

The Power of Whiteness

© Gary Foley 1998

In 1972 at the peak of Aboriginal political militancy in Australia, two Italian brothers, Alessandro and Fabio Cavadini, made a film called Ningla-Ana (Aranda for "Hungry for Land") about the 'Aboriginal Embassy' demonstrations in Sydney and Canberra that year. In a scene filmed at the Australian National University, a group of white, middle-class feminists hold a session of mutual non-comprehension with a group of radical activist women from the Koori movement. It is an interesting moment as the black women aggressively try to explain to the white feminists that racism is what they perceive as the problem, and the white women earnestly attempt to ask the black women if it isn't men that are the real problem.

Any suggestions by the black sisters that these white feminists might be speaking from a position of privilege and power merely because of their 'whiteness', or that having been infused with a lifetime of white racist conditioning these white women were incapable of understanding a black women's perspective, were met with a combination of surprise, shock and hurt on the part of the white feminists.

The communication problem between Koori political activists and non-Koori supporters, eloquently revealed in that scene filmed in 1972, is one which persists to this day.

One example today is the dramatic difference in the treatment of the issues of racism and sexism on University of Melbourne campus. When one enrolls as a student at the university, your student diary has more than a dozen pages of information about sexual harassment, discrimination and other issues related to sexism, but not a single page is devoted to issues of racism on campus. This is extraordinary given that Melbourne University has one of Australia's largest overseas student populations, and that Koori students in recent years have been outspoken about racism on campus.

The problem at the University of Melbourne is not unique, and I can see little evidence in the broader community of 'progressive' Australian feminists and/or

anti-racists trying to come to terms with where their own "whiteness" places them in any discourse with Koori Australians. Despite eloquent voices on the Indigenous side, like Marcia Langton, who states, 'The particularities of Australian and Aboriginal history and culture are the stuff of cultural production and of the way we create signs for seeing each other', the feminist and other progressive movements still fail to properly acknowledge this, despite the fact that feminists, in particular, have been at the forefront of developing theories that have changed society for the better since the 1960s.

Ruth Frankenberg, in her book, *White Women, Race Matters*, states that, 'Since the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s, feminists have transformed accounts of personal experience into politicised and theorised terrain.' She goes on to point out that during the 'second wave' of feminism, there was a challenge to the two major canons of the 'progressive' left, the first being male domination of left and ant-racist movements, and secondly, when non-white feminists questioned 'feminism dominated by white-centred accounts of female experience'.

In Australia, Koori political activists have challenged white hegemony over our political movement as far back as the early 1930s when such people as Bill Fergusson, Pearl Gibbs, William Cooper, Marge Tucker and Jack Patton created the earliest Koori-controlled political organisations. The basic arguments in favour of Koori controlled organisations to represent Koori people have resonated down the decades in Australia. The inability of even our 'friends and supporters' to shake off their own, deeply imbued racist notions of Aborigines meant that Kooris had to create their own 'voices' to be heard.

At the time of William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League in the late 1920s, the leading white "expert" on Aborigines was the noted anthropologist, Professor A.P. Elkin, who is still regarded as the great friend of the Aborigines and a great humanitarian. Yet, in 1929 Elkin wrote,

...some races possess certain powers in greater degree...than do others. Thus, the Australian Aborigines and the African negroes are human and have their powers, but they are not necessarily equal to the white or yellow races.

Almost forty years later, in the mid-1960s, another generation of Koori political activists were confronted with the same problem; that some of the worst enemies of Aboriginal self-determination were those who professed to be our best friends. Ironically, in the 1960s the only national Aboriginal organisation was the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), which was dominated and controlled by non-Aboriginal people.

After FCAATSI co-ordinated the successful 1967 Referendum campaign, some of the Aboriginal members, including Bruce McGuinness, noted poet Kath Walker (later Oojeroo Noonuckle) and her son Denis, began to suggest it was inappropriate for FCAATSI to remain under white control. This proposition was met with fear, anguish and derision by the white members of FCAATSI who promptly labelled those advocating change as 'Black Power Radicals', thereby marginalising and isolating Walker and her group, and clearly reminding them of their "otherness" to the good 'Christian folk' and soft-left trade union officials who dominated FCAATSI.

Amidst much muttering about 'ungrateful blacks' and 'Communist influenced radicals', the whites in FCAATSI fiercely fought to protect their positions, which to them meant the prestige of an image as a 'humanitarian', whereas to the Kooris it meant a voice in the ongoing battle for survival. The white resistance to change was so strong that McGuinness, Walker, Nicholls and their supporters were ultimately forced to split from FCAATSI and create the first national Aboriginal-controlled political organisation, the National Tribal Council.

This all came about because the strongest supporters and best friends of Aboriginal people in 1968 still did not think Aboriginal people were capable of running their own affairs. These white 'do-gooders' seemed incapable of any insight into their own racism but, ironically, they were still the white people best disposed toward Aboriginal people in that era.

This is one of the significant contradictions that continues to bedevil black white relations in Australia, and it stems from a singular lack of insight by white Australians regarding their own condition and privilege in both colonial and a supposedly post-colonial Australia.

Historically, it began with the myth of terra nullius, the foundation block upon which the entire legitimacy of the institutions of this country have been built, was created both because the British regarded the Indigenous peoples of this continent as 'sub-human', and also as it made it easier to justify the theft of Koori lands without compensation. In Victoria, as Christie notes, 'Throughout the frontier years (between 1835 and 1850) the intellectual argument that the Aborigines more closely resembled "the ourangoutangs than men" made it easier for the squatter to treat the Aborigines as subhuman, to lump them with the dingo and shoot them as a "rural pest."'

These attitudes have resonated down through a hundred years of reproduction and refinement through education systems, media and culture to linger and lurk in the minds and culture of present day white Australia and find expression in the likes of Pauline Hanson and some of her followers. The sad thing is that many people from the other end of the political spectrum to Pauline Hanson also display signs of inherited, infused bigotry in the discourse on racial difference in Australia. I have already described how this manifests itself in the current disparity between attempts to combat sexism and racism at the University of Melbourne, but it also functions in many other ways as well.

For example, virtually all feminists and anti-racists still regard Indigenous people in an essentialist way. This results in an unwitting romanticising and idealizing of the Aboriginal peoples and their 'heroic' struggle for justice, which in turn makes them blind to the blatant contradictions that organisations like ATSIC, and concepts like 'native title' confront them with. This leads to otherwise sensible and sincere people saying, 'we must defend native title', despite the fact that the Native Title Act is regarded by Aboriginal leaders like Jacqui Katona and Murandoo Yanner as being a great sell-out of Black Australia. It also leads the same white supporters to illogically believe that the government agency ATSIC is a credible, Koori controlled organisation, rather than the primary instrument of white control over Kooris in this country. A comprehensive ignorance about the people, culture, political history and landscape of Koori Australia is something that progressive political groups too often share with the rest of white-Australia.

This inability to come to terms with anything but their own inverted, culturally manufactured, and historically inaccurate perception of who and what we are, or even that we are real people, remains a significant part of the problem of non-comprehension on the part of white-Australia. Frankenberg argues that, 'whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence'. It is not Kooris who need to know and understand white Australia, it is them who need to understand us. Indigenous people in Australia have had 'white' language, culture, religion and version of history rammed down their throats for two hundred years. And in all that time, with all their science and technology, what has white Australian culture come to know of the Indigenous people? Australians today find it hard to accept that most of what was taught to their grandparents generation about Indigenous people were distortions and falsehoods based on Nazi-style racial theories, and that these myths and lies continue to infuse and pollute the space from which they today speak.

To begin to understand how white ignorance impacts on the complex world of Government Aboriginal Affairs policies since the 1970s, we must first recall that it was the Aboriginal political militancy of the 1960s and 70s that forced major changes implemented by Whitlam in 1973. The legendary 'Aboriginal Embassy' demonstrations of 1972, saw Aboriginal activists place their struggle in the international political arena when the TV cameras of the world were attracted by the brilliant audacity of the protest.

The success of the 'Embassy' resulted in changes which saw the Whitlam Government forced to recognise that the appalling, health, housing, education and incarceration rates of Aborigines needed urgent attention. To implement these new policies Whitlam boosted federal Aboriginal Affairs funding from \$44 million in 1973, to almost \$200 million by 1975. Initially some of these funds were allocated to assist Koori community self-help programs such as health centres, housing co-operatives, legal services and child-care centres, but very quickly things began to change as a new elite of Koori public servants began to emerge and become the embryo of a black middle class.

Back in 1973 there were only three Aboriginal federal public servants, Charles Perkins, Margaret Lawrie and Reg Saunders. Twenty years later in 1994 the

number of Kooris employed by ATSIC was 582, although this still represented only 38% of the total staff.

Over the previous 20 years the public service (through lucrative salary and perk packages) had recruited Kooris by the hundreds, mostly employed in junior positions without real power (in 1994 in ATSIC 91% of Koori staff were employed below Senior Officer Level) Today, many of the potentially brightest minds from Indigenous Australia are safely contained in meaningless bureaucrat positions, subject to the Public Service Act and thereby constrained from doing anything useful for their communities. Simultaneously, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of white professionals who have found lucrative careers in Aboriginal Affairs

The funding emphasis over the years swiftly evolved from community self-help programs, to bureaucrat generated, white-expert-intensive, mega-projects. These programmes consume vast amounts of Aboriginal monies and create extensive white employment but little for Kooris genuinely in need. In 1998 Federal Government expenditure on Aboriginal Affairs approaches \$3 billion this financial year, yet all of the social indicators clearly show that the majority of Indigenous Australians are as bad off today as they were thirty years ago. In which case, I hear you ask, what has happened to the more than \$20 billion spent on Aboriginal Affairs since 1973? In a perverse demonstration of a 'post-colonial moment' in Australia, most of that money has ended up in the pockets and pay packets of non-Aboriginal Australians.

But in Australia today, where the simplistic one notion of Pauline Hanson would have you believe that all this money went to Kooris, there persists an equally simplistic notion among the opponents of Pauline that she is wrong and racist to criticise ATSIC. Numerous Aboriginal political activists have slammed ATSIC as a fraud for years and the term "Aboriginal industry" was in fact coined 20 years ago to describe the vast gravy train that employed large numbers of non-Koori people during the Hawke/Keating years. Illogically, these days it is deemed racist or politically incorrect to point out that many of Pauline Hanson's criticisms of ATSIC are valid, thus ensuring that little reform will occur in the Aboriginal industry, thereby guaranteeing that another generation of Koori Australians will suffer the appalling inequities in health,

education, incarceration rates, premature death etc to which their parents and grandparents generations were subjected.

So, in conclusion, I again quote Frankenberg, who said, 'Analysing the construction of whiteness is important as a means of reconceptualising the grounds on which white activists participate in anti-racist work.' It is therefore vital that any person who does seek a more meaningful path should read Frankenberg's book. They should also consider some of the contradictions about Australian society and its commitment to Indigenous Australia in the context of what she has to say about 'whiteness'. The policy mistakes of successive governments, and even the parameters of the 'race debate', are examples of limitations placed on Indigenous people by white Australians who refuse to acknowledge the significance of their own position of "whiteness" in the current discourse of race in this country.

Original version 1st November 1997.

rewritten 20th September 1998. words