

## ***Breaking free – loosening the shackles of colonialism: the road ahead***

**Such a momentous occasion deserves to be opened with an anthem – so here, some new words from an old verse – with thanks to Anita Heiss.**

### **Advance Australia – Unfair**

**Australians all should be ashamed  
For we are not all free  
They killed the blacks and stole the land  
And lock up refugees  
The land is raped by profiteers  
The Murray-River died  
History's page  
Denies the rage  
Because historians lied.  
In prison cells how can we sing  
Advance Australia fair?<sup>1</sup>**

Intervention by whites into the affairs of Indigenous Australians, and especially Indigenous Territorians started back at La Perouse- long before such legislation as the Northern Territory of Australia's Aborigines Ordinance 1918-1943 – and long before esteemed Elder and statesman Vincent Lingiari protested and agitated against the working and social conditions at Wave Hill or now-known Kalkarinji – and walked Gurindji people to Wattie Creek or Dagaragu.

John Howard and Mal Brough are part of a long line of Chief Protectors who offer interventionist programs, through their 'special' powers policies. Added to that, it has taken 219 years of refining of indigenous identity to arrive at the nonsensical definition that we live with today – Aboriginal/Aborigine, yet conditions have never improved and indigenous Australians, more than ever, exist on the periphery of Australian society, even more peripheral than migrants and refugees – not fully included in the overall Australian social contract, and still being managed as part of a problem, not as part of a society. Rural and remote community people remain as always, the fringe dwellers.

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Heiss, *I'm nor racist, but...: A collection of social observations*, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2007, p.25

Gurindji people now make up some of the wide Diaspora of Indigenous Australians, not just from far-flung regions of the Northern Territory, but from all across Australia. So it is that I speak tonight of Diaspora as an Indigenous Australian experience – and not in the context of mass exodus of migrants, but still in the context of Indigenous Australians being essentially, refugees (in the most part) in their own country and yet within the boundaries of the Australian state. Diaspora is usually mostly understood as the forced movement of people in overseas countries and can be as result of coercion, political, economic and social pressures and measures “which directly, or even more so indirectly, force people to leave or flee their homelands for fear of life, liberty and security...” But expulsion or forced removal, as experienced in the Indigenous Australian setting can be clearly defined as “an act, or a failure to act, by a State with the intended effect of forcing the departure of persons against their will from its territory for reasons of race”...(International Law Association 1986). As Australian history tells us most of the migration of Indigenous Australians was brought about through economic and political pressures, and in earlier times directly through often violent disintegration of individual nations of people, followed by their reconstitution in foreign lands with an alien social order. The past truly has become for them a foreign country. Yet the Gurindji nation stood its ground, and under the leadership of several Gurindji statesmen, and women, led by Vincent Lingiari, demanded their basic human rights. It is this that we come together to celebrate tonight in the 41<sup>st</sup> year of the anniversary of the 1966 Wave Hill walk out.

The Wave Hill walk out was a revolution that Gurindji led in the History that Indigenous Australians apparently had to have. Government sanctioned dispersals as well as the forced removals that took place before the 1966 walk out and which saw people like my Grandmother end up in a compound in Darwin, long-distant from her ancestral homeland, as a forced migrant in foreign Larrakia country.

Even before Vincent Lingiari, his Gurindji and non-Gurindji supporters stood their ground at Kalkarinji, successive governments had introduced a wide range of indigenous intervention plans and strategies – they all failed. And they continued to fail even though the Wave Hill walkout sent a clear message to government, and to Australia in general. Yet here we are today, 41 years later and we find that the road from Wave Hill to Mutujulu has been all too short and the overall direction unchanged. Even the language remains unchanged from when Paul Hasluck set government trend and spoke of “stable society not just integrated community”. His wants for Indigenous Australians were not dissimilar to the expectations of Mal Brough and his counterparts at both state and Commonwealth levels as they make calls for organization and conformity in all “Aboriginal communities”. They forget, once again, that different communities have different aspirations, different politics, different social organization, different educational requirements and agendas. One size does not fit all.

At different periods in Australian government indigenous intervention plans, social policy has followed the same trend. That is, those who design such policy and plan continue to speak of the recognition of the special situation of disadvantaged and underprivileged Indigenous Australians. In the past it seems that recognition was confined only to those dwelling in urban centres and the promise was, that through

continued assimilation, a better future may be planned and attained. Those urban dwellers were told that there was no longer room for ‘clashes of culture’ as continuing social reform would mean that all, regardless of ethnicity, would be in a position to share in the ever-evolving Australian dream. The introduction of the earlier exemption certificates which granted quasi-Australian citizenship encouraged many during the 1950s, and prior to the Gurindji revolution, to aspire to the ideals and comforts of white Australian suburbia. The once reviled ‘half-castes’ or ‘Coloureds’ or ‘part-Aborigines’ were being allowed to enter into a social contract which, if they played it right, would mean a share in national prosperity.

But what of those Indigenous Australians who remained in or near their homelands, or ended up on the reserves set aside for them so that they remained out of sight and out of mind? Those Indigenous Australians who were given the description of “traditional” as the code word to disguise primitive, were left to eke out an existence in sometimes barely productive, environmentally fragile landscapes. What promises were made to them? What Indigenous interventionist plan was developed to meet their needs prior to the federal government’s 2007 strategy?

At the time of the Vincent Lingiari led walkout, there was already a huge chasm of difference between rural and remote Australia – it was economically, politically and socially different, not only for white Australians, but the divide was even more noticeable between urban and remote and rural Indigenous Australians.

And that gap has got wider instead of narrower with the increasing success rates among the urban raised due to increased opportunities in education and employment. Even as Indigenous Australians of metropolitan areas argue that they still exist essentially, as both a class and a race phenomenon, the majority’s lives are less complicated, more affluent and quite comfortable compared to the greater number of their rural and remote counterparts. Mostly, the urban Indigenous Australian has forgotten – sometimes do not even know of the struggles that went before, some may have not even heard of Vincent Lingiari, or Gurindji, and those who do know of them, forget too easily. They have become part of the urban elite, and with their selective memory, live uncomplicated and unchallenged safe lives alongside their non-Indigenous associates.

But we must ask – how has all this come about? First we must examine the lie of *terra nullius* – the English discourse meaning “instrument of empire”, the western translation of dispossession. Regardless of the arguments that surround the term, and in spite of colonial/settler nationalistic histories that work hard at dismissing Native Title claims, the fact remains that this land mass was occupied when the British fleet first arrived. The truth is that the land was obtained by an act of dispossession carried out through British law that insisted on the assumption that the land was unoccupied. The ‘settlement’ of Australia was to be only part of an on-going colonial goal followed by a continuation of criminal acts against Indigenous Australians. By the time the colonial machine reached the Northern Territory, and specifically Gurindji homelands, it was well-oiled and able to justify all of its processes and actions. When Indigenous Australians did not cooperate by becoming extinct, even though they were provided with a variety of “soothing pillows”,

the colonial machine, instead of being set back, became even more ingenious and more focused on how best to control its colonized constituency. Mostly this was done through the invention and introduction of intervention plans and policies, all of which justified theft, kidnapping and the displacement of great numbers of people. *Terra nullius*, 'settlement', was to be an experiment in criminology and colonialism, the after effects of which impact on Indigenous Australians to this day.

While there are some indigenous commentators who become annoyed with those who speak of the link made between the British 'settlement' of Australia and the dire situation, including child sexual abuse and substance abuse and petrol sniffing problems existent in remote northern Australian communities, they cannot easily dismiss the legacy of colonialism. It is a major factor regardless of the stretch of time between 1788 and the present and it should not be so easily dismissed as having little or no bearing on the conditions and situations that exist today. Indigenous people who dismiss the forces of colonialism as being of little or no consequence obviously have no appreciation of the objectives and directives of the colonizing machine. I remind them of the words expressed by one Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) who, even though describing one of his many opium-induced "proto-psychedelic Oriental visions" reportedly said of colonialism that it was "...all sorts of engines and machinery...expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome".<sup>2</sup> Robert Young<sup>3</sup> continued with these thoughts on colonialism: "Colonialism [is] a machine: a machine of war, of bureaucracy and administration, and above all, of power..."<sup>4</sup> Yes, alcohol and gunja and other drugs might have been recent introductions into communities but the vehicle that brought them there, and the attitudes and colonial practices now firmly set in place in Australia started its journey in colonial New South Wales when the first white man stepped ashore and made this country his permanent home. From that fateful day, celebrated now as Australia Day on 26<sup>th</sup> January every year, at the very first entry in colonists' journals and diaries a history of conquest and oppression was ensured. Colonialism has an insatiable appetite – it is forever hungry, it can never be satisfied, and it recruits both unwitting as well as willing emissaries from the vast ranks and ever-growing number of colonized Indigenous Australians.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, and Other Writings*, p.70, original publication, The Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd., 1886, in Robert J.C.Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p.98

<sup>3</sup> Robert J.C. Young might be described as a modern-day De Quincey whose writings on today's cultural theory repeats, represents and perpetuates many of the key concepts and terms in relation to culture and race and terms and definitions set down in the past. Both De Quincey and Young give clear definitions that assist the colonised in understanding the colonising racialised processes that remain an essential and significant component of the current colonial mindset. The analogy for me is the connection between the opium-affected "dreaming" or confessions of the coloniser and the claims of Australian coloniser government officials and law enforcers that the problems for Indigenous Australians are due to their being locked into a "gunja dreaming". This thinking allows the coloniser to dismiss the root problem – colonialism – and blame is shifted back to the victim, the drug dependant misfit, the colonised.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p.98

Colonialism, even though De Quincey<sup>5</sup> romanticised about it in his drug-hazed dreams and later writings and Young spoke of it as a past occurrence, and in a “post-colonial” context from which everyone it seems has both learnt and recovered from, and neatly framed within a set historical period, is an illness, a scourge that continues its destructive journey for it seems an undetermined period, usually without end. Colonialism, and its attendant, imperialism, ensured not only dispossession, it cancelled sovereignty outright and has suppressed the self-determination and economic development of indigenous enterprise until quite recent times. Those non-indigenous people that embrace and promote the advantages of colonialism, usually forget that they see the success of the colonizing campaign from the safety of their gendered, racial, national and imperial frameworks, and indigenous embracers of colonialism see it from their privileged class base. Most fail to remember that not all Indigenous Australians share in the spoils of colonialism as there is in place a clearly defined social differentiation between the haves and have nots within most indigenous communities, urban, rural and remote. There are, among Indigenous Australians those who have reconciled themselves to new arrangements and happily accept the status quo. By readily accepting that the patterns of history and those negative forces of colonialism, the carefully chosen and “the lucky ones”, compliant and grateful, are easily enlisted and nurtured. These colonized subjects actually give consent to their subjugation and agree to assume ‘their rightful place’ in the colonial order of things – they in turn self-colonise.

Australians, especially those who make proud claim to British heritage and their convict pasts have a rare opportunity to re-examine their legacies, to ask questions about the convict and settler pasts and to perhaps make serious effort to come to terms with the forces of colonialism – and by doing so, taking ownership of the roles they continue to play in that history of conquest and oppression. A renaissance of thought, along with a review of language and action is urgently needed throughout the wider Australian populace if real change is to be affected. The utopian ideals and thinking that came with British in the early days of settlement, that saw the rationalization of wars, theft of land and total subjugation of Indigenous Australians followed a pattern that was set down by westerners in a far distant past. However, persecution, oppression and intolerance continue in relationships between mainstream Australia and Indigenous Australia even now at the start of the new millennium. While some call for an embracing of a more pluralistic outlook as a way of overcoming this unequal relationship, and perhaps as hope for some semblance of respect and understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens, a thorough cleaning out of skeletons from the colonial closets needs to take place first.

The Australian “holocaust” has dragged on for far too long now, and even now during the current implementation of the indigenous intervention strategies and plans, there remains bare recognition for the reasons behind the problem. Australians in general, like other colonizer societies past and present, “cannot bear to confront the horror of what their

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<sup>5</sup> “...De Quincey’s essays were widely read during his lifetime and exerted powerful influence on such significant and diverse cultural developments...[his writings]...occupy a prominent position in the development of modern culture.” Barry Milligan (ed.) *Thomas De Quincey: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and other writings*, Penguin Books, New York, 2003, p. xiv

forebears have done in their name, the ordinary horror by which they exist, build a society, [and] prosper...They cannot bear...to possess...a tragic consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> Instead they maintain patterns of separatism, encouraged and validated by those age-old rules of colonialism – that is “divide and rule” and maintain their justifications for acts of displacements, mass death and cruelty as they continue to build on the utopian ideal of an all-white nation.

In the Australian setting, if there was ever an event, or series of events that should be subject to the same scrutiny, debate and discussion, and less ridicule, and as an overall attempt at initiating a possible Australian “tragic consciousness” it has to be through the equivalent of the “Australian holocaust” – the genocide or eradication of Indigenous Australians, and especially that of the Stolen Generations. Perhaps a tragic consciousness of the Australian kind would see, instead of memorials, buildings and other commemorations honouring those who assisted in the destruction of Indigenous Australian society, even if only through the genocidal policies of assimilation, there perhaps should be Stolen Generations museums in every city and town in Australia.<sup>7</sup>

It is far too late to save the Stolen Generations, and it is also far too late to reinstate land and resources to a conquered people, but it seems, it is never too late to introduce new strategies and initiatives to deal with problems introduced at the very beginning of white Australian history. Once again in the Northern Territory Indigenous Australians, valiantly clinging to the last pieces of their whittled away estates, are told that government is to remove their proprietary rights. We are told this is necessary if government is to have rights of access and more importantly rights of governance within those “troubled and dysfunctional” communities. One senses a case of *déjà vu* when thinking of the 1865 *Colonial Laws Validity Act* which “denied legal appeal to Aboriginal title...and left unanswered the moral question of how arbitrary appropriation of Aboriginal land could remain outside the law”.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the *terra nullius* principle is alive and well. The road into the future is not clearly marked – not that the road has ever been – and while I would like to offer words of hope this is difficult to do with the Howard government’s latest experiment driven by the draconian principles that guide this latest “indigenous intervention plan” reminiscent of the old “new deals”. The plan is ill-prepared and rushed and not much different in intent and focus to those earlier ill-fated “new deals” offered by AE Elkin, Paul Hasluck and other colonial administrators. The only difference is that there is now ever-growing numbers of academic mercenaries as well as industry marshals lining up for their hunks of the indigenous budget. They cleverly recruit indigenous peoples into their ranks with their glib rhetoric and their tokenistic roles as ‘advisers’ and ‘consultants’ – even identifying them as ‘indigenous leaders’ and ‘official spokespeople’. The only thing they do not do is to fit them out with

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is history fiction?*, UNSW Press: Sydney, 2006, p.8

<sup>7</sup> S. Stanton, “Coloureds and Catholics: A Colonial Subject’s Narrative of the Factors and Processes that led to the Colonisation and Conversion of Coloureds at Garden Point Mission, 1941-1967”. Unpublished PhD manuscript – submitted CDU, February 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Elder, “The Inner Logic of Dispossession: Land Acquisition in the Northern Territory and Papua”, *Journal of Northern Territory History*, 2000, p.3

brass breastplates. Of course I generalize – there are also a great number of Indigenous Australians, in all areas, academics, professionals and grassroots people who work long and hard – and with strong spirit and great commitment. However for every one of the ‘compliant native’ among their midst, the good work quickly comes undone. Indigenous Australians - if they are to heal, recover and march forward – need the numbers and strength – from every single corner of Australia. The colonial war is not over – and will never end – it cannot because this is the nature of colonialism, but Indigenous Australians could one day be triumphant in working to undoing the devastating damage so far done. It will take both individual and collective effort on a grand scale – and it should not be looked at as wishful thinking even though the forces of colonialism have forcefully stamped into broader Australian culture, privilege (for non-indigenous) and oppression (for indigenous). The patterns of history can only change if it is the will of all the people to do something about changing them – changing the role that these patterns play in making privilege happen, and lessening the affects of oppression is the only result we should all aim for.

‘Getting along together’ and ‘being nice to each other’, ‘practicing tolerance’ or doing a 10-week crash course in Aboriginal Studies, or sanctioning a hurriedly put together “indigenous health or employment strategy” is simply not enough. Until all people understand the patterns of history and accept the truth in relation to the forces of colonialism they will never comprehend, nor accept, that inequality and oppression are embedded in the structures of western colonial power – and that it is that power that shapes and directs almost every aspect of the disadvantaged Indigenous Australian – every day. The status quo may never change nor will the impact of the forces of colonialism be simply solved by ‘addressing’, ‘acknowledging’ or ‘paying close attention to’ the ‘indigenous problem’. Good intentions only work for a short time and here I appeal to all decent non-indigenous people to not allow yourselves to be fed on the desperate and powerful illusion that ‘good intentions’ and ‘good deeds’ make all this colonial madness disappear. As well, I urge all those indigenous people who step back from the issues, who concern themselves too much with image and or position – I urge you to cease ‘flying under the radar’ and to have the courage to fly above it.

I am not any heavy duty government policy adviser or writer, nor am I a nominated or selected ‘indigenous leader’ or ‘spokesperson’ – I am simply, another colonized subject and at the same time a western-trained colonial historian offering my views on the ‘trouble’ created for Indigenous Australians directly through the forces of colonialism. Personally, I work hard at challenging western academic disciplines in an effort to correct the misrepresentations of indigenous decision-making and overall political and social practices. I am not among that number of indigenous academics who suffer internal colonization or forget that the focus is on collective responsibility to the broader indigenous community. I beseech my indigenous colleagues, fellow educators and researchers, even students, that we remain vigilant, and critical about the indigenous past – the present – and the future. Continue to speak out against colonial powers, be prepared to face challenges by constantly confronting the colonial status quo. Do not be afraid to protect and or promote indigenous practices and knowledges and know and be proud that they threaten the hegemony of western European influence in education, in academia. At

individual level, the indigenous researcher-educator must diligently incorporate Indigenous Knowledges and ways of teaching and learning – of knowing. This must be done through the gathering and promoting of indigenous voices, especially those of community-based cultural leaders and advisers, and most importantly Elders and traditional owners. We can only hope that eventually the academy, and government will take notice and fully accept that indigenous knowledges are legitimate canons in their own right.

The responsibility lies with indigenous intellectuals and general array of academics to constantly challenge, to constantly demand inclusion of indigenous voice and perspectives. They must cease allowing themselves to be regarded, even if only by a small minority of non-indigenous educator-academics and other gatekeepers – as rabble-rousing essentialists just because they insist on the inclusion of matters indigenous. Have the courage to demand voice over tokenism.

The truth is, Indigenous Australians were forced into a ‘heart of darkness’ from which they have no escape. European imperialism had no boundaries and Australian nationalism perpetuates that imperialism in modern times. Most Indigenous Australians have never had the capacity to escape all of those catastrophic consequences and those who do have the capacity to understand, or at least think about those imperialist imperatives, have it seems convinced themselves that this was a historical journey they just had to undertake. It seems most of this latter group have accepted that dispossession and genocide are experiences that are easily recoverable from. The majority of Australians, and especially by those at government level, who shamelessly defend the patterns of colonialism and imperialism are committed to maintaining superior habits and language in their efforts to ensure enduring political subjugation. The age-old factionism justification for doing little or nothing has a rather flimsy premise, and really no legitimate base or argument, and indeed Indigenous Australians must cease agreeing with westerners on that issue as that approach further assists in the continued disempowerment and suppression of the majority of our people.

It is time to break free. We owe it to the memories of our almiyuks and numiyuks, our wetjies, our jimins, our warriors, our fighters, all our men, women and the generations of children who died for us. We must continue the struggle, fight the forces of colonialism, at every turn, we must loosen, indeed we must discard altogether, those shackles of colonialism that keep us bound up in what can only be described as white moral cognitive dysfunction<sup>9</sup>. Little indigenous children are indeed sacred, but so are indigenous women and men – can they survive this latest edition of the colonial racial contract – the contract which has consistently been based on assumptions of “the rightness and necessity of subjugating and assimilating other peoples to [the European] worldview.”<sup>10</sup>

It is time for Indigenous Australians to unite on this issue. Indigenous Australians in positions of influence, must, in all haste, identify and learn to understand the workings of

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<sup>9</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997, p.95

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Williams Jr., “The Algebra of Federal Indian Law: The Hard Trail of Decolonizing and Americanizing the White Man’s Indian Jurisprudence”, *Wisconsin Law Review* 1986, p.229



the racialized ethic that is continuously applied through government policies and legislation. Indigenous Australians must ask of non-indigenous colleagues, friends, government ministers, and others how it is that they are able to consistently do the wrong thing while thinking that they were/are doing the right thing?

Colonisation is the ultimate form of trespass, which represses the ability to act without reference to colonial terminology, paradigms, and symbols.<sup>11</sup>

In closing this address I share with you the words of Jean Paul Sartre:

**“[The colonized] do not even need to be exterminated anymore. No, the most urgent thing...is to humiliate them, to wipe out the pride in their hearts...The body will be allowed to live on but the spirit will be destroyed. Tame, train, punish...those are the words that obsess the colonizer.” – Jean Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and neo-colonialism*, Routledge, London, 2001, p.76**

I ask that each and everyone walks from here tonight with a commitment to changing the direction of colonialism, and to bring to an end the impetus of its current destructive path, and by doing so, restore dignity and some semblance of peoplehood to Indigenous Australians.

Each one of you should walk away from here knowing that in this current, and continuing colonial relationship the colonized, that is Indigenous Australians will never be allowed to experience change on their own terms. And perhaps this will never happen for:

The final stage of self-determination supposedly removes the colonizer from the mix and allows the indigenous population full, rather than limited, sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

While we know this is never going to happen, let us not rush in this “search for order” in so-called “dysfunctional Aboriginal communities” or allow any further dilution of individuals’ rights and privileges as white Australia goes about with its latest version of amalgamation and acculturation.

Thank you

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans & Whites in the Progressive Era*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2005, p.xi

<sup>12</sup> Tom Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans & Whites in the Progressive Era*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2005, p.xi

