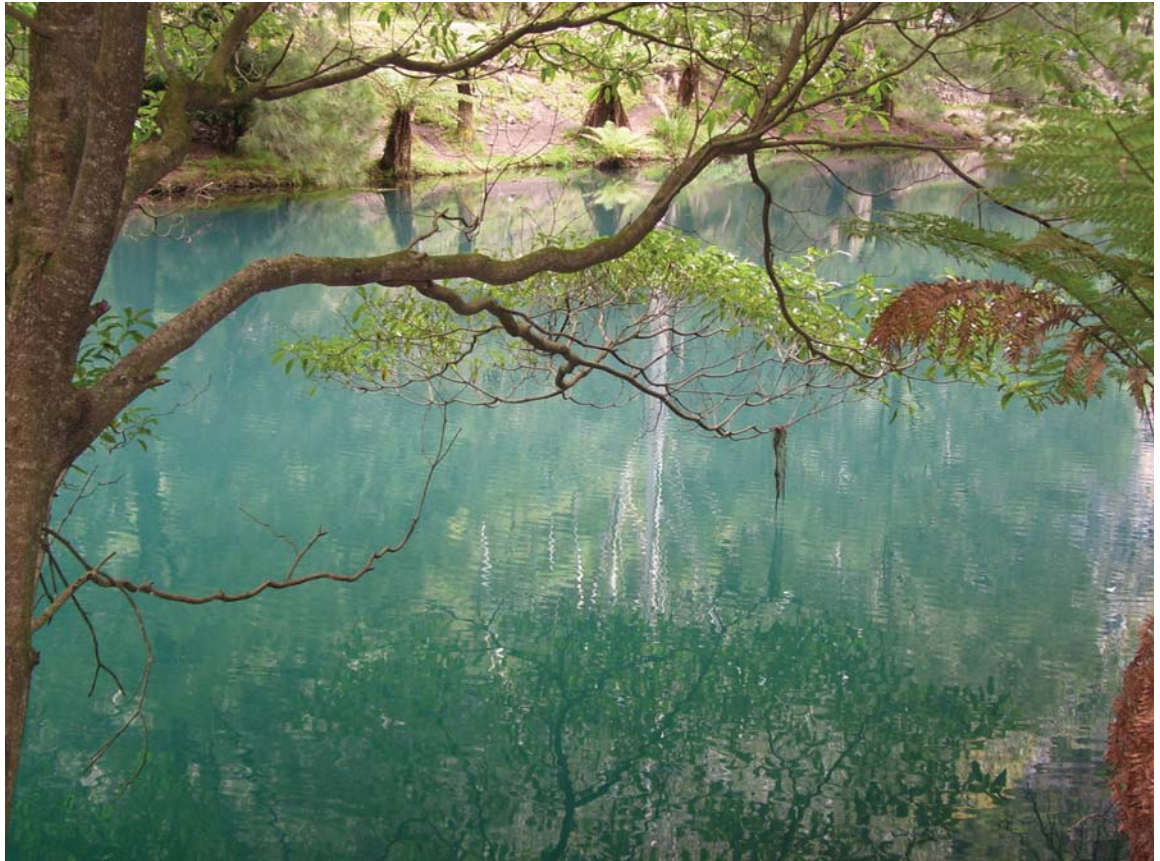


ROUND PEGS IN SQUARE HOLES:

An Ethnographic Study of the Educational Lifeworlds of Aboriginal Australian Students



A Dissertation submitted by

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ABSTRACT

Within the Australian education system one particular type of knowing is valued. This is evidenced by the mania that surrounds the national curriculum and standardised testing, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. It is through these instruments of official knowledge that students are labelled as learning successfully and ‘other’ learning is silenced. It is within this climate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are represented as educationally incapable. Inspired by this deceitful discourse, this dissertation explored the educational lifeworlds of five Aboriginal, male students. This project utilised photo elicitation methods to uncover the complexity of the participant’s educational lifeworlds. Narrative analysis was engaged with to reveal five main themes that connected with concepts surrounding identity, families, formal schooling, employment and cultural knowledge. The project concludes that there needs to be a transformation with how education is conceptualised and provided, so that all cultures and types of knowing are valued and acknowledged. Recommendations about how this can be accomplished have been proposed.

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, analyses and conclusions reported in this dissertation are my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award.

Signature of Candidate

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Supervisor

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the Giabal and Jarowair peoples of Toowoomba, as the traditional custodians of the land, where this research project was completed.

I wish to thank my participants, as without them, I could not have completed this work. I hope that because of all the time you spent taking photographs, talking with me and allowing me to see into private and, at times, painful aspects of your lives that we can contribute to making education and the wider society, better, for Othered students.

I am indebted to my supervisor, Associate Professor Jon Austin, for all his time and effort. We both endured some difficult experiences throughout this particular doctoral journey but we both came out alive.

Most importantly, I would like to sincerely thank my family. Particularly, my parents (Sally and David) for their unwavering love and support and for Francesca's inspiration to keep going, when all I really wanted to do was sleep for more than three hours at a time.

This work is dedicated to three special females in my life –

Nancy (my grandmother) who gave me the courage to embark upon this journey,

Sally (my mother) who gave me the strength to continue it and

Francesca (my daughter) who provided the inspiration to complete the journey.

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CHAPTER 1.**STARING INTO THE ABYSS: MY JOURNEY AND THE LENSES THAT I WEAR**

This dissertation is comprised of this written text and a photo essay that is on the cd provided. This photographic essay intends to be a visual exploration of learning and culture of both the participants and me. It presents some of the data that has been collected to enhance the transparency of this research project as well as being a method for disseminating some of the important stories that arose over the course of the project. The photographic essay has been explored in greater depth in later chapters.

WHO AM I AND WHERE HAVE I COME FROM?

I began this journey as an outsider in so many different ways. I was an outsider in that I moved to a new town to complete my doctorate and to be closer to my supervisors who lived there. I was an outsider to my participants as I am a white, middle class, woman researching with participants who were all male and Aboriginal. Throughout this journey I have begun to be less of an outsider but not yet an insider. This research project has been a challenging and eye opening experience. I am very lucky that I have had the opportunity to do this research and to work with the people that I have.

As L. T. Smith (1999, p. 5) states, “Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity”. Approaching this project I was acutely aware of the link between research and the “worst excesses of colonialism” and that this “remains a powerful remembered history” and although Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p.1) was talking from a Maori perspective, this notion could very easily be transferred to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context here in Australia. Mudrooroo (1995, p.75) states, “it is said that we are the most studied race in the world, and it may be said that we are also the most governed” (Fredericks, 2008; White, 2010). This project aspires to be a resistance piece that hopefully illustrates and gives space to counter-stories. The stories in this project look to disrupt the discourse of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are positioned as educationally incapable.

At numerous times throughout this journey I have heard various people or groups float the idea that this sort of work, ‘research that aims to illuminate hidden racial oppression’, is no longer needed, as humans have moved past this point. That race and racism are no longer contemporary issues that hold any weight within our society. Then I will engage with certain people, or witness particular events, that highlight the urgent need to continue this fight. One event that is emblazoned on my mind occurred quite recently when I was having a discussion with an academic working within teacher education at the university. We were teaching together in a course that explores the issues and challenges of adolescence and one of the themes within the course was race. In his office, he was discussing with me the potential for race to impact educational achievement and cited studies where white students attain