied out.

By this systematic negation of the 'other person' and a determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?" (Fanon, 1990, 200).

Each of us is surrounded by what we understand are "facts" which are interpreted via our areas of knowledge and learning. Facts cannot have shape without language.[8] As John Jackson says in his 'Hart and the Concept of Fact':

"These ascriptions do not come out there from the world, but from the conventions of the language that we have adopted to reflect the conceptual frameworks or frames of reference that makes sense to us. To determine whether something is to count as a fact, therefore, we do not dip into some linguistically naked reality, but instead we must ask whether it can be justified within the conventions of a language which are grounded in what Wittgenstein (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations') calls our forms of life'.[9]

Facts themselves then, are interpreted according to many factors. Thus for a non-Aboriginal person who has been raised in a European-based education system, the linguistics of 'facts' can scientifically prove[10] that Aboriginals are "less than" in relation to themselves. The 'facts' for an Aboriginal person who cannot see their own experiences of their lives reflected in any positive way, are that they are powerless and invisible. That their Aboriginality is the cause of everything that happens to them is confirmed by the statistical information that has already been presented, *and which is actually happening to them*. Is it then unreasonable for an

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[7] Paul Gilroy cites McGrane: "Beyond Europe was henceforth before Europe … differences residing in geographical space … became differences residing in developmental historical time … the simultaneity of geographical space was transformed into the successive linearity of evolutionary time' (90.cit. 329) What and who was out there beyond Europe was prior to Europe, before, not of or in Europe's time.

[8] Ngaire Naffine, Feminism & Criminology, Allen & Unwin Australia 1997, Ch. 6, "An Ethical Relation" p.139.

[9] John Jackson, 'Hart and the Concept of fact', *The Jurisprudence of Orthodoxy: Queen's University Essays on H.L.A. Hart,* eds. P. Leith and P. Ingram, p. 72.

[10] Charles Darwin, 'On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection: or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life. New York University Press, New York, 1988 (1876), also Jean Jacques Rousseau, 'A Discourse on Inequality', Ed. And translated by Maurice Cranston, Penguin, London 1984 (1753).

Aboriginal person to assume that despite what they have done, they are imprisoned for their Aboriginality?

In 1996 the median age of the Indigenous population was 20 years compared with 34 years for the total population. With 40% of the Indigenous population aged under 15 and 3% over 65 the Indigenous population of 1996 had a younger age structure than that of the total Australian population at the beginning of this century.[11] 73,200 Indigenous children were attending primary school in 1999 and 33,400 Indigenous children were attending secondary school in 1999 compared to a non-Indigenous primary and secondary school population of 3.2 million students. 8,000 Indigenous students were attending institutes of higher education, with 479 of these doing post-graduate study, compared to a non-Indigenous higher education student body of 686,3000.[12]

In all probability then, given the statistical information, there is a young Indigenous population some of whom will more likely than not, experience a prison education equally as likely as they will experience a non-prison education. It is also reasonable to presume that their understanding of why they are imprisoned is because of their Aboriginality. This conceptual relationship with the world is also a 'fact' for Aboriginal people in terms of education, employment, access to housing, health and so on, and it continues as a cultural normalcy with this younger generation growing up in the same world.

Thus discussions about Indigenous education which include the recognition of the social, historical and political realities of Aboriginal life will, indeed, reverberate through generations and will, indeed, impact on the survival of Indigenous people in this country.

The question of the definition and construction of Aboriginality in Australian society has been debated by generations of scholars and more recently by Aboriginal people themselves.[13] While I am aware of the extent of

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[11] Year Book Australia 2001, Chapter 5, Population, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Number 83, p.134.

[12] Year Book Australia 2001: Chapter 10, Education and Training, Australian Bureau of Statistics, p. 403-427.

[13] Charles D. Rowley, 'Who is an Aboriginal? The answer is 1967', appendix A. in Charles D. Rowley, *Aboriginal Policy and Practice,* vol. 1, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society,* Canberra: ANU Press, 1970: Athol Chase, 'Empty vessels and loud noises: Views about

the depth and passion of this debate, I draw attention to it to highlight some of the influences that have impacted on the lives of Aboriginals and which have shaped the sense of identity of Aborigines in Australia.

The naming and classification of Aboriginal people have been an integral part of the colonising process. Michael (Mick) Dodson, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, explored the purpose and function of *white* Australia's definition of the Indigenous people of Australia in the 1994 Wentworth Lecture, 'The end in the beginning RE(de)fining Aboriginality'. Dodson says:

"The definitions and constructions have not simply been for the control and management of Indigenous peoples. Our constructed identities have served a broader purpose of reflecting back to the colonising culture what it wanted or needed to see in itself. The constructions of Aboriginality, in all their variations, have marked the boundaries which define and evaluate the so-called modern world. Whether Indigenous peoples have been portrayed as 'noble' or 'ignoble', heroic or wretched had depended on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself."[14]

This issue of constructed Aboriginal identity is very much at the forefront of my awareness – it hits me in the face with regular monotony each time I teach Aboriginal people in prisons. Dr. Lorraine Johnson-Riordan comments in a significant soon to be published paper[15] that:

"… education, along with other disciplines has a history. It is saturated in the grand master narratives of Modernity. That includes the privileging of rationality, genealogies of origins, universalising and homogenising narratives of 'the individual' and selfhood, narratives of identity formation, human

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Aboriginality today', *Social Alternatives,* 2 (2), 1981, pp.23-7: Myrna E. Tonkinson 'Is it in the blood? Australian Aboriginal Identity, in Jocelyn Linnekin & Lin Poyer (eds.) *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity to the Pacific,* Honolulu University of Hawaii Press, 1990 pp. 191-218, Andrew Lattas, 'Nationalism, aesthetic redemption and Aboriginality', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology,* 2 (3), 1991, pp. 307-24, David Hollinsworth, 'Discourses on Aboriginality and the politics of identity in urban Australia', *Oceania* 63 (2) December 1992, pp. 137-55 and comments on Hollinsworth's paper (in the same volume) by Mudrooroo Nyoongah (pp. 156-7), Bain Attwood (pp.) 158-9), Andrew Lattas (pp. 160-4) and Jeremy Beckett (pp. 165-7, and a reply by Hollinsworth (pp. 168-71).

[14] Michael Dodson, 'The end in the beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality', The Wentworth Lecture, *Australian Aboriginal Studies,* no. 1 1994, p.8

[15] Lorraine Johnson-Riordan, *Decolonising the 'white' nation: decolonising 'white' psychology,* International Journal of Critical Psychology, 2001 (currently unpublished).

progress and development, assumptions of sameness of culture and community, and the deployment of historical amnesia.[16]

Education's power then is embedded in its ability to make Aboriginal history invisible to 'knowledge' and in the process it makes Aboriginal life, Aboriginal day to day experiences, invisible to Aboriginal people as they are living it. Their lives are Aboriginal, yet 'education' does not tell them so. They are *Aboriginal* which lives internally and is experienced externally as a conflict and a confusion. This can perhaps be best illustrated by a recent experience of mine in a maximum security prison. It is my habit to introduce myself to inmates one by one within their living environment when starting, which most often requires a custodial officer to let me in and see me out again. In this example (which is not an unusual one) the officer introduced me as the new Aboriginal teacher *"come to teach you how to be Aboriginal"*. It was a serious introduction and by its existence causes considerable damage to the inmate in her/his relationship with the processes of institution/education by its denial of integral identity.

Another example is the reference to the idea of 'traditional' Aboriginality as opposed to most inmates not being 'proper' Aborigines. It is worth noting that Aboriginal culture is a living culture and that it is vital that this is asserted through every pore of Education's being. A living Aboriginal culture refers to a Traditional Aboriginal society, a Transitional Aboriginal society, and a Contemporary Aboriginal Society. Traditional Aboriginal society refers to Aboriginal societies and cultures developed over thousands of years with its foundations in the Dreaming. Transitional Aboriginal society is Aboriginal society since the arrival of Europeans in the 18th century. This includes the effects of cultural contact during the period from the first arrival of Europeans. Contemporary Aboriginal society refers to Aboriginal culture and communities as they exist in Australia to the present.

The variety of communities, rural, urban, and traditionally orientated, and the role of Aboriginal history, science and culture in the total Australian context; the disparities between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal societies in relation to socio-economic status, education success, health, housing and land ownership, and the prevailing attitudes and their causes between

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[16] See for example, Couze Venn, Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity, Sage, London, 2000.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are portrayed by Aboriginal people in cultural expressions, particularly art.

Professor Judith Atkinson, new Director of the College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, at Southern Cross University located in northern New South Wales, at Lismore, and also a Bundjalung woman of that region, said in relation to Indigenous education at the centre:

'*I am vitally interested in the relationship between well being of people and well being of country. I am particularly interested in how traumatised groups and traumatised country results from natural disaster and human atrocity, and the natural and powerful human capacity to heal trauma. I want to know more about how people work together to help each other heal. I would like to document more, the cultural processes that Aboriginal peoples demonstrate in healing practice in our ceremonies song, art, story, and ritual and the links between so called 'traditional' cultural healing processes and the cultural knowledges and skills we utilise today in contemporary Indigenous healing practice.*'[17]

Aboriginality is the only identity in the world defined legally. Aboriginality is as follows:

1. The person must identify as Aboriginal.
2. The person must have a mother or a father who identifies as an Aboriginal person.
3. The person must be accepted by their community as an Aboriginal person.

Aboriginal identity is amazing in its diversity and this has been the case since pre-European times. Aboriginal identity is *based* in a particular relationship to country. That relationship is clear and is identifiable through community relationships that go back to the Dreaming. Time is not static in this relationship so as much as the past will define Aboriginal relationship, so does the future, as well as the present. Mnemonics of place is reflected in the cultural practices of relationship to country and these cultural practices through song, art, story, and ritual, are vital to the continuing identity of Aboriginality. Dispossession has damaged both identity and relationship to country and for a healing to take place, Aboriginal education and healing as described by Professor Judith Atkinson, become one and the same.

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[17] Koori Mail, Wednesday, October 17th, 2001: 'New Director is Prepared for Challenge', Education Section p.29.

The discipline of art making has had a confusing relationship to Aboriginal education which is worth talking about a little. Often the significant contribution of the processes of art making to the broader education of individuals through the development of an innate human creativity becomes the argument for a continuing programme of Aboriginal art education. These arguments can be more appropriately applied to the larger population both within a Corrective setting as well as within our education institutions in the society in which we live. The value and justification of art and culture in our society is ongoing, most recently in the tax debates in relation to the application of Australian Business Numbers and the definition of artists as small businesses in order to define the taxation process.[18]

Dr. Margaret Seares at her National Press Club Address on 13th June 2001 notes that in the British Government's recent Green *Paper "Culture & Creativity: the next 10 years"* there is clear recognition from the Government as a whole of the value of immersing young people in creative pursuits including the arts. There appears to be a genuine conviction that such a move is vital if Britain is to generate a workforce which has, again, the communication skills, team work, problem solving, risk taking attributes that we understand are required in our new environment – and which are inherent in the arts experience. The foreword to the Green Paper by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, proposes that the arts matter *"because they can enrich all our lives"* – standard fare. But he also says, *"they also matter because creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future".*

Dr. Seares address is significant because it explains the importance of creativity to our overall quality of life as Australians. A creative life allows for a non-verbal development of a rich imaginative life, a rich spiritual life, and recognition, identification and naming of feelings and emotions, a self and identity based on a realistic self-concept, problem solving skills, team-building, risk taking and structural skills, a safe path to literacy and numeracy, among many others. Dr. Seares says:

"…there is potential for the arts to have significant impacts upon various areas of community life… Education, health, crime, social

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[18] See National Association for the Visual Arts (N.A.V.A.) discussions papers on tax, 1999-200.

rehabilitation, community building, cultural identity – these are just a few of the areas where research exists showing the positive impact the arts can play in successful outcomes for the individuals and communities concerned".[19]

Dr. Seares significant comments are important in understanding the great contribution art education has to our overall Australian community in all its diversity. Her comments cannot be applied specifically and particularly to Aboriginal people. Art has its own significance and its own arguments for the ongoing support of a focused art education within prisons and they are important arguments that apply also to Aboriginal people, as part of the family of humans. However, Aboriginal art programmes must have their own reasons, their own theory and justification which is different from the general art programmes as they apply, both within and outside prisons.

Indigenous identity is rooted deep in the land from where one comes as stated earlier. This relationship to land is not a relationship to 'nature' or the 'natural world', which is shared by all humanity. Aboriginal identity is affirmed through spirituality, through culture, and through history. Aboriginal spirituality is bound up in Creation Stories and a relationship to the flora and fauna of the country we belong to. Aboriginal spirituality is also expressed through our culture. Aboriginal culture is represented through our creativity as human beings and *it is holistic*. By this I mean there is an interconnectedness of subjectivities rather than an objectivity of disciplines. A better way of explaining this is to explain a difference of culture between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people.

For non-Indigenous people, the assertion of individuality is an essential part of identity. In modernity, Individuality is easily lost. Thus authorship becomes an essential assertion of the individual. For Indigenousness, individuality is a given through relationship to land, community, and culture. Community is of greater value and is therefore of greater assertive importance. The community one comes from, the people one is related to, the land one bears relationship to, has a greater social value.

These relationships are sacred and have traditionally been expressed in ceremony and in body painting. In very recent times, these markings have become "paintings" in the European way, as objects to be observed and explained, with a market value of their own. These paintings, be they from

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[19] Dr. Margaret Seares, former Chair of the Australia Council, at her National Press Club

Yirrkala, Yuendemu, the Kimberleys, Yorta Yorta, wherever, have become an important (and I would suggest only) cultural signifier of a national identity. This is particularly so for many Indigenous people.

It is an acknowledged historical and political fact as stated earlier, that many, many Indigenous people were dispossessed from their language, their lands, their families, their spirituality, and their sacredness. Thus we have almost as a national reference, an understanding of the term "stolen generations" where Governments and missionaries targeted Indigenous children for removal from their families from 1814 until the early 1970's.[20]

This disruption has impacted on Aboriginal life generationally. It has allowed for an ongoing discussion on Aboriginality including its culture, its history, and its identity, that has excluded Aboriginal people. It has disadvantaged them in such a way that official inquiries have had to be convened, legislation has had to be enacted and other processes set into place in order to redress some of the horrific disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal people.

In Modernity Indigenous people of Australia are a deeply traumatised people. Education, along with incarceration, has been a main signifier of disadvantage and alienation to Aboriginal people and a major contributor to this trauma. I refer yet again to the statistics that 73,200 Indigenous children were attending primary school in 1999 and 33,400 Indigenous children were attending secondary school in 1999 compared to a non-Indigenous primary and secondary school population of 3.2 million students. Eight thousand Indigenous students were attending institutes of higher education, with 479 of these doing post-graduate study, compared to a non-Indigenous higher education student body of 686,3000.[21]

As well as the reasons outlined earlier, art education's significance to Aboriginal inmates can perhaps best be discussed in relation to my own experiences as an Aboriginal person teaching Aboriginal people in a prison setting. The underlying trauma of so many Aboriginal individuals and

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Address on 13th June 2001.

[20] Bringing Them Home. Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, convened on 2 August, 1995 and report handed down 5 April, 1997, by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission President, Ronald Wilson, published by Sterling Press Pty. Ltd. Commonwealth of Australia, 1997.

communities described in other sections demands acknowledgment if the educational process is to be successful. Acknowledgment also requires redress.

Through painting and the exploration of culture and identity my students have been led into a desire for a wider language. Given current recidivism rates many of my students have become quite skilled. It is a sad indictment that young Aboriginal people have more chance of being exposed to structured educational processes inside prison than they would outside prison. Given this, once again I assert the importance of what is actually being offered, and how it is being offered.

Aboriginal inmates by any disadvantage, are not unintelligent, unskilled or unmotivated. Without wishing to stereotype, Aboriginal social and communication skills are quite advanced. This is the result of the community culture in which they grew up, in many cases. Aboriginal history is traditionally an oral history. This does not mean that it is 'less than'. Oral history is held in a very structured way by being contained within individuals and clan groups, and within communities.

Many Aboriginal paintings that Australians are aware of, such as the "Honey Ant Dreamings"[22], and "Wakiripirri Dreamings"[23] are documentors of an oral history that contains very complex information on genealogy, geology, pharmacology, astrology, and other areas of science.

Traditional painting and ceremony document Aboriginal oral history. In many cases only certain people or certain groups have the right to produce particular parts of a whole story. Traditional Aboriginal art is meticulously retained and executed and to do other than to take care of it would mean for many of its traditional guardians a fate worse than death.[24] Art is central to Aboriginal life; it expresses the identity of individuals and family groups, and

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[21] Year Book Australia 2001: Chapter 10, Education and Training, Australian Bureau of Statistics, p. 403-427.

[22] Honey Ant Dreaming paintings from Yuendemu in the Northern Territory have been painted by the Napaljarri, Tjungarrayi, Tjupurrula clans.

[23] The Wakiripirri Dreamings are owned by Napanangka, Napangardi, Japanangka, and Japangardi skins.

[24] Colin Galvin, *Aboriginal Art and the Protection of Indigenous Cultural Rights* – a paper presented in the Australian Centre on Koori Issues: October 15, 1991, p. 228.

connects people to the land. It also comments on the contemporary realities of its makers.[25]

Where traditional European society is a literate society – by that I mean that written word is the predominant language of communication, documentation, and expression, for Aboriginal individuals and communities a visual language fulfills that role. Thus, in order of importance, oral skills and visual skills are primary and literacy and numeracy skills in the European educational framework, come after that. This is where Aboriginal art classes are so important, particularly in a Correctional setting and this is their difference from the non-Aboriginal art classes, which I emphasise here, also have a vital role to play in education and in society.

Within a prison setting how does an Aboriginal person work out who s/he is? What decides identity (not who)? What do you surround yourself with to say who you are? These questions demand an acknowledgment of Aboriginal life *under colonialism.* Without asking these questions and without seeking the answers the education we are presenting continues the problem.[26]

In answering these questions it is relevant to consider the Aboriginal images that Aboriginal people in prison are already surrounded by. I note that they constantly choose to do dot kangaroos, snakes, hands, goannas, and the sort of imagery that clearly fits a stereotypical Aboriginality in terms of presentation of art. The execution and presentation of these works is nearly always meticulous indicating a pride and care that often does not extend to other areas of their lives.

Despite great trauma in their lives, the Aboriginal students have continued to paint the images I have described, sometimes taking weeks to complete a work. It is important to realise that Aboriginal prisoners choose these images because of a relationship with the viewer as well as because of the meaning to the artist her/himself. The viewer could look at the work,

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[25] Avril Quail, *Marking our Times: Selected works of art from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection at the National Gallery of Australia,* Catalogue Introduction, National Gallery of Australia, 1996, p.6

[26] See, for example, Kris Johnson ‘Learning to be White’, in Travelling Tracks: a collection of writing by Indigenous students of Goolangullia, University of western Sydney, Macarthur, 1998, p.29-32: also Lorraine Johnson-Riordan, ‘Teaching/Cultural Studies (or Pedagogy for “World Travellers”/World-Travelling Pedagogy, in Joyce Canaan and Debbie Epstein eds., A

which is observably Aboriginal and accept that it is Aboriginal art. Following from these observations, the viewer could conclude that it is done by an Aboriginal person. Or else they could query whether an Aboriginal person did it. Whichever way it happened, the artist's identity as an Aboriginal person is inevitably confirmed. In the production of the artwork that is produced, a first level of identity has been established, that of another person recognising Aboriginality.

The issues of education and dispossession form a complex background for the Aboriginal person in prison claiming identity through their artwork, a process unique to Aboriginality. It is reasonable to surmise that the artist's intended audience is both Aboriginal, but also non-Aboriginal, and that the imagery is deliberately confrontational in that the visual language elucidates and validates identity and therefore a history that is otherwise denied.

The artists who paint in prison describe again and again how it makes them feel "good" in their Aboriginality to have these pictures around them. The Aboriginal students were doing these works for a different audience say, than those works which consciously research and process the imagery of Aboriginality. Nevertheless a clear function of the work was that the viewer understood by its imagery that it was Aboriginal art: therefore, the artist must be an Aboriginal artist.

Since I first became aware of this particular process, whether I am teaching Aboriginal people in Technical and Further Education Centres, Universities, prisons, or communities, I meet the same responses. In simple terms, the process tells me how important it is to have cultural items that are perceived to be part of that culture and identifiable as part of the culture, in order to tell yourself who you are. The confirmation comes from within and without. Therefore to be surrounded by one's own being becomes a healing process and healing is a vital component of Aboriginal education.

It must also be observed that the imagery of the Aboriginal students was not imposed. It comes from and is informed by many Aboriginal communities. The hand, colours, goannas, snakes, lizards, turtles, and so on, come from somewhere. They are not accidents developed in a vacuum,

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Question of Discipline: Pedagogy, Power and the Teaching of Cultural Studies, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1997, p. 117-130.

just suddenly 'there'. They are images that have a discernible history and come from a specific culture. They are identifiable.

When I taught the Koori class at Mulawa Women's Correctional Centre from 1990 to 1996, I organised for these natural painting skills to be extended by establishing an ongoing mural project.   This project wove itself around many of the buildings in the grounds and particularly established the identity of the 'Koori Room' in the education grounds. We talked, and we painted. This is the traditional Aboriginal way and it is a comfortable way for students to become involved in a process of education.

Part of the process of developing imagery was to discuss the areas from which mothers and fathers came from and the development, side by side with the murals, of their own sacred painting to be understood and explained only by the artist in each case. From these discussions we could research and establish appropriate imagery from the area. This process required a connection with culture and land, and an understanding of the students relationship to that process as well as the end result which ensured that an inner dialogue was established in which their own lives and reality was the major narrative.

The development of both the imagery and the end result was holistic, by which I mean it allowed for a number of disciplines to both cross and interact: most importantly it addressed spiritual and cultural issues in a most personal way that allowed both ownership and healing. For Aboriginal people who continue to come into prison the murals will speak to them in a lonely and frightening setting. The murals will tell them that they are not invisible – for education to follow, students must feel visible, must feel they have a presence which is based in their reality. These murals, I am pleased to say, still exist today and hopefully will be for a long time into the future.

The development of the murals also allowed discussion on appropriate paints – the stability or otherwise of paint was discussed as was the impact of the sun, the chemical development of colour, and so on. In fact all the requirements of the technicalities of paint, fine art, and design were covered. I say that the most important part of this educational process was the spiritual healing that went on. I have sought in all my programmes to incorporate this Aboriginal perspective as an integral part of learning and teaching.

One could ask the question – given Aboriginal dispossession and the history of colonisation, how different then is the prison setting from Aboriginal inmates experiences of education as they grew up? The answers would be varied but overall, I would have to say that the relationship to education was punitive and unproductive. Statistically, of course, Aboriginal people have less access and opportunity to education and this contributes to employment and other problems and may well be a contributor to their incarceration. For all the problems, both political and social, of their representation in prison, there is an opportunity within this setting to make education meaningful to Aboriginal people. There is an opportunity, through learning to empower, and to redress disadvantage – or we can continue the disadvantage.

An area of Aboriginal teaching in Corrective settings that cannot be avoided is that of literacy, or the lack of it. It is clear that it is an issue within prisons and it is an indicator of an alienation or disadvantage within our society. It is an issue that regularly confronts me within the classroom. I have sought to address it by recognising the primary cultural literacy skills of an Aboriginal traditional oral and visual culture. From this recognition there have been a number of strategies that I have developed that lead Aboriginal students to the written word.

I originally started teaching Aboriginal people in Long Bay Prison at Malabar, here in New South Wales. Many of the Aboriginal students were already enrolled in a number of programmes, all of which required a degree of literacy. In every case the literacy skills that the students had were far behind the requirements of the courses they were involved in. As many of these courses were being conducted by correspondence the students were, in a sense, set up for failure. And of course this was happening.

By setting aside a number of classes to simply sit and talk about the courses they were involved in, their experiences of schooling in the past, and their expectations, I was able to recognise some of the major problems that the students were confronting. The biggest single problem was that of writing an essay. Writing a paragraph was an insurmountable problem, let alone an essay. They had written before them all the processes and structures of essay writing and were being led through the process as well by committed teachers. Still it was a problem.

As I listened to the students 'speak' I realised that their literacy was contained in their language. I had a couple of small tape recorders which I brought into the prison (I did not realise at the time that this was NOT ON!) and encouraged the students to talk into the tape recorder. At first they were, of course, very self-conscious, not of the performance of the speaking, but of the sound of their voices played back to them. However, once used to the process, they went one by one to the chapel, which was a quiet and accessible place, and 'spoke' their essay into the tape. After they had done this, it was simply a matter of transcribing the tape to the written word. 'Correct English' was secondary to the integrity of voice although the basic structure of an essay was maintained.

By encouraging the students to trust what they were already skilled in, their oral ability, the students were no longer intimidated by the process of the written word. In the case I describe, the written word was another language and the strategy I used was that of translation skills from primary language – oral - to second language - written.

This strategy was developed again from 1994 -1996 between the then Normal Parker Centre and Mulawa Women's Correctional Centre when I was teaching the Aboriginal classes in both these centres. In these classes, our primary focus was on painting and with the recidivism rate of the young Aboriginal women, over time the students became quite skilled and started to look for other language to assert their being.

Starting at the Normal Parker Centre for three hours a week initially, eight women I had known for many years started meeting and talking. I encouraged this round table talking as a recognition of a primary cultural skill and reference, that of an oral tradition. This talking started with working out what were common experiences and where those experiences and Aboriginality met. This important process helped to name a history that they had a place in. As Phillip Adams said in a recent article;

"History isn't was. History is. No matter how much we wipe our feet at the front door, we track history through the house. Leaving its muddy footprints all over the carpet."[27]

In owning these experiences and their history the women became quite powerful in their culture. It certainly contributed to an understanding of

my assertion that they had a choice about whether they perceived themselves as victims or not. This did not deny the very real experiences of racism that they experience – what it did do by its owning was to put these experiences in a political, social, and historical context that made sense. This in turn gave them a control over the very real rage many felt at the events of their life. When this process was started there was a varying rate of literacy from illiterate to barely literate to quite literate.

Once we started these meetings (classes), I installed myself as the scribe by writing down particular narratives that came out. I did this with the group's permission and with the understanding that we would, first of all, learn to read and write, and secondly, aim towards a book of some sort. I would read my text back to the group at the end of our time and the women would observe spelling, structure, and so on. Over a period of time the role of scribe broadened as each woman became both confident and competent in this area. My focus was still on the idea of surrounding my students with their Aboriginality. With this in mind I taught them to write and to listen for the integrity of voice and language of each person. A 'correct' writing structure would come later I decided. The bigger test was to read individual texts to women who weren't part of the group, to see if they identified the voice of the writer. If there was the response "oh that's so and so – it sounds just like her!" then I felt we had succeeded.

By owning their own language and their own stories in this way, the skills base was expanded rapidly to the point where we had a number of stories that they felt were publishable. It had taken over a year to get from illiteracy to this point. I was concerned about the impact some of the stories might have. These stories spoke of incredible pain, suffering, and brutality, which, in the 'normal' course of events, would be considered private. In exposing these stories the women were very vulnerable I felt. In articulating these events as they had happened to the women, it seemed that there should be a follow-up process – perhaps counseling or psychological long-term support.

By this time I had obtained funding to publish. As a group, we talked through the issues that I raised, as well as other issues as they came up. The final decision by the group was a resounding "publish!" The title of the

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[27] Phillip Adams, *History is now, not later.* The Weekend Australian, July 21-22, 2001,

work was to be *Free Spirit.*[28] I discussed with many professionals what I should do as a consequence of the revelations in the book. I was advised by Social Workers, Counselors and Psychologists that I spoke to that I was on dangerous ground and that professionally, I needed to put supports into place for those who might need them. However, within my own community, the discussion was very different.

Sorrow was expressed but also admiration that the women had achieved so much for themselves. I came to understand, as I already knew, that the healing language was already in the book and was already in the community. In naming their pain they owned it and that in itself was empowering. Learning the skills of naming through first of all, speaking (oral) of it, then painting (visual) it, and finally writing it down and publishing made visible what was invisible.

I wrote on the last page of this publication:

"The intention in both of the courses that produced this book was to understand history and culture and to develop literacy skills. The first teaching strategy of this course in both The Norma Parker centre, and at Mulawa Women's Detention Centre, involved extensive and casual round table discussions in order to establish where students came from, and what they understood to be 'Aboriginality'. It was a necessary definition in order to develop the discussions in terms of understanding history and culture. My interest in developing this strategy was two-fold. The first part was to put self and personal narrative into the context of a documented Aboriginal experience, and secondly to step over the endless stereotyping that goes on in relation to Aboriginal studies.

Aboriginal people have been for so long observed and defined by the 'other' that their own studies of Aboriginality have become a part of their alienation from self - they observe the Aboriginal as the 'other', rarely connecting their own lives with Aboriginal history and culture. Thus the personal narrative, the 'telling' becomes a validation of identity and of existence. It's a way of saying "I am here: I lived in these times and this is what it was like for me." In the classes that produced this book, we picture a grandchild five generations to come, reading our stories. We asked the

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question, "where is the story of Aboriginal women's incarceration?" "Where are the stories that led to this point?" "What are the common themes?" "What are the differences?" We noted that we are hearing of the rise of the Aboriginal author, yet we are still seeing so few compared to non-Aboriginal authors observing the Aborigine, and contexting our lives and who we are.

Our discussion led through an analysis of Protection and how it informs us now. We found that our common acceptance from quite a young age, of police and institutional interference in our families led to an inability in many cases to effectively parent – which, it must be said, is not an inability to love. We noted that the institutionalisation of psyche continued in schooling where some students had completed up to Year 9 and Year 10 were still effectively illiterate. This did not mean that we were stupid but that the education system we had been through had failed us; that for most students further education was as realistic as a trip to Mars. We saw that our children were sometimes lost to us as we were lost to our mothers, and they to their mothers. We observed that addiction and suppressed rage, poverty and hopelessness, were a common personal experience; that the feelings of despair were all pervading, that the events that led to these feelings were still 'secret'.

The good things we had were the memories of close family and friends, of a culture that involved both the mystic and the pragmatic; that we could tell a good yarn, empathise, and laugh. Once again we noted the things untold and unspoken. These things started slipping out. These stories were written in personal diaries that I had supplied to the students. They also came through being dictated to me and read back once transcribed. They were stories told to each other and transcribed. We were careful not to lose the 'voice' – the individual stamp on language that makes 'telling' authentic. There is a way each person speaks that belongs uniquely to them. That 'voice' gives the feeling and strength to any personal narrative. It moves the readers soul because it resounds with truth and integrity – call it what you will.

The teaching strategies as much as the curriculum application had to be necessarily different from standardised methods. Teaching in gaols requires different strategies from teaching anywhere else, I would venture to

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[28] The title comes from a section of a film "Blackfellas" where the maint character says, "I'm free, I'm free". Many of the students were going home within the month of publication. They observed they would be "free spirits" just like the character in the film.

say. Teaching Aboriginal women in gaol has added challenges with no available references that are directly applicable. The strategies I have used in these courses have, as usual, led down unexpected and unexplained rivers and way out into oceans that we could have been lost upon. The writing becomes documentation and this book becomes a permanent record and insurance that we will never be lost if the stories are told. They are now part of that every-expanding pool of Aboriginal history and culture as told by Aboriginal people. It is such a little drop but the ripples are huge. It says we are part of a living culture and that we have survived."[29]

The strategies used in the practice of education can help empower Aboriginal inmates, heal the ongoing effects of colonisation within Aboriginal communities. However, education must be relevant. Education must look both inward and outward, to its language, to its methodology, to its history, and to its understanding of both theory and knowledge. Education has to look at the implications of the practice of professional power on Aboriginal people and take responsibility for the effects of a power that in the past has discriminated against Aboriginal people by being part of the colonising process rather than being part of a solution.

[29] Pam Johnston, *Free Spirit,* a book produced by Aboriginal women from Norma Parker Centre and Mulawa Women's Correctional Centre, funded by Blacktown Institute of T.A.F.E., Granville Institute of T.A.F.E. and the Department of Corrective Services, and published by Contemporary Women Artists Gallery Press, 1996, p.20.