



Aboriginal Young People

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report on a recent study of Nyungar young people residing in a southern metropolitan region of Perth, and discuss the limitations of other research that categorises young people into various groups which are assumed to represent distinct and identifiable subcultures.

Events such as the Rethinking Youth Policy Conference in Melbourne in 1993, and recent editions of *Youth Studies Australia*, have provided the space for much needed debates around the re-emergence of 'youth culture and subcultures' as the subject of academic and policy interest. One of the important contributions of this debate has been the critique of the blind categorising of young people into various groups which are assumed to represent distinct and identifiable subcultures.

Our work draws out some of the contradictions and limitations in uncritically applying Anglo-centric theoretical frameworks (be they shaped by structuralist or post-structuralist traditions) to the study of the 'lifeworlds' or cultural experiences of Aboriginal young people.

It is our view that much of the inquiry that occurs in the broad arena of youth subcultures ignores the simultaneous involvement of Aboriginal young people in a range of spheres, domains and activities. It is our contention that, in the main, formal and academic work in Australia largely mirrors pop-

ular or 'everyday commonsense' ideas about Aboriginal young people. Either Aboriginal young people are invisible in research and discussions concerned with youth subcultures or, where they are considered, there is generally an over-reliance on problematic assumptions about what Aboriginal young people do and do not involve themselves in. This most often leads to passive acceptance of subcultural analysis which relies too heavily on functionalist discourses on deviance and criminality, or more 'racial' discourses that are often romantic or overly deterministic.

This paper draws on the preliminary findings of an ethnographic study investigating how Nyungar young people articulate their

everyday experiences of the nexus between substance use and the police. Here, however, we are not so much interested in what the respondents had to say about substance use and the police, as in whether their accounts challenge many of the underlying assumptions which inform past and current work on youth subcultures.

The field work for the study was undertaken in early 1993 and involved Nyungar young people residing in a southern metropolitan region of Perth engaging in discussions with a Nyungar researcher. Many of their comments challenge popularly held views about Aboriginal young people's attitudes, behaviour, style, and 'leisure' and spare time pursuits.



Picture: Courtesy Mili Mili Wungka magazine

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and Youth Subcultures

It is important to note that we are largely limiting ourselves to a discussion of youth culture and Nyungar young people. We use the term Nyungar to refer to descendants of Aboriginal people in the southwest of Western Australia. Nyungar country extends eastward of Albany, northwest roughly to the small wheatbelt town of Nyoongah and west-north-west towards the town of Cooroow on the west coast. Wetjella is the name used to describe non-Aboriginal people.

There are essentially two reasons for this. First, this paper uses source material from a study of Nyungar young people living in suburban Perth. The second reason is that if we are to take seriously the claim (which we later make) that discussions of youth culture must take into account Aboriginality, then we must speak of specific groups of Aboriginal young people. Having said this, we acknowledge that much of the following discussion may be pertinent to Wongi, Yamagi, Nunga, Murri, Koori, Tiwi and other generic or regional groups of Aboriginal people.

Nyungar Young People and Limitations of Youth Subculture Analysis

While there is not the space to review fully the descriptive material that was generated from the research project under discussion, it is important to provide some cursory comments regarding the general patterns that emerged when participants were asked to talk about their (cultural) experiences. In a sense we use the study to offer insights into the way that Nyungar young people are socially constructed (or ignored) in popular discussions pertaining to youth subculture rather than to provide a detailed ethnography of Nyungar young people themselves.

Accounts from this study indicate that work on youth subcultures has either made Nyungar young people invisible, or has accepted a number of popular misconceptions about what happens to them. One of the most unfortunate aspects of research that is situated within the discourse of Anglo academia or public policy is that Anglo-centric assumptions underpin many of the con-

clusions reached about Nyungar young people. These assumptions can and do generate or perpetuate popular stereotypes (Beauvais and LaBoeff, cited in Brady 1992:2).

Specifically, it is our contention that research interest in Nyungar young people and their 'cultural' existence often uncritically embraces the following popular misconceptions and problematic premises:

- over-emphasising the substance use and criminal activities of Nyungar young people;
- denying contemporary Aboriginality and cultural continuity and assuming Nyungar social disorganisation is at the base of problems for Nyungar young people;
- focusing most research attention on the activities and lives of Aboriginal young people living in rural and remote communities;
- lacking specificity and assuming homogeneity among youth and young Aboriginal people;
- individualising and truncating Nyungar young people from their families and communities;
- adopting an anti-historical or Anglo-his-

torical analysis which relies on non-Aboriginal constructions of history which are often couched in negative, victim centred and static aspects of Aboriginal people's history;

- viewing Nyungar culture as so distinct and different and regarding Nyungar young people as so marginalised that they only spend time and share 'cultural' experiences with other Nyungar young peoples; and
- assuming that Nyungar young people experience personal and social problems because of boredom and a lack of meaningful things to do.

Nyungar Young People as 'Deviants': Crime and Substance (mis) Use

The first and, in terms of the research project, most disconcerting pattern emerging from the majority of work that focuses on Nyungar (and indeed most Aboriginal) young people is how captivated social researchers seem to be with criminality, incarceration and substance 'abuse'. When originally undertaking a review of literature dealing with Aboriginal young people it became apparent that the most written material on this social group centres on the nexus between such matters as crime, alcohol, 'drugs' and police relations. These ideas, argues Langton (1993:195) emanate from quite old and established ways of 'imagining' indigenous Australians as 'drunken Aborigines'.

We acknowledge that the destructive use of alcohol and other volatile substances, and disproportionate involvement in the justice system, is of serious concern to many Nyungar families and community groups, and it is our view that much of the more recent research interest in these areas has been eminently useful in countering unjust practices which result in some Aboriginal young people being treated unfairly. However, an over-emphasis on the connection between Nyungar young people and these activities can lead to the subtle perpetuation of the notion that Nyungar young people are inherently more criminal, irresponsible and devastated by alcohol and other substances than other young people.

This is especially disconcerting and perhaps even perplexing given that: 'The real problems associated with misuse of alcohol in many Aboriginal communities are amenable to solution, when the rate of alcohol misuse in the Aboriginal community is actually less than in the general population, and when the focus of these campaigns is handfuls of binge drinkers in the provincial towns whose plight deserves something better than vicious racist attacks' (Langton 1993:196).

And, of course, researchers who are pre-occupied with criminality and 'dangerous' substance use find that there is little time to 'tell other stories' about Nyungar young people. In other words, research which focuses the majority of attention on the spheres of crime and substance 'abuse' represents an unbalanced picture of Nyungar youth 'cultural' experience.

For example, of special concern to a number of Nyungar families living in Perth has been the obsession by key media outlets with Nyungar young people's involve-

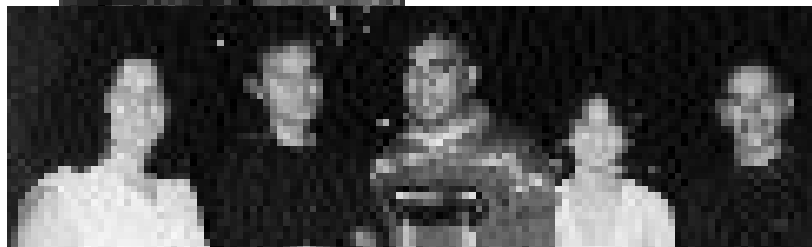
ment in car stealing and the subsequent police chases that ensue. The print media particularly have tended to substantiate this fixation with all manner of statistical data, but little or no reference is made to the overwhelming majority of Nyungar young people who are clearly not involved in this or other criminal activities. Rarely do the same media outlets seem to take an interest in other spheres of Nyungar 'cultural' life.

This kind of selective interest in the criminal activities of a relatively small proportion of the Nyungar population often results in calls for more regulation and policing designed to control public spaces frequented by Nyungars. As well as resulting in the extra sentencing of Nyungar young people, it is likely that these kinds of legislative changes will legitimate patterns of policing that ignore 'violence against Aboriginal women and children by men, and violence against Aboriginal people generally by non-Aboriginal individuals' (Cunneen 1992: 89-90).

One of the major goals of the research project was to investigate how Nyungar young people describe their daily experience of police and substance use. Perhaps the most noteworthy theme emerging from the



Pictures: Courtesy Mili Mili Wungka magazine



research was that for young Nyungars crime and substance use make up a very small proportion of their lives. Some of those involved in the research made it quite clear that they rarely used alcohol or illegal drugs. Others made reference to a life with little, if any, contact with police or state officials or perhaps even rare or self-regulated use of drugs such as marijuana or alcohol. Even though participants were each asked about their involvement with police and substance use, for many it seemed like these were not central concerns or worthy of great discussion. Of those interviewed several chose to spend a great deal of time talking about their involvement in organised sporting activities, time spent with family and the importance of friendships in their daily lives.

For example, the following account of one of the discussions with a Nyungar researcher (NR) illustrates a distinct attempt on the part of one Nyungar young man

(NYM) to make it clear that, rather than choose to smoke marijuana, much of his time is spent playing sport and 'hanging around' with friends.

NR: *What do you do during the day then?*

NYM: *Um . . . I just go and play some games at Timezone in Fremantle and just play games. Boxing, golf, football, basketball, and hang around with friends, just have a cigarette some times. That's all I do. I don't smoke ganga [marijuana] or anything like that.*

Although the question of contact with the law and substance use received serious consideration by those involved in the design of this research, it seems that this does not reflect the prominence these issues have for many of the Nyungar young people who acted as informants.

Nyungar Young People as Culturally Impoverished: Aboriginality and Cultural Continuity

The second key idea that often informs work concerned with Nyungar young people is the misconception that 'Aboriginal cultures are merely remnants of an imperfectly remembered traditional past, particularly for those living in urban or fringe areas' (Moore 1992: 173). In other words 'authentic' Aboriginal culture is perceived as a culture that is frozen in time (Neumann 1992:277).

In our experience much youth studies work is premised on ideas that deny contemporary Aboriginality and cultural continuity and assumes Nyungar social disorganisation is at the base of problems for Nyungar young people. As Langton (1981:20-21) has argued,

popular constructions of urban-living Aboriginal people are premised on the belief that 'traditional' (and we use this term with some reservation) Aboriginal societies were static and unchanging, and that conflict was absent. The result has been that urban-dwelling Nyungar people are often accused of 'losing their culture', no longer engaging in 'traditional' practices, and of not being 'fully or real Aborigines'. As Moore (1992:174) asserts, these kinds of ideas are ethnocentric in the extreme, and rely on the assumption that Nyungars living in urban areas suffer from 'cultural disintegration' when compared with 'idealised and pristine "traditional" or "tribal" Aborigines of the past'. From our reading of Nyungar literature and from the comments made by participants in the research, contemporary Nyungar language, knowledge and culture is not only alive and well but considerably influential in the lives of Nyungar young people.

While having considerable contact and shared interests (perhaps even similar obstacles) with non-Aboriginal young people, some Nyungar young people talked about fundamental differences and the importance of a distinctly Nyungar 'life'.

NR: *Tell us about your Wetjella [non-Aboriginal] friends.*

NYW: *Oh, they're pretty good, you know. But they're still a bit, I dunno, just don't feel right hanging around Wetjella kids. Because they have just different lifestyles, you know.*

NR: *What's the difference?*

NYW: *Ab, just like they're completely different people even though they get pissed and get chased by the cops. Nyungar, I can relate to them. Like I'm half white and half Nyungar so I can relate to both sides, but still when I relate to Nyungar kids they can sort of talk to me and sort of communicate with me. But the Wetjella kids, it's oh, I dunno, they haven't got the Nyungar family tradition.*

Discussions with Nyungar young people reveal that, although central to their cultural experience, Aboriginality is not fixed. It is our view that Neumann's (1992:297) description of Jimmy Chi's musical 'Bran Nue Dae' could well describe contemporary Nyungar young people's language, style and cultural behaviour. He says: 'It depicts a lively and thriving present-day Aboriginal culture that takes and integrates diverse influences from other cultures, as well as contemporising and mimicking 'traditional' Aboriginal concepts, all of which contribute to its distinct Aboriginality.'

Contrary to a popular view, distinctly Nyungar languages and practices continue to exist in urban centres like Perth. This reflects that one of the features of the histories of Nyungar people has been their huge capacity to negotiate and adapt to change (see Langton 1981; Dugeon and Oxenham 1988; Bennell 1991). Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives and practices of Nyungar young people.

Nyungar Young People as Remote Dwellers: Regional Affiliation

The third theme that very much ties in with the preceding discussion is the tendency in the study of Aboriginal youth culture to focus a great deal of attention on Aboriginal young people living in rural and remote communities. This is hardly surprising given that it has only been in very recent times that anthropologists and others involved in Aboriginal studies have taken any great interest in the lives of Aboriginal people living in urban centres. As Langton (1981) makes clear, this in itself reflects very dubious dichotomies such as ideas of 'full-blood versus half-caste' or 'traditional=tribal=rural versus urban' Aborigines. These kinds of icons reveal more about the perceptions of those who attempt to question the authenticity of various Aboriginal people's claims than the actual experiences or views of Aboriginal people themselves.

In his article on research and preventive activities targeting alcohol use among Aboriginal people, Moore (1992) suggests that an over-emphasis on rural and remote communities by social researchers and policy developers hinders innovation in programs designed for use in urban settings. Given that so many live in or around large urban centres, Nyungar young people are among those groups of Aboriginal young people most affected by this tendency. While we appreciate that (especially in states like Western Australia) Aboriginal young people living in remote areas have particular problems associated with physical and social isolation, an exclusive interest in these groups results in research failing to depict what happens for chiefly urban-dwelling groups like Nyungar young people.

Youth studies research which accepts this preoccupation with rural and remote-living Aboriginal young people will inevitably become responsible for making invisible, or more likely distorting, the complex and unique lives of many, if not most, Nyungar young people. In other words, Nyungar young people involved in this project, who spend most of their time in the southern Perth metropolitan area, have relatively little in common with Pitjantjatjara young people who spend most of their time in the Western Desert. Rather, Nyungar participants in the research spoke of specific needs which reflected their particular family, social network and regional situations and histories.

Nyungar Young People as 'Youth': Specificity

Another major criticism that has already been levelled at youth subcultures theory is that youth is often assumed to be a homogeneous social group. The term 'youth' is full of ambiguity and is rarely used in a consistent way (Sercombe 1989). When confronted with the task of making sense of Nyungar young people's cultural life, this brings with it problems at two levels.

First, youth studies has tended to treat all young people as if they have similar life opportunities. In other words, work on youth subcultures assumes that Nyungar young people have essentially the same kinds of problems and concerns as non-Aboriginal young people. In talking about Koori young people, Palamara (cited in Chisholm 1985:47) argues that the biggest mistake that welfare and youth policy research makes is to view young Kooris as no different from anyone else.

We believe that this is pertinent to Nyungar young people as well. While there is a danger in ignoring the aspects of contemporary Nyungar young people's lives that are shared with other groups of Australian young people, it is important to acknowledge difference between young people. As the following remark indicates, racism directed at Nyungars results in a distinctly different experience of being young.

NR: *So you're saying that Wetjella and Nyungar kids are alike? They go through the same dilemmas?*

NYW: *Yeab, but the Wetjella kids can get away with things a lot easier. Probably 'cause cops are prejudiced against Nyungars. It's just a fact of everybody's life. Like we was out driving without a licence a couple of times and got busted. On one time this Nyungar dude got done for driving without a licence and on another this Wetjella lad, who didn't have a licence, got picked up and all he got busted for was blowing the horn.*

Second, when youth studies research occasionally does recognise the importance of Aboriginality, it often fails to specify Aboriginal identity in terms of gender and class, or regional, language and family affiliations. The assumption shaping this trend is that all Aboriginal young people, regardless of their family, region and social background, have similar cultural experiences and life chances. As Keen (1988:7) so aptly reminds us when he discusses Aboriginal cultures, 'neither the social and economic conditions nor the culture of Aboriginal people of "settled" Australia is homogeneous'.

When asked to talk about the similarities and differences within attitudes, lifestyle and practices of Nyungar young people, one Nyungar young woman considered there was huge diversity. She chose to use the example of differences between Nyungar young people studying at a local university and 'half of them others' who would not even be able to conceptualise what it is like to operate in such an environment.

NYW: *Attitudes are just completely different — there are some Nyungars that go to Murdoch [University], but half of them others wouldn't even know about things like that [education offered by tertiary institutions]. There's nothing there for them. Whereas the Nyungars at Murdoch — well, some of them are going to Law School and stuff.*

Nyungar Young People as Individuals: Kin and Family Affiliation

Linked with these oversights is a tendency towards individualising Nyungar young people. By and large, practitioners and policy makers tend to deal with Nyungar young people outside of their community and family context. The theme that 'youth' is a distinct, separable and identifiable period in human life is central to much of the thinking in youth studies. The idea that social phenomena, in this case 'youth', can be dissected and studied in discrete sections is a feature of western and modernist science.

This practice very much reflects western unitary notions of individuality, with adults being deemed as having equal rights before the law and the state. As Bulbeck (1992:327) notes, this contrasts markedly with many non-western and indigenous systems where personhood is connected with kin relationships, sex, age and a range of other factors. The assumption is that if a Nyungar young person is experiencing difficulties, then attention needs to focus on that particular person as a discrete and isolated individual. In contrast, Nyungar people often see the

lives and welfare of their young people as intricately tied up with family or community expectations and responsibilities rather than as a distinct and separate issue (Chisholm 1985:59). Something of this was portrayed in one of the participant's narrative of an incident at school.

NYM: *Once there was this big brawl between all the Nyungars in the school. They took sides for family reasons and that, and then it got stressed out a bit by teachers who really went overboard. They got cops involved, but they never did when white people fought at school. Soon as the Nyungars had fights at school, it was bang, the cops were there and it was the Nyungars getting arrested . . . just because it was a family thing.*

Nyungar Young People as Powerless Victims: Agency, Negotiation, Resilience and Resistance

A further critique that we believe is worthy of mention is the European control over the 'making' and 'unmaking' of Aboriginal history and culture. Recent criticism on the part of Aboriginal people and some anthropologists in terms of non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal history is pertinent to youth studies. Much of this history either ignores the contributions and experiences of Nyungar people or couches them in powerless, negative, victim-centred or static terms (see Attwood 1989; Bulbeck 1992; Cowlishaw 1993). Many of the young people involved in this project spoke of highly fulfilled and successful lives that reflect much more than a history of passive marginalisation, 'oppression' or subordination. Rather, their narratives often refer to accomplishments that are largely invisible in popular accounts which 'hunger for histories of colonial blood and horror' (Cowlishaw 1993).

From our experience, nowhere is this preoccupation with simplistic, sympathetic and sorrowful ideas of the 'Aboriginal experience' more evident than in the realm of formal education. For example, a theme articulated by Nyungar students in tertiary institutions is that non-Aboriginal academics and students seem to have a fascination with the devastating impact of early Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contact and the negative aspects of Nyungar history, while often ignoring the strength, courage, resilience and success that exemplifies the struggles and survival of Nyungar families and life (for a more detailed discussion of Nyungar struggles with Western Australian government authorities see references to John Kickett, Mourdey, and Norman Harris in Haebich 1988:32, 143, 389). This, we believe, is reflected in a good deal of social research which often implicitly constructs Nyungar young people and their families as totally powerless victims who have had little or no agency, been unable to enhance their social position or had no capacity to determine their own futures.

This kind of uninformed oversight ignores the many and varied ways in which large numbers of Nyungar families have fought to succeed in both Nyungar and non-Aboriginal

terms. It also ignores the way that some Aboriginal people interpret their past. For example, Neumann (1992:292) contrasts the pessimistic future of Tasmanian Aborigines offered by anthropologist Bonwick with the optimistic view espoused by Nyungar writer Mudrooroo. Since the earliest days of Nyungar/Wetjella (non-Aboriginal) contact there are examples of resistance and negotiation, with Nyungar people being able to speak of very fulfilled lives and of much accomplishment in the face of adversity. Nyungar young people must not be 'defined as the helpless dupes of tradition or awkwardness' (Bulbeck 1992:327). Having said this, it is also important that we not overromanticise Nyungar young people's agency and award them with some kind of superagency which ignores their 'real' and material experiences of racism (Bulbeck 1992).

A practical consequence of this kind of Anglo-centred view of history is the exclusion of Aboriginal people as trainers, designers, researchers and informers in youth studies research. From our experience, it is not unusual to hear non-Aboriginal youth studies researchers, trainers and practitioners complain that 'there are no Aboriginal researchers or trainers out there' or 'wouldn't it be good if we could train up an Aboriginal person to be resource person?' The danger in assuming that the process of colonisation has impacted in much the same way on all Nyungar people and resulted in total powerlessness, is that competent, qualified and experienced Nyungars who are experts in dealing with Nyungar youth affairs and are highly skilled at 'researching' and interpreting the lives of Nyungar young people are ignored as potential researchers.

A popular theme (evident in the language and style of the accounts) emerging from the dialogues with young Nyungars was pride in a distinctly Nyungar way of 'behaving in the face of conflict and authority. Far from being powerless and helpless, those concerned spoke of an ability to 'get their own way' and 'have their point heard'. One of the Nyungar young women participants recounted with a great deal of pride an incident involving the police, her grandmother and some of her Nyungar friends. Without recounting the finer details of the incident, the upshot was that the young woman's grandmother was able to give the police 'a good tellin' off for hasslin' us kids, even though we should have been locked up for a break we had just done. Us [Nyungar family name] we can make them monarch [police officers] piss.'

Nyungar Young People as Segregated and Different: Adaptation and Incorporation

Yet another problematic conclusion that implicitly informs studies of young people's culture is that Nyungar youth culture is so distinct and different and Nyungars are so marginalised that young Nyungars only spend time and share 'cultural' experiences with other Nyungars. This is perhaps more of a reflection of a number of the assumptions already outlined than a distinct theme itself. Notions of youth subcultures that are built upon theories of deviance can lead to the perpetuation of the idea that Nyungar young

people cut themselves off totally from 'mainstream' groups and institutions.

What this conclusion ignores is the complex interplay between Nyungar young people, non-Aboriginal young people and other cultural factors and systems. In the current technological context, where 'mass culture' results in communicative exchanges unparalleled in the history of humanity, it is absurd to suggest that the everyday lives of Nyungar young people are untouched by influences outside of the interests of Nyungar families. In the 'post-colonial' days where 'Aboriginal culture' is immersed in so many images of Australian life, it is equally unreasonable to ignore the way in which Nyungar young people's style, language and behaviour inspire and arouse interest in other young Australians.

For example, according to a youth worker at a local state school situated in fast-becoming-gentrified Fremantle, it is no longer 'fashionable' to tell racist jokes or make reference to 'coons' or 'Abos'. Rather, it is far more trendy to draw land rights symbols on school bags, listen to Yothu Yindi music and learn to play the 'didge'. Likewise on the inner city streets of Perth, non-Aboriginal young people can be heard warning their colleagues about approaching 'monarch' (Nyungar term for police), perhaps joking about the last time they had a 'moony' (sexual intercourse), or frequently ending their sentences with 'unna' (isn't that right?). As the data collected in this research indicates, Nyungar young people have considerable personal contact with non-Aboriginal young people and youth culture. This contact not only shapes the cultural milieu of Nyungar young people but also impacts on the cultural experience of non-Aboriginal young people. There is every indication that this has been the case since early days of Nyungar/non-Aboriginal contact.

The following statements are indicative of the comments of many Nyungars interviewed when they were asked about their contact with non-Aboriginal young people.

Interview 1

NR: *Who do you hang around with? Nyungars all the time?*

NYW: *No, not all the time. When I get sick and tired of Nyungars I go back to all my Wetjella friends. Well, we got a couple of Italian fellas, Portuguese, us Nyungar girls, um . . . just a couple of normal Wetjellas. We all mixed bred.*

Interview 2

NR: *Who do you go to school with?*

NYW: *My Wetjella friends.*

NR: *How many are there?*

NYW: *There's lots, yeah, quite a few.*

NR: *Tell us about them?*

NYW: *They're nice, yeah — they sort of know a few Nyungar words and try to be Nyungar and, um . . . yeah, hang around Nyungars.*

There is almost no reference within youth studies to Nyungar young people's capacity to adapt or influence both Nyungar and non-Aboriginal cultural forms, make them

their own and persuade other young people to follow their lead. Again, without romanticising and 'wishing away' the real and actual force of racism, this contact does change cultural experiences for a meaningful number of Nyungar young people and, indeed, non-Aboriginal young people.

Nyungar Young People as Bored: Cultural Poverty Revisited

The final assumption that is highly tenuous and worthy of critique is that Nyungar young people experience personal and social problems largely because of boredom and a lack of meaningful things to do. This kind of conclusion follows the already mentioned view that Aboriginal cultural life has been largely annihilated, that Nyungar young people have lost a connection with their cultural past and that their cultural life lacks any real meaning or expression. This view tends to rely on a self-fulfilling argument which goes something like: 'Nyungar young people engage in

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certain activities, such as crime, because they are bored. If they were not bored then they would have no time to engage in these activities.' It is often thought to follow that solutions to Nyungar young people's social and personal problems are to be found in increasing recreation and other diversionary activities targeting Nyungar young people.

While we would not wish to underestimate the success of recreation-based programs designed to combat such problems as the over-representation of Nyungar young people in state detention centres, there are serious problems in assuming a cause-effect relationship between leisure (or lack thereof) and involvement in activities such as crime, substance use, self-destructive behaviour and poverty.

This kind of assumption ignores the possibility that some Nyungar young people might choose to engage in activities and practices that are deemed to be self-destructive, illegal or socially unacceptable, while many actually spend the majority or all of their time engaging in legal, acceptable and socially sanctioned endeavours. For a significant number of those interviewed, their lives were exceptionally busy with large involvement in 'respectable' activities such as school, homework, organised sport, 'going to Timezone', just hanging around at the local shopping or youth centres, and visiting friends and relatives.

Conclusion

Today, as has been the case in the past, many Nyungar young people are working very hard to assert their rights and responsibilities. However, we do not believe that this struggle

is being supported terribly well by 'official' youth policy nor acknowledged within literature interested in youth culture. Given that the next ten years will see an increase in the number of Nyungar young people (in fact Aboriginal young people in general), and subsequently likely popular interest in the activities of Nyungar young people, it is paramount that youth studies research acts to counter the silence and invisibility of Nyungar young people in the literature.

Unfortunately, much of what constitutes current research work concerned with youth culture is, at best, isolated from the material and cultural realities of contemporary Nyungar young people and their families or, at worst, blatantly racist. We share the conclusions of Eversley Ruth (1990:41) that non-Aboriginal practitioners, policy makers (and indeed youth studies 'experts') have much to learn and could do well to accept the wisdom of Nyungar people and appreciate their ways of dealing with the issues that confront their young. Or as Birch (1992: 244) claims

in respect of Koori cultures: 'Koori culture is not a commodity. It must be interpreted in an educative fashion by those who live it — Koori people.'

Finally, it seems to us that there is a need to make explicit and recognise the limitations in the highly western and Anglo-centric theoretical frameworks that inform work on youth cultures, and to engage in dialogue with Nyungar people. While a number of disciplines and research traditions (such as Anthropology, Aboriginal Studies and Women's Studies) seem to have taken up the challenge of incorporating difference and eliciting the knowledge and expertise of the 'subject', it is our view that youth studies has largely failed to enter into dialogue with the 'Other'. Research and policy development targeting all young people must involve, in its earliest stages, two-way or reciprocating conversation between Nyungars and non-Aboriginal people.

Rather than being relegated to the margins of youth research interest, academics and other youth studies researchers could place the experiences of Nyungar young people at the forefront of their analysis. Similar to Bulbeck (1992:330), we hold the view that youth studies research that centres on Nyungar young people can not only tell us much about the actual lives of Nyungar young people, but also it can uncover ways in which non-Aboriginal young Australians are slaves to their own histories and traditions. The result of such work will be research and policy that is informed, sophisticated and which takes into account the multifaceted, complex and sometimes contradictory identities and experiences of Nyungar and other groups of young people.

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