
A CRITICAL MEDIA ANALYSIS OF THE REDFERN RIOT

by Andy Gargett

'Our wealth and lifestyle, the much touted "Aussie way of life" have all been achieved as a direct consequence of Aboriginal dispossession'.¹ The Aussie notion of 'fair go' and our love of the underdog, indicate the extreme hypocrisy of the exclusion of Indigeneity in the production of 'Australian identity'. How can a country extol the notion of a 'fair go' yet historically and currently, systematically discriminate against its first peoples? How can it cheer for the underdog, yet allow the plight of its Indigenous people fall, all too often, on deaf ears? How? Exclusion. Marginalisation. Denial.

It is imperative to assess the continuing role that the criminalisation of Indigenous Australians has in the construction of Australian identity and on the collective suffering of Indigenous communities today. Media representations play a crucial role in the production of public attitudes, particularly in relation to images of deviance.² The mass overrepresentation in the justice system and the third-world living conditions experienced by Indigenous communities are usually portrayed as a result of Indigenous incompetence/deviance. The criminalisation discourse excludes the role of white Australia in the criminalisation of Indigenous peoples.³ Given Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, an examination of the media representations of Indigenous identity is particularly pertinent.

The 'Redfern riot' has been used as the focus for analysis of media representations as it has crystallised current attitudes and the power of the media in perpetuating a colonial mindset. The riot between Indigenous youths and the police on 15 February 2004 was sparked by the death of Indigenous teenager TJ Hickey, who fell off his bike and was impaled on a fence. The Indigenous community believed this occurred whilst the police were chasing him. Redfern, an inner Sydney suburb, has a strong Indigenous community and identity primarily situated around the Block.⁴

The focus on Redfern was justified by a number of considerations. The riot was seen as a crisis point in Indigenous relations with police, and with non-Indigenous

Australians at large. There has been a long history of struggle in Redfern between Kooris and the police; this incident is part of a continuing cycle of interaction and tension. This tragic event was also heavily reported and commented on, thus providing a suitable vehicle to deconstruct media discourses. Redfern is arguably the 'black heart' of Australia with a strong political, spiritual and cultural significance to Indigenous people from all of NSW and across Australia.⁵ Redfern is the birthplace of many Indigenous organisations and activism from the 1970s.

As a 'white' person, I feel I am implicated by my very being within the continued unequal distribution of power between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. Self-reflection, consultation and a critical mindset were vital to ensuring my research project did not perpetuate the violence of exclusion and appropriation of Indigenous voice. As an academic I am in a position of authority. I am powerfully positioned to resist and provide resistance against the continuing drone of colonialism that pervades dominant discourses in society. From my position of resistance, I do not hope to *speak for* Indigenous Australia but to destabilise the taken-for-granted; to clear a *domain* for Indigenous public self-articulation.

Throughout the media coverage of Redfern, I examine how it portrays Aboriginality as a threat by linking Aboriginal people to crime. To avoid this, they say salvation is required, and appears to be attainable only through sporting prowess. Finally I examine the operation of victimisation. The image of the victim is mobilised in a number of ways to consecrate stories of Aboriginality that marginalise the Aboriginal voice. Victim status is only afforded to groups accepted by the dominant discourses of society,⁶ and the police, not Aboriginal people, are accepted as victims.

THE CRIMINAL

Crime is central to the constructions of identity. To be criminal is to be outside the moral community of the state, and therefore an enemy.⁷ Media discourse has a tendency to link crime and race. Representations of the riot applied this operation with vigour. These media

representations of the Indigenous criminal perpetuate negative, stereotyped opinions within mainstream Australia.⁸ Continually throughout the media coverage Aboriginality is painted as criminal; as 'hopelessness, [as] depression, drug and alcohol addiction, and a life of petty criminality'.⁹ TJ's Walgett hometown is used as an example of the links between Aboriginality and crime. Throughout the discourse, TJ is constructed as the typical criminal Indigenous youth, yet 'his criminal history was relatively light, at least by Walgett standards... [an area with a crime rate] 2 ½ times the state average'. The image of complete crime is created: outnumbered, 'the non-Indigenous locals, the 40 per cent minority',¹⁰ are under siege by criminal Aboriginal people, out of control. The extraordinarily high crime rate is implicitly because of the town's predominate Aboriginality.

The media produce the Indigenous body as criminal. Indigeneity itself becomes crime. Similarly, Redfern is a symbol of Indigeneity and crime.

The problems of drugs, alcohol, domestic violence, sexual assault and chronic medical problems continue to rise among Redfern's urban Aboriginal population and there is little hope they can be contained...¹¹

The two terms become interchangeable: Indigenous people as criminal. Criminalisation as discourse controls representations of Indigeneity amongst the Australian population. It controls what is acceptable to think.

Marginalised is an Indigenous voice that challenges society's power relations which continue to subordinate the Indigenous population. The discourse of criminalisation is control, it reproduces Indigenous subordination. The criminalised body of the Indigenous person becomes an object of fear and thus a controlling agent is required, paving the way for law and order policies. '[Y]ou will hear story after story about the Aboriginal kids being out of control'.¹² The creation of fear demands a response to 'restore control'.

The continual portrayal of Indigeneity as criminal is explicit. It reduces the riot to acts of criminality, rather than acts of desperation or frustration. It reinforces the either/or logic that places Indigeneity outside legitimacy and into the world of deviance. It washes away the links between colonial legacies and Indigenous crime. It removes context and diversity from the issue, resulting in what Indigenous Senator Aden Ridgeway predicted:

No doubt people will over-simplify the images and the reports they have seen. Many will be quick to point the finger of blame at Aboriginal youth.¹³

THE SALVATION OF SPORT¹⁴

Sport is created as the Indigenous saviour from crime. Media representations encourage the belief that to be Indigenous and non-criminal is the exception. To be a success is a rarity, and generally based on Indigenous sporting prowess. It is only through sport that Indigenous culture is readily accepted by mainstream culture:

Aboriginal Australians are the most gifted athletes on this earth. Therein lies their chance of survival and advancement.¹⁵

The underlying assumption is that freakish physical attributes are the only salvageable traits worth adopting into mainstream society from an ancient race. Survival and advancement means assimilation into mainstream culture and sport is the vehicle to accommodate this assimilation. Other Indigenous attributes are placed counter-posed to the mainstream. The richness and diversity of Indigenous culture is written only as an explicit challenge and threat as it is uniformly written as deviance.

TJ is constructed as the typical Indigenous youth, a 'happy-go-lucky boy who played football with quicksilver bare feet... Then he entered his teens -- and things began to change. The football cut out'.¹⁶ Without sport, deviance and dysfunction is the inevitable result. Indicated by the example above, TJ is explicitly and continually linked to criminality.

FRONT LINE HUMAN TARGETS

The media creation of the police as worthy victims strengthens the link between Indigeneity and crime. The construction of the Aboriginal criminal necessitates police presence in Redfern:

[T]he policing of the area is not overtly racist or heavy-handed. The blatant dealing, the public drunkenness, the routine thievery, would not be tolerated anywhere else in Sydney.¹⁷

The 'criminality' of Redfern is used to exonerate police and white roles in the riot and in Indigenous deviance. TJ is portrayed as a criminal in hiding; he 'would have been fully aware he was wanted... He kept low in Sydney, enmeshed in the netherworld of the Block in Redfern'.¹⁸ This while denying claims that TJ Hickey was being unreasonably chased at the time of his death. The loaded language of 'netherworld' operates here to make the distinction between the criminal and non-criminal. It creates Indigenous people as criminal and the police as non-criminal; hence the police over-presence in Redfern was justified.

Justified police presence removes any 'residual doubt'¹⁹ over police involvement in the death of TJ Hickey, thereby absolving the police of involvement in the riot. The riot

is represented as borne out of an Indigenous perception that Hickey was being unreasonably harassed. The denial of this claim serves to marginalise the view that Hickey's death was the culmination of crisis and tension between police and the Indigenous community. The police are constructed as neutral characters in the lead up to the riot; simply doing their job. During the riot this neutrality is replaced with victimisation – police sacrifice their well-being to return order to the streets.

In the face of this pervasive construction of neutrality and justification, Indigenous claims of police racism and over-policing are muted. Gail Hickey, TJ's mother, describes police as 'nasty... They treat our kids like dogs';²⁰ yet such quotes are left in the margins. They are never supported or backed up with evidence. Further, these comments are often situated near the end of an article. The structure of the newspaper operates here to marginalise Indigenous voice. The layout of the newspaper compels the reader to a 'readily accessible conclusion' at a glance;²¹ therefore, a waning of the readers' attention as an article progresses is foreseeable. My analysis revealed that when Indigenous views were included, they were generally placed towards the end of the article. With no support, no evidence, and relegated to the end of articles this Indigenous protest, although technically voiced, is actually muzzled.

Police malpractice is written out of media representations. Birch's analysis of the riot indicated that:

[N]o members of the NSW police force have been cited for provocation or violence despite witnesses stating that the police had not only incited the initial confrontation but had themselves acted violently.²²

The silencing of criticism of police action, and the complete omission of eyewitness accounts of police inciting violence and violent behaviour is crucial to the 'us versus them' construction that shaped media representations. Silenced is the voice that speaks of historical and continuing systematic over-policing and harassment of Indigenous communities by the police. Marginalised are articulations of police violence, and the Indigenous voice that all too well remembers that the police did the dirty work of 'the heads' (the government).²³ Denied is the extensive history of institutionalised police violence against Indigenous people and communities. Without an understanding of Indigenous mistrust and angst towards the police, the police *do become* victims and Indigenous people *do become* threats.

Indigeneity is demonised while the police are championed. The policing of Indigenous communities is represented as justified; their resultant victimisation constructs them

as the bastions of order – they suppressed a 'riot, in which 40 police officers were injured in a sustained assault from hordes of Aborigines'.²⁴ The thin blue line protects social order and stability against the threat of these 'Aboriginal hordes'. The dichotomies of order/disorder, civilisation/barbarism, us/them are manifested continuously. A process that simultaneously marginalises the Indigenous cry of pain whilst further cementing the naturalness of police neutrality and justified presence in Redfern, and Indigenous communities throughout Australia. The enactment of these dichotomies ultimately leads to the mutually exclusive distinction between those who feel police action was justified and those who contextualise the riot by listening to an Indigenous point of view. This contextualisation is constructed as making excuses.

As a child, I'd always fear, 'get down in the car, jungais [police] coming.' I'd always fear, jungais were like the 'douligar', a fear that was always built in us.²⁵

The Indigenous discourse that speaks of historical fear and mistrust is written out of the public psyche simply as a 'myth', or worse, a 'luxurious falsehood'.²⁶ The implication is that the solution to prevent another 'Redfern riot' is to deny Indigenous historical fear. One cannot sympathise with the Indigenous perspective without simultaneously administering blame to the police. It is constructed as anti-police, as disorder, as barbaric and most of all as *one of them*.

CONCLUSION

The violence of colonialism is repeated over and over again as the media continue to write Indigeneity as deviant. This power helps construct a public psyche that 'condone[s] an endemic system of violence perpetuated against Indigenous people that inevitably produces a violent response when no other defence is available'.²⁷ This violent response to violence, as manifested in the Redfern riot, can be commonly witnessed through Indigenous dysfunction, alienation, substance abuse and crime throughout Australia. Public discourses such as the media ensure that this violent cry for help is constructed as Indigenous deviance, due to an innate criminality. The driving purpose of this work has been to debunk the perceived naturalness of these representations.

My analysis of the metaphor has shown that threats and victimisation work together to exclude Indigeneity from the production of Australian monoculturalism. If mainstream society's inherent whiteness is challenged by the cultural power of Indigeneity then it is written as threat. If Indigeneity is constructed as threat, it can be legitimately marginalised. The police, representing

and protecting the white mainstream, are constructed as victims of Indigenous violence, silencing mainstream's involvement in the production of an Indigenous underclass. White as victim means white as innocent. Whiteness, the mainstream, is pardoned from involvement in the production of Aboriginal fear, mistrust, unemployment, substance abuse, welfare dependency and criminalisation. Therefore, the perpetrators become the Indigenous people. Their deviance is inherent and unquestionable; their status as victims, impossible.

The future of representing Indigenous and Australian identities is uncertain. I have struggled against the monologue of exclusion and subordination. Whilst we as a nation are stuck in a monologue, at 'best' we will be apathetic to Indigenous concerns, vulnerability and marginalisation. At 'worst' negative representations will invoke fear and hatred. The denial that paints injustices against Indigenous communities as a thing of the past, that removes their influence from the lives of Indigenous Australians in the present (and future), is evidence of our complicity in a system that perpetuates racial discrimination. The implications of this paper lie at the very heart of generating national identities:

Sooner or later, any society that would like to know itself as 'post-colonial' must confront an inevitable question: how to live with collective memories of theft and murder?²⁸

The media discourse stuck in the monologue addresses this question through acts of blaming, constructions of threat and a washing of hands.

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- 1 Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788*, (2003), viii.
- 2 Howard Sercombe, 'Youth Crime and the economy of news production' in Judith Bessant and Richard Hill (eds) *Youth, Crime & the Media* (1997) 43.
- 3 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Witnessing Whiteness in the Wake of Wik' (1998) 17 *Social Alternatives* 11.
- 4 The colloquial name for a residential block in Redfern bounded by Louis, Vine, Everleigh and Caroline Streets. The Block is owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company.
- 5 NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, Parliament of NSW, *Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern and Waterloo: Interim Report* (2004) 3.2.
- 6 Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2002).
- 7 Chris Cunneen, *Conflict, Politics and Crime: Aboriginal Communities and the Police* (2001).
- 8 Sercombe, above n2.
- 9 Tim Priest, 'Stop the Social Engineering and Empower Sydney Police' *The Australian* (Sydney), 18 February 2004, 13.
- 10 Jamie Walker, 'TJ's Life Played Out in the "Dead Zone"', *The Australian* (Sydney) 21 February 2004, 1.
- 11 Priest above n9.

- 12 Walker above n10.
- 13 Aden Ridgeway, 'Boiling Point After a Decade of Tension', *The Australian* (Sydney), 18 February 2004, 13.
- 14 The prevalence of Indigenous art and music in the mainstream indicates that this too can provide 'salvation'. The focus of this analysis however was how sport provides salvation, as that was the recurring theme throughout my data.
- 15 Priest above n9.
- 16 Walker above n10.
- 17 John Stapleton, 'Hope the True Victim on Redfern's Streets', *The Australian* (Sydney), 21 February 2004, 22.
- 18 Walker above n10.
- 19 Martin Chulov, 'Key Image Gave Police Charge of Redfern Story' *The Australian* (Sydney), 26 February 2004, 19.
- 20 Martin Daly, 'Eruption Was A Long Time Coming' *The Age* (Melbourne), 21 February 2004, 3.
- 21 Alison Young, *Femininity in Dissent* (1990) 121.
- 22 Tony Birch "'Who Gives A Fuck About White Society Anymore?': A Response to the Redfern Riot' (2004) 175 *Overland*, 18, 18.
- 23 Martin Flanagan, 'Fear And Loathing From Tampa To Redfern', *The Age* (Melbourne), 1 March 2004, 2.
- 24 Steve Barrett, 'Riot Controllers "put lives at risk"', *The Australian* (Sydney), 17 March 2004, 5.
- 25 Sarah James, Interview with a Koorie (Victoria) in *Koories and Jungais: A Study of Aboriginal and Police Relations* (2000), 16.
- 26 Andrew Bolt, 'Why I Won't Change' *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 25 February 2004, 21.
- 27 Birch, above n22.
- 28 Ross Gibson quoted in Maria Tumarin, 'First as a Tragedy, Second as a Farce: Traumascape, Memory and the Curse of Indifference', (2004) 175 *Overland*, 22, 25.

