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A Third Space Social Enterprise:
Closing the Gap Through Cross-Cultural Learning

Introduction

Welfare statistics continue to count Aboriginal people as the country's most disadvantaged cultural group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012) despite numerous political programs aimed at improving conditions for Indigenous Australians. After attempts at self-determination following the 1967 referendum and self-governance in the 1990s (Fletcher 1994; Markus 1994), the Howard Coalition Government (1996-2007) promoted 'practical reconciliation' with a focus on Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage and statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Altman 2004). Practical reconciliation, which marked a shift away from an Indigenous rights-based approach "to a new liberal paradigm" in Indigenous policy (Strakosch 2015:2), continues to underpin the current Coalition Government's (2013-) 'Closing the Gap' policy framework. Closing the Gap seeks to foster improvements in areas such as remote housing, health, early childhood development, jobs and improvements in remote service delivery and to make available Indigenous-specific funding in support of these reforms (Council of Australian Governments 2008).

One key objective of the Closing the Gap strategy of particular interest to this paper is the intended halving of the Indigenous employment gap by 2018 by way of encouraging Indigenous participation in the formal economy (Council of Australian Governments 2008). The government's focus on Indigenous employment is certainly warranted, especially in rural and remote areas where Indigenous participation remains low (Brereton and Parmenter 2008; Australian Government 2014; Altman 2016), and it is this lack of formal economic participation by Indigenous people that is

seen to perpetuate their low socio-economic status and poor health statistics (Osborne, Baum and Brown 2013). To date, however, as the government's most recent Closing the Gap report (Australian Government 2016) attests, no progress has been made in halving the gap in Indigenous employment. This explains why economic mainstreaming attempts are deemed inadequate to deliver improved Indigenous economic participation (e.g. Altman 2014, 2015a, 2016; Jordan 2012). The Closing the Gap approach with its focus on Indigenous socio-economic needs—or "*deficits*" (Sullivan 2013:354 italics added)—and statistical performance management is criticised also for it is seen to "depoliticise Indigenous issues" (Pholi, Black and Richards 2009:8) and to ignore the "historical and politico-economic causes of marginalisation" and Indigenous disadvantage (Altman 2009: 6). According to critics, statistical equality is seemingly achieved at the expense of cultural difference (Altman and Hinkson 2010:203; Sullivan 2013:354).

The government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Australian Goverment 2014), introduced as a vehicle for delivering on key aspects of the Closing the Gap framework, intends to "connect working age Indigenous Australians with real and sustainable jobs, foster Indigenous business and assist Indigenous people to generate economic and social benefits from economic assets". This aim is reflective of the goals expressed by the Council of Australian Governments (2009), which strives for reduced dependence on welfare, the promotion of personal responsibility and a level of engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms. While this approach purportedly offers Indigenous Australians a choice between mainstream work and welfare, it translates into the requirement to migrate to places with economic opportunities in remote parts of Australia where finding employment remains a particular challenge (Hunter and Gray 2012). This in turn treats as

unproblematic the attendant uprooting of Indigenous people and the loss of connection to their ancestral lands in search of formal employment (Altman 2007b:3), incurring trade-offs between cultural and locational ties and economic participation.

It is in this context that we focus on a *Third Space* social enterprise in the Bhabhaian sense, operating in Yirrkala near the mining town of Nhulunbuy in northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The venture, which blends semi-formal employment with customary practices and local traditions, is not only a place "where white fellas and Aboriginal people mix" (Green cited in Kennedy 2011) but also a space of two ways of learning and cultural blending; a place where Indigenous culture can be maintained and protected but also enriched by non-Indigenous culture and vice versa. This *Third Space* enterprise provides a culturally safe place of work and a stepping-stone towards 'real' employment whilst shielding its staff from mainstreaming pressures applied by the ruling colonisers.

Somewhat surprisingly, with few notable exceptions, *Third Space* writings in the Australian Indigenous context (see Dudgeon and Fielder 2006; McLaughlin 2012) and the business and entrepreneurship literature (see DeBerry-Spence 2008; Frenkel 2008) are rare. We thus see value in employing the *Third Space* lens, investigating the issues of culture and power in the Closing the Gap policy context and exploring the ways in which these are being addressed within a small, Indigenous-run social enterprise. We commence with a contextualisation of this study by way of describing and critiquing the Closing the Gap framework and its goals of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. This is followed by an introduction of the Bhabhaian *Third Space* theory and the related concepts of mimicry and hybridity. We then focus on the case of the enterprise under investigation, presenting empirical data derived from ongoing

research efforts in Yirrkala with a view to offer a *Third Space* analysis of its activities and impacts. In doing so, we hope to provide a critical insight into the power dimensions of Australia's dominant Indigenous welfare and employment policies and to draw attention to what we regard as an effective response to the assimilation pressures these policy approaches entail. Overall, we seek to show that cross-cultural enterprises such as this can offer an alternative pathway to meeting the thus far elusive Closing the Gap Indigenous employment targets and thus has implications for Indigenous policy-making by government.

Australia's Closing the Gap Framework

Since the late 1960s successive Commonwealth governments have sought to address Indigenous disadvantage, and the Closing the Gap strategy is the most recent of these political attempts (for overview see Hunt 2008; Strakosch 2015). Areas such as education, employment and housing targeted by the Howard Coalition Government (1996-2007) under the banner of 'practical reconciliation' (Altman 2004) became key elements of the Closing the Gap policies introduced by the Rudd Labor Government (2007-2010). While the current Coalition Government (2013-) has pledged its support for the Closing the Gap targets, the policy emphasis has shifted more strongly towards individual self-reliance, stressing individualism and the role of the market. Statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is now treated as a matter of 'free will' and 'free choice', and the role of government programs is reduced to that of a mere 'catalyst' for Indigenous socio-economic advancement (Abbott cited in Martin 2015).

The Closing the Gap framework comprises a series of commitments made by the

Council of Australian Governments (COAG)[1] in 2008 under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Council of Australian Governments 2008) to implement reforms in remote housing, health, early childhood development, employment and improvements in remote service delivery. Under the policy a halving of the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians is envisaged by 2018 by way of enhancing economic participation.

Early 2016 saw the most recent release of the aforementioned Commonwealth Closing the Gap report with the Prime Minister conceding that "no progress has been made against the [employment] target since 2008" (Australian Government 2016:27). Indigenous employment outcomes have in fact worsened over the last seven years as the proportion of Indigenous people employed fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-13, creating a 28.1 percentage point gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working age people (see Australian Government 2015a).

The recent rise in Indigenous unemployment is attributed in part to the replacement of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in mid-2013 despite evidence of social and economic improvements in the lives of Indigenous people through participation in CDEP-funded projects (Altman and Gray 2005; Morphy and Sanders 2002). The phase out of the CDEP is believed to have resulted in the loss of over 22 000 CDEP-funded jobs (Hunter and Gray 2012: 9), with its effects felt in remote areas in general and in the Northern Territory in particular (Gibson 2012) where CDEP has been by far the largest driver of Indigenous employment (Jordan 2012).

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[1] COAG is Australia's peak intergovernmental forum comprising of the Prime Minister, State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association.

CDEP was the brainchild of the Fraser Coalition Government (1972 -1975) designed to address the long-term welfare dependency concerns brought about by policy changes introduced during the Whitlam Government era (1972-1975) (Jordan 2012). The CDEP model offered part-time government-funded employment to local people to work on local projects, importantly accommodating or including traditional or customary local practices. CDEP-funding helped the growth of Indigenous cultural and natural resource management and has been instrumental in the rise of Australia's Indigenous art industry and assisted with Indigenous enterprise development (Altman and Sanders 2008; Morrison 2007; Nalliah 2001). The flexibility provided in CDEP-funded jobs allowed the prioritisation of the social and cultural obligations of CDEP participants, and this social efficacy of CDEP has often been portrayed as a particular strength of the program (Altman, Biddle and Buchanan 2012; Altman and Gray 2005; Morphy and Sanders 2002).

Assessments of the overall effectiveness of the CDEP, however, have remained mixed over the duration of the program. While the scheme was successful in providing employment[2] to people without access to mainstream jobs and/or without the skills to find non-CDEP employment (Altman 2007a, 2016; Altman and Gray 2005), the CEDP has also been described as a hindrance to investments in education and finding paid employment and as crowding out 'real' jobs in the 'real economy' (Spicer 1997; Hudson 2008; Hunter 2009; Pearson 2007). Empirical data show that in terms of the 'job characteristics' non-CDEP employment is preferable over CDEP-funded positions (Hunter and Gray 2012). However, for remote Australia CDEP has for many years been the main employer of Indigenous people due to the lack of formal employment

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[2] There is considerable debate as to whether CDEP-funded positions can be counted as a form of employment. The respective inclusion or exclusion of CDEP jobs has a strong influence on Indigenous unemployment figures and thus on measurements of the effectiveness of Closing the Gap policy measures (Gray, Hunter and Lohoar 2012; Gray, Hunter and Howlett 2013).

and the conflict that can arise between the demands of paid work and the "socio-cultural realities" of "many Aboriginal peoples" (Jordan 2012:50). While recent years saw considerable non-CDEP job growth in remote Australia (Gray, Hunter and Howlett 2013), the growth rate is unlikely to be sufficient to offset the recent loss of CDEP-funded positions (see Hunter and Gray 2012), let alone help meet the 2018 Closing the Gap policy target (see Biddle, Taylor and Yap 2008).

CDEP arose from the recognition "that orthodox welfare and employment creation institutions were unsuitable for the exceptional economic and cultural circumstances of remote living Aboriginal people" (Altman 2016:180). CDEP enabled the co-existence of work and cultural practice through "direct job creation *in situ*" (Jordan 2012:33), whereas the new arrangements under RJCP demand Indigenous people to access mainstream employment in places where job opportunities exist. The RJCP, purportedly designed to facilitate employment and training-related activities (Australian Government 2015b), compels participants in remote areas to attend training for a 'real job' or at least to take part in 'work-like' activities to ensure receipt of unemployment benefits. Payments are docked for people failing to comply so that program participants "will learn the behaviours expected of workers, […] by there being immediate consequences for passive welfare behaviour" (Taylor 2014). In remote parts of Australia where job opportunities are scarce but attachment to land has remained strong (Altman 2007b) the uprooting of individuals entails significant cultural trade-offs (Greer and Patel 2000; Thompson, Gifford and Thorpe 2000). Also, the arduous work for the dole regime severely limits "opportunities to engage in other productive activity like hunting or fishing and living at homelands" (Altman 2015b:11) and thus make difficult the balancing of economic participation and the maintenance of Indigenous customs and traditions.

Strong "assimilationist" and "paternalistic" (Brown cited in McQuire 2015) overtones are detectable in the RJCP and Closing the Gap approach for traditional connections to land are couched in terms of "individual lifestyle choices" (Karvelas 2014; Medhora 2015) rather than in terms of "ontological anchorage" (Altman and Hinkson 2010:101), rendering Indigenous culture as being in the way of Aboriginal socio-economic advancement (see Johns 2008). Further, Closing the Gap strikes as a continuation of the government's gradual distancing from the "allegedly failed" attempts at Indigenous self-determination (Hunt 2008). Critics speak of a new form of "monoculturalism" (Sullivan 2013:359), which imposes Western social and economic norms and values (Jordan 2012:51; Altman 2015b) with a view by government "to direct and mold Indigenous cultures and their systems of governance into its own democratic likeness" (Smith 2008:76)3. Indeed, notions of "responsibility, welfare reform and economic opportunity, as well as ideas of competitive contractualism and normalisation" are now key characteristics of government service arrangements (Sanders 2014:12). Once regarded a vehicle for Indigenous autonomy, the CDEP has gradually become a 'welfare' program (Sanders 2007) that effectively turned into an instrument of governmental paternalism under RJCP (Altman 2015b; Sanders 2012). Altman (2014) speaks of a "retrograde shift […] to the conservative comfort zone" and the use of old colonial tactics masked by a discourse of fiscal responsibility (Altman 2015b) to attack the "last bastion of alterity and cultural difference, that openly challenges the conservative neoliberal vision to transform all Australians into highly individualistic and materially acquisitive neoliberal subjects" (Altman 2014). Overall, the Federal government's Closing the Gap approach is found to be at odds with Aboriginal values, priorities and concerns (Dodson 2015; Thompson and Wadley

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3 For a more detailed critique on the western culture of governance in relation to Indigenous Australia see Hunt el al. (2008).

2007) and considered a break with liberal multiculturalism and a shift towards further neoliberalisation of Australian Indigenous policy (Altman 2015a; Strakosch, 2015).

It is against this policy backdrop that we turn below to an exploration of the Bhabhaian *Third Space* concept. This perspective will inform the ensuing analysis of an Indigenous social entrepreneurship example in the Northern Territory with specific attention given to the cultural and power dimensions of the Closing the Gap Policy.

The Bhabhaian *Third Space*

Bhabha's *Third Space* is located within the discourse of marginality and postcolonialism, challenging definitions of static or fixed culture and identity and assumptions about the inherently positive nature of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Bhabha highlights the temporal and ever changing nature of culture and identity, using the term *Third Space* to denote a locus where an individual exists between his or her day-to-day world and other worlds. As suggested by Belk (2005), the *Third Space* is a place where boundaries are blurred and normal rules do not apply, a transitional realm in which people move from one status or role to another. Whilst in this realm, individuals are suspended between places of here and there, a phase—described by Turner (1967) as 'liminality'—with "few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (94).

For Bhabha (1994), the *Third Space* is about interstitial acts of enunciation, negotiation and translation, enabling other positions, identities and cultural hybrids to emerge. The concept is premised on the assumption that to arrive at a more complete understanding of the power relations between rulers and the dominated, a focus is required beyond the resources and structural forces affecting the behaviour of the

colonised, for power is relational (Peltonen 2006). Akin to Foucault's (1980) understanding of power, it is seen as a social construction enshrined in systems of classification and institutionalised practices with knowledge integral to the operation of power. Knowledge construction and the use of knowledge (e.g. practical, technological) are considered power-laden instruments used for the representation and reproduction of social hierarchies. In the postcolonial context, Bhabha (1994) explores the emergence and use of colonial knowledge in the unequal relationship between colonisers and colonised, ascribing a naturalising and legitimising role to knowledge which serves to maintain patterns of domination.

Central to the operation of knowledge is the concept of mimicry referring to the process of imposing the dominant culture of the colonisers and the reactions this process triggers among the colonised. The discourse of mimicry requires the adoption of the values and knowledge of the rulers. The forced emulation of these values and knowledge are portrayed to be for the 'good' of the dominated but at the same time act as a means of control for the benefit of the colonisers. Also, despite attempts at mimicking the dominant model, the colonised will remain the 'Other' and are thus prevented from ever becoming a legitimate part of the dominant culture (Bhabha 1994). This structural constraint provides choice and room for agency among the colonised, however, in that the will of the ruler can be followed but also be resisted which gives rise to the concept of hybridity.

Resistance to power can on the one hand result in conflict-laden cultural encounters between rulers and the colonised, a clash between colonial and pre-colonial knowledges, values and traditions. On the other hand, it creates opportunity for the emergence of what Bhabha (1994) refers to as 'hybrid culture'. Hybridity in this

regard speaks to the ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of culture and denies the naturalising and essentialising of culture and identity (Bhabha 1990), none of which are static or innate but fluid and modifiable through experience (Bhabha 1994). The *Third Space* in this regard can be understood as the locus of cross-cultural encounters, a place where colonisers and colonised meet but where neither group's rules and laws prevail (Bhabha 1990). It is in this 'space of in between' (Bhabha 1996) from where hybrid or fused cultures can emerge.

The *Third Space* metaphor is a useful tool for thinking about cross-cultural encounters but also about cultural resistance to colonial authority and the construction of fused, new cultures and identities (Bhabha, 1990). The use and application of the *Third Space* concept for the purposes of this paper enables us to make explicit a) the colonialist assumptions at the heart of Closing the Gap policies, b) the way in which these policies are reflective of the power relations between the colonisers and the colonised and c) how an Indigenous local grassroots organisation can act as a pocket of resistance against assimilationist pressures inherent in the Closing the Gap approach.

Comments on Method

This paper is informed by data derived from ongoing research in northeast Arnhem Land (Brueckner et al. 2010; Brueckner et al. 2014; Spencer et al. in print), measuring the social efficacy of Nuwul Environmental Services through the application of an integrated assessment framework developed by Lee and Nowell (2014). The framework assesses enterprise performance across four different effectiveness variables; namely inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Aspects pertaining to

cultural safety and cross-cultural learning, relevant to the exploration of the *Third Space* concept, formed part of the assessment.

The study was invited by Nuwul Environmental Services and is supported by the Board of the Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation, which oversees Nuwul's operations and shares the perspective taken on Indigenous disadvantage in this paper. Study objectives and design were developed jointly with Nuwul staff, and ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Murdoch University.

Data were collected over the course of three field visits to Yirrkala between 2013 and 2014 by way of open-ended semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Wengraf 2001) as well as 'yarns' (after Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010) with Nuwul staff and external stakeholders. Yarning refers to an informal approach allowing the researcher and participants to engage in conversation on topics of interest relevant to the research, building on the rapport and relationships the researcher has developed with informants. The format is generally open-ended, encouraging participants to share their views on, and experiences with the issues discussed.

Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during yarns where practical or alternatively summary notes were produced at the end of informal conversations. The data were then subjected to a thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) in search for patterns. Themes were developed through the careful iterative and reflexive examination and encoding of the raw interview data. Thematically grouped data were then clustered under performance criteria corresponding to Lee and Nowell's (2014) four effectiveness variables that were relevant to the analysis presented in this paper (i.e. cultural safety and cross-cultural learning).

The *Third Space* Social Enterprise

Nuwul Environmental Services is a grassroots organisation owned and run by members of the Rirratjingu clan in the town of Yirrkala, located 20 km south of Nhulunbuy in northeast Arnhem Land. The organisation is managed by a non-Indigenous ethno-botanist who was invited by Rirratjingu clan members in 2009 to re-establish and manage the business that was trading then as the Dudungurr Nursery. Nuwul operates as a not-for-profit environmental organisation that uses Yolŋu culture and knowledge of local plants and their uses as key resources for the business (Nuwul Environmental Services 2010). Enterprise activities include the collection, storage and propagation of native seeds and plants used for landscaping and revegetation work. Nuwul derives an income from ground maintenance, landscaping and training contracts with local and Northern Territory (NT) authorities (e.g. East Arnhem Regional Council, NT Department of Education) for profit (e.g. Rio Tinto) and non-profit organisations (e.g. Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation) and residents and through the sale of native and exotic plants. The nursery is also working with homelands in the region that seek to establish cooperative farming ventures and require horticultural advice and plant stock.

Government transfer payments such as CDEP and RCJP monies provide funding for additional work and allow the organisation to grow. Between 2009 and 2015 the organisation grew from around 13 volunteers to around 40 staff of whom 14 have transitioned from RJCP funding to weekly wages and the remaining staff to receiving an income through the old CDEP scheme or RJCP. Also, at the time of writing, around three workers were with Nuwul on work orders from the NT Department of

Correctional Services. With the expansion of the nursery more nursery staff are expected to move from government income support to receiving weekly wages.

Central to Nuwul activities is the training of its staff members, many of whom have completed a Certificate II in Small Engine Operations and Maintenance (certified through Charles Darwin University), money management (via Laynhapuy) and are currently seeking to obtain a Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management (CLM - certified through Batchelor College). Nuwul is also a partner organisation with the Federal government's Remote Youth Leadership and Development Corps Program, which aims at building skills necessary for sustainable employment in a locally-relevant industry. Nuwul is also involved in teaching gardening programs at the Yirrkala School and a Learning on Country program in association with the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation targeting local cultural and environmental knowledge.

What renders Nuwul a *Third Space* social enterprise? We address this question below by way of providing examples that speak to the concepts of mimicry and hybridity at Nuwul and make explicit the degree of cultural blending in the organisation (see Brueckner et al. (2014) for a detailed description of Nuwul activities). To begin, Nuwul's organisational mission statement captures the centrality of Yolŋu control and ownership of the enterprise and its social and cultural commitments to the community. At the same time, the organisation is outward looking, seeing itself as a vehicle to enable the traversing between Yolŋu and Western culture with reference to skillsets relevant in the formal economy.

> *Our aim is to preserve the land and culture of our people in a manner,*
>
> *which benefits all of our community. Our goal is to be autonomous,*

sustainable, respectful and ethical in all of our actions. We are aiming to function as a not-for-profit organization, which is wholly independent of other commercial interests. We provide employment for the local Yolŋu population, reinforcing a sense of personal and community pride, which have undergone many challenges over the previous decades. We see ourselves as a skills provider, which will enhance the employment potentials for Yolŋu people, so that they can participate more broadly in the wider community. (Nuwul Environmental Services 2010)

In this sense, both mimicry and hybridity are at the very core of the organisation. On the one hand, Nuwul facilitates the emulation of dominant values and practices by way of providing semi-formal employment as well as training in literacy and numeracy skills and financial management (Nuwul Environmental Services 2010). The organisation's focus on job readiness creates opportunities for mainstream employment outside Yirrkala. In doing so, the organisation not only helps create local employment opportunities and skill development but also addresses community problems associated with long-term economic disengagement and welfare dependence in the region.

People can make it clearly here. They can have long-term employment and they can really build expertise ... it has the ability for people to really get their teeth into it, do study and develop a career in that area, and at the same time ... for those people who are maybe not even at the stage of thinking about a career, they still join in and have it as a stepping stone where it basically develops a strong work ethic and work awareness. (Partner organisation staff)

Back in the 70s we administered a welfare system that was well intentioned but people didn't really think about what this was going to do to the region and now thirty years later we are having to battle some very serious social habits that have come from that ... [Now Nuwul is] at a point where it could create jobs that never existed twelve months ago. It is a really good model ... [but] if the government doesn't fund these guys and some sort of work like activities, then the government funds their sit down money, their welfare which has so many other social problems attached to it. So when you look at the two situations, it is better that money comes into someone's pocket via a respectful job, rather than coming to their pocket through the rather humiliating Centrelink system that existed. (Partner organisation staff)

On the other hand, the enterprise—whilst recognising the paramount importance of, and seeking to protect traditional knowledge and culture—seeks to demonstrate the distinct advantage for Yolŋu of learning about traditional and Western ways (Nuwul Environmental Services 2010). In the words of the nursery manager, Nuwul is about "finding a working space between two vastly different cultures with two vastly different sets of value systems".

I try to meet the awesome importance of cultural responsibility and the traditional and ecological knowledge. So when we go out seed collecting, we're also encouraging people to be looking for bush honey or bush fruits and things sort of in season. We go hunting on weekends and do that sort of thing [and d]uring the week we also hold down a job ... we work toward that sort of balance but also having a sense of pride and discipline, rather

than being lost between two worlds, seeing the advantage of having one foot in both. (Nursery Manager)

The employment and training provided by Nuwul is seen to have a positive impact on both workers as well as their families and the wider community.

The most immediate impact is anyone who is employed, their families can see that they are employed and their families can see what sort of benefits and what sort of good things ... come from that employment. ... the mum or the dad that might work has an income where they can afford more food or other things for their family. I think that the main benefit that I can see is that for each one Yolŋu who is employed and enjoys their employment is someone who has made a conscious decision that employment for them is a better way of life. (Partner organisation staff)

Their families, especially their kids, can see what that is. It is not so much of a mystery anymore. There are some families where work is a mystery ... The fact that those individuals are employed means that their families get a demystification of just what it is like to work a day. I think that in itself is always a good thing. (Partner organisation staff)

... when we see the staff, they are always happy ... They work every day and they are evolving and growing every time. Every time we meet them, there's a new person that is happy to be there and enjoying what they're doing. (Partner organisation staff)

Nuwul staff are alive to the hybridity within the organisation, recognising that they are "learning two ways. Balanda [white fella] way and Yolŋu way" (Nuwul staff).

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Examples of cross-cultural learning include the transfer of technical skills as they relate to tasks and routines of working at a nursery such as equipment maintenance, planting and seed collection and aspects pertaining to occupational health and safety.

> *Yes we know how to like pop the tyre, change the tire, we know how to fix lawnmowers and we know how to fix the whipper snipper.* (Nuwul staff)

> *Everyone is wearing proper gear for safety. That is good.* (Nuwul staff)

Yet, learning also occurs in generic skill areas such as numeracy and literacy, skills that are essential for, and transferable to, other work settings.

> *If someone ... people have come here in the nursery and ask we are going to buy something like a plant from you, we're learning for writing the name of that person ... the plant name and price. We're learning the adding up of cost for that person.* (Nuwul staff)

Cross-cultural learning also extends beyond the workplace, with Nuwul staff receiving advice and training on matters such as hygiene, nutrition and healthy living. As suggested by one Yolŋu nursery supervisor:

> *We've got to teach them [staff] how to eat well and we'll be alright. We've been introducing barbeques ... introduced health checks, Nuwul helps us do our blood pressures.*

Learning 'both ways' not only applies to Nuwul staff but critically also includes Nuwul's non-Indigenous management. The General Manager has gained valuable insights into Yolŋu language, culture and customs. Staff of a local partner organisation speak of him having become "entrenched in Yirrkala" to the point that

locals "don't consider him white" any more. The quote below speaks to the degree of his cultural immersion and gives insight into his reflections on the experience.

Sometimes I forget the botanical names or the Napaki [white fella] names of plants and I'm just thinking of the Yolŋu names. I do find myself more and more thinking backwards from Yolŋu back to English. It's something the family finds amusing ... I suppose that is just reflective of my mindset and that is something that is picked up on by people here. So I get told off if I say I am a white person; 'no you're Yolŋu', which I see as inspiring. I don't think I'll ever be truly Yolŋu because I haven't been brought up with that worldview from day dot ... it is something that I can understand peripherally but not at the core of my being. I feel very privileged to be seen that way, that that is their perception. (Nursery General Manager)

The General Manager's cultural learning has given rise to organisational policies and practices that are conducive to a cross-cultural workplace where neither culture dominates. Nuwul's overstaffing policy is a case in point, which enables nursery management to maintain a critical mass of workers each day without needing to insist on, or reprimand for transgressions against, a rigid 'nine-to-five' work routine. Allowing for 'Indigenous time' (Smith 1999) provides opportunities for meeting cultural obligations or participating in customary practices such as local arts, hunting and fishing.

The staffing policy meets Yolŋu cultural requirements but also the Western, more business-orientated needs. On the one hand, according to the nursery manager, it creates capacity for the nursery to "work with non-Indigenous businesses to build contracts". A larger, more flexible labour core is seen as an advantage "because you

don't know when someone might pass away or there will be something that will call away some or most of your workforce".

At ... times you might be over-employed and that actually means you can knock over your contracts that much faster. So it's not quite boom or bust, but it's giving you a real flexibility and sometimes when you do have a variable workforce, it allows you to achieve things that normally you wouldn't have the manpower to do. I always try to have us a little bit under the pump, fractionally behind ... That means that we've always got things coming up to do, which is going to keep the money coming in. Sometimes we can clear all of that out really quickly, we recover our costs and then we have the capacity to do more community orientated things. (Nursery manager)

He's [the Manager] sort of operating off a model where he has a good sized staff that don't necessarily all come to work every day. He has at least a core every day that might be different. It is actually a better way of pooling, where you have a group of people knowing full well that 20-30 per cent of them won't be there each day, but you'll have that core ... it means that they can still offer at least some sort of guarantee of a service for their business. (Partner organisation staff)

On the other hand, it helps create a culturally sensitive space that meets Yolŋu needs, as there are according to nursery management "always cultural things going on, funerals and things … Some people are away and there always have to be priorities; people attend to things of cultural importance".

I am not trying to turn them into nine to five workers and having a sensitivity to their backgrounds and needs without judging them by our own social standards and what we would perceive as white professionalism. (Nursery manager)

It is a model that would be great for other organisations to do … It is a strength that allows Nuwul to be more culturally appropriate for employees. (Partner organisation staff)

Plus you know, there are the roles - not having all full time positions, but for job sharing and things like that where you might have mums who have to take care of their babies, you have people who have got cultural obligations and things like that. I think we need to have a lot of flexibility. (Nursery manager)

Flexibility provisions are needed also as the nursery is seen as a to-go-to place in the community and community service being integral to the Nuwul mission and philosophy (Nuwul Environmental Services 2010). As such, interruptions to daily routines at the nursery are common, as issues arising in the community often need to be addressed by nursery staff.

This area, this nursery… it's not about us, it's about community and helping our community. (Nuwul staff)

If there are problems in town, we want to be there to support them and make sure. (Nuwul staff)

Nuwul's community focus is also recognised by other Indigenous organisations in town.

> *They've got a good ethos because they're working with the community and the purpose of their company is to strengthen Yolŋu.* (Partner organisation staff)

This cultural sensitivity is also portrayed outwards to customers when nursery activities are affected by staff needing to fulfil cultural obligations.

> *Obviously there are times they've got funerals on. I have to be able to go back to clients and say look we can't get it done at the moment, everyone is at a funeral ... If it is a protracted funeral then I will go out ... and maybe take on someone else just for the immediacy, just to get things done.* (Nursery manager)

These work arrangements at Nuwul should not be romanticised. The navigation of both Yolŋu and non-Indigenous aspects is an ongoing challenge, which Nuwul's manager likened to "walking … [a] razor". Despite the flexibility arrangements to accommodate cultural obligations, there is a fine line to be found between culture and "let[ting] people run riot".

> *Don't get me wrong. Sometimes I do berate, but I'm not like some mainstream employer or something like that.* (Nursery manager)

While for the nursery manager "a lot of it comes down to knowing the people, intuition, empathy, those sorts of things", he receives cultural guidance from Nuwul Board members and other senior traditional owners in the community to assist in

culturally sensitive grey areas. Notwithstanding, it is these elements of the workplace culture mentioned above that arguably shape staff and community perceptions of the organisation. Even though Nuwul has a non-Indigenous manager, the organisation is seen to be a "Yolŋu business … a family business" (Nuwul staff), which a member of a partner organisation attributed to Nuwul being "quite egalitarian" and seen to "meld well with [the] Yolŋu way".

> *There's not some huge enormous … CEO up there … because it is not an organisation with all these tiers -- it is not a complex organisation. Things are managed … around the guys and girls on the ground … I think the fact that there are so many* Yolŋu *there and the fact that he has been working with* Yolŋu *for such a long period of time … I think it is a culturally safe place to work.* (Partner organisation staff)

Yet, not only is Nuwul seen to be a culturally safe place for Yolŋu but also as "a culturally safe place for all walks of life". As suggested by a Nuwul Board member:

> *As far as I am aware of the nursery existing for the last twenty odd years or more now … it's something that has always made people welcome… somewhere that they felt they were welcome to come to … we've had non-Indigenous people, other Indigenous like Tongan or … New Zealanders …*

This sense of safety is also recognised by Nuwul staff.

> *I think it's a really good place. It is a place where obviously there is something down there … there's harmony.* (Nuwul supervisor)

> *The other thing is this job is open to anyone.* (Nuwul staff)

It is not a situation where you have to be white to get a job. It is a situation where all you need is a bit of commitment to a particular area in horticulture and that opportunity is open to you. It is not a closed door and it is open to you. (Partner organisation staff)

Discussion

The above data speak to the way in which a grassroots organisation is responding to the Federal government's Closing the Gap policy and the pressures this mainstreaming approach entails. Nuwul counteracts these by providing a culturally safe environment where local knowledge and culture can be shared and retained but also enriched through Western ways of learning and knowing as demanded by the formal market economy. In this sense, two-way learning at Nuwul is aligned with the rules of the colonisers but can also be seen as a form of resistance, for it ensures that economic mainstreaming occurs on local terms and translates into local benefits.

The cultural hybridity enabled by Nuwul has historical antecedents in Yirrkala. The promotion of teaching Indigenous culture and language alongside Western disciplines in the 1980s saw the introduction of an Aboriginalisation plan and so-called 'two way' Aboriginal schooling in town (Marika 1999). Harris (1990:48) defines both ways of learning as a "strategy to help make the matter of choice real in both worlds; to provide opportunity for the primary Aboriginal identity to stay strong, though changing, and thus continue to be the source of inner strength and security necessary for dealing with the Western world". This strategy has been linked by Devlin (2004) to sharing power and bringing balance to competing knowledge systems in the curriculum, which in Yirrkala translated into the bringing together of Balanda and Yolŋu learning to strengthen local culture. This blending of Western and Indigenous

knowledge is reflected in Yolŋu metaphors such as *ganma* – an area within the mangroves where the salt water from the sea meets the fresh water coming from the land – and *milngurr* – the ebb and flow of water with high tide representing being full of new knowledge, new ideas, new thinking and low tide signifying the search for new things (Marika 1999). Nuwul's philosophy of cross-cultural learning is reflective of these values, for the organisation strives for the strengthening of local culture and knowledge and the maintenance of local ownership and control. At the same time, Nuwul is a safe place for learning about non-Indigenous work values and gaining skills that enable the traversing of Yolŋu and Western culture equipping staff with a broader, blended cultural repertoire; in the image of Bhabha's (1996) *Third Space* as a 'space of in between'.

Activities at Nuwul go beyond tasks related to botanical work at the nursery. The organisation helps staff develop technical and generic capabilities but also imparts healthy living skills and an ethic towards paid employment. These 'survival skills' for the formal economy are juxtaposed to the cultural learning that occurs about Indigenous knowledge of local flora and its role in cultural practices and traditions (e.g. healing practices, ceremonial rituals, cooking).

RJCP monies, despite their restrictive character, are used to help create a critical mass of workers that gives the organisation the capacity to provide culturally germane flexibility and help build the size of the business. These government transfer payments aid the building of the contractual base for the organisation to transition staff from RJCP funding towards waged employment. In doing so, the organisation is able to change the government's 'work for the dole' regime described earlier as a threat to Indigenous cultural participation and likened to 'work for work's sake'

(Altman 2015b) into a vehicle for meaningful job creation and a means through which economic participation and cultural practice can be balanced.

On the question of mimicry, Nuwul is compliant with, but also resisting the rules of the colonisers. Under the Closing the Gap policy the lack of local employment opportunities would normally require the relocation of job seekers to places with stronger labour markets further afield and thus force Indigenous people to break ties to their land and communities. In this context, Nuwul helps create local work and actively seeks to contribute to the community and address local problems. 'Moving to places of opportunity' is turned into the 'making of places of opportunity', an approach similar to the one underpinning the original CDEP concept that sought to keep people on country. In this sense, the normalisation pressures of the Closing the Gap framework and their delocalising effects are effectively lessened.

Conclusion

Homi Bhabha's notion of the *Third Space* was employed in this paper together with the related concepts of mimicry and hybridity to explore the workings of an Indigenous social enterprise in the Closing the Gap policy context. We hope to have made explicit—using the Bahabian lens—how the Closing the Gap policy serves to legitimise and reproduce the neoliberal market logic that has come to underpin policy-making in Indigenous affairs in recent decades. The policy is reflective of the power imbalances that long have defined race relations between the colonisers and the colonised in Australia, which it helps cement further—certainly to our reading in remote Indigenous communities—through the imposition of culturally insensitive and prescriptive rules of engagement for Aboriginal people with the formal economy. The need for dramatic improvements in the lives of many Aboriginal Australians is

beyond dispute, and equitable access to paid work would undoubtedly go a long way towards delivering benefits to Aboriginal people. However, the obligation-based approach chosen by government to address Indigenous disadvantage was found to merely offer socio-economic improvements, especially for remote communities, at the expense of culture and tradition. In this regard, at the very heart of the Closing the Gap approach and related policies we see a continuation of the Howard Coalition Government's 'practical reconciliation' agenda, which Rowse (2006) describes as an "ideologically driven entrenchment of assimilationist practices" designed to co-opt an Indigenous client population into the adoption of government values and objectives (Thompson and Wadley 2007).

Nuwul Environmental Services was presented in this paper as a local business that has created a space for the safe blending of Indigenous and Western culture. The enterprise works with, but also resists external policy pressures, striking a balance between colonial rules and local culture. Cross-cultural learning enables Nuwul staff to learn about and retain local culture and traditions whilst being exposed to Western ways of knowing and doing that are critical for full participation in the formal economy. The enterprise is successful in creating local employment but also in preparing staff for employment elsewhere. Its focus on the community and working towards local improvements has helped the organisation to become an agent of positive social change in Yirrkala, restoring cultural pride and addressing the social ills that have arisen consequent to past government policies. In particular, its role in education and training targeting Yolŋu and the creation of local employment play a vital role in countering the trend of cultural disintegration and socio-economic decline experienced in Yirrkala and the wider Gove region.

Whilst unrealistic to suggest that policy-makers adopt a Bhabhaian perspective, there is call for greater flexibility in policy settings to enable the growth of grassroots ventures that blend formal and informal economic activity and harmonise Indigenous and Western culture. Ultimately, however, a departure is needed from the current approach in Australia, which uses policy as a governmental means through which to maintain hierarchical power relations and treat as inferior the culture of the 'Other'. The *Third Space* concept helps make explicit the highly problematic cultural assumptions at the core of government policy but also points towards alternatives. We see the enterprise reported on here as such an alternative, for it provides a potential blueprint for how cultural differences can be dealt with respectfully and creatively and translate into the kind of community benefits Closing the Gap is intended to deliver.

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