

Growing up brown in a white-shirted time

Dennis R McDermott

If all outlets for venting anger come with heavy costs, then unresolved injustice simply simmers

Some time back, my high school matriculation class held a reunion at a Tamworth motel. Many of us hadn't seen each other for 27 years. Over those years, people, and times, had changed in unexpected ways. I was surprised by the vehemence of one former classmate, who berated me for still having my hair! Then I was angered by another, who now radiated the same kind of menace as the crims he'd put away in the intervening years. What really threw me, though, were the four or five separate occasions when I was pulled aside by someone wanting to personally apologise for "the way they had treated me" all those years ago. Their change in awareness was heartening, their behaviour sincere. Yet I was left groping for words.

There was no Indigenous-settler lingua franca from which I could pull a response. I thought back to a particular, clued-in science teacher taking my class to task — in code — for negative responses to "a particular class member's difference". Then there were the examples, over the years, of my presence provoking inexplicable hostility: puzzling kicks in the shin in the primary school playground, group taunts at Cubs and Scouts, or the quick-fisted farm boy who spotted me as soon as I turned up at high school. I'd come to believe, though, that the problem was me — that, in some irremediable way, I was simply unacceptable. Not so much that I didn't, but that I could *never*, measure up.

My mother dealt with our Aboriginality like her mother before her, by simply denying it. My father's side of the family made their way from Ireland to the south of New South Wales around the 1860s. My mother grew up in Gadigal country in the 1920s, less than a kilometre from "The Block" in Sydney's Redfern, yet the family fiction bequeathed to her was that her father came off a boat from Trinidad. Detective work, much later on, teased out a different picture of my grandfather. What emerged was a Gamilaroi man from the north-western slopes of NSW. It took my experience as a psychologist — in particular, work with blackfellas in crisis — to bring home to me that my tussles with identity in fact echo those of many other Aboriginal men.

The West Indian fantasy was neither unique nor unusual. The historian who coined the term "stolen generations", Peter Read, estimates that 100 000 Australians deny, or are denied, their Aboriginality.¹ This country is awash with dubious "ancestors", such as Javanese royalty and surprisingly skinny-legged Māori.



Dennis and his late mother, Dorothy

When I work with medical students, registrars or even long-practising mental health professionals, I see them struggle to grasp *how* such severance from self came about. Our education system has failed them: they have only the haziest idea of how all-encompassing — and how deleterious to Indigenous wellbeing — was the system of "Clayton's"* apartheid that still ruled in the 1950s and 60s. (For example, the Queensland Government's *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act 1939* was still affecting the way its enforcers went about their business as late as 1969.) In a sense, this is not surprising. The Australia that decreed that newly married women must give up their jobs is incomprehensible to contemporary young women, yet this

was just one of a range of social strictures applying at the time. My daughter's high school friends thought it "weird" that business shirts for men only came in colours from the late 1960s on. The "white shirt" mentality ruled more than men's wardrobes: expectations about how one should present were proxies for inflexibility about how one should behave — for Indigenous Australians, about how one should *be*. When you're unaware how far-reaching was the control of Aboriginal lives by mission managers, "The Welfare" or police, it's hard to comprehend the lengths to which Aboriginal Australians went to escape that control. Many simply identified as Indian, Fijian, Italian ... whatever would get the authorities off your back and keep your children by your side.

Tamworth was blindingly "white". Apart from Wilga and her brother at my school, and my mother, there were few black faces to be seen in town. The experience of growing up "brown", in a landscape configured for something else, shaped an isolation that took a long time to resolve. A continual awareness of underlying antipathy — one that occasionally snapped its leash — left me confused and angry. Walking the few blocks from home to high school churned my stomach. My arms and legs lost connection, my head went down as I broached the rows of early arrivals astride Globite school cases, a gauntlet that ran from school gate to assembly area. My anxiety played out bodily and mentally. The facial tics of early high school years progressed to specific obsessions and compulsions: counting to 15 before making any major, or even

* Clayton's tonic: the non-alcoholic, Scotch whisky look-alike advertised as "the drink you have when you're not having a drink".

minor, decision; washing and rewashing; scratching imaginary itches throughout a conversation. I functioned sweetly in some environments, but fell apart in others. I left for university with relief.

As long-standing Aboriginal social exclusion and the bite of lived racism played no small part in my mental distress, letting go my anxieties was never going to be a straightforward task. There was no prescription. Education, the opportunities of improved income, a strengthening of identity — the usual suspects — all played a useful role. Negotiating my hybrid identity and the contradictions of the Australian mantra of a “fair go” meant I learnt as much off campus as on. My high school belief in an omnipresent “British justice”, for example, was swiftly quashed at 18, as I left an Armidale pub. From a group of otherwise strictly Anglo-Celtic students, I was the one selected to see the inside of a steel-benched police wagon, then introduced to a new sport: speed up and brake ... speed up and brake ... Your head quickly becomes intimate with metal.

For blackfellas, racial profiling is no new-millennium phenomenon, though fresh manifestations stoke old fires. If all the outlets for venting anger come with heavy costs, then unresolved injustice simply simmers — a physical charge that won't go away. As the Acting Social Justice Commissioner noted in his analysis of responses to the 1997 *Bringing them home* report:²

The Indigenous sense of injustice is so deeply inscribed that it forms an *expectation* of injustice [emphasis added].³

Personal narratives are a way to comprehend the push of the past into the present. They can, though, label the teller as both victim and whinger. This is a risk that needs to be run. Unless settler Australia comprehends the pervasive, yet casual, nature of state-sanctioned violence in Indigenous lives — in particular in male lives⁴ — it will remain puzzled as to the violent responses engendered in turn.

My experiences are small beer compared with those of many other blackfellas. I wasn't attacked with a broken pool cue, in the proud, pioneer town of Orange, as was a nephew of mine; I didn't have to jump from a slowing-down car, on a remote Tasmanian road, to avoid a bashing from the group who'd offered me a lift, as did a former partner of my sister. Racist violence, immediate or threatened, is the razor wire around Aboriginal lives. The effects are potent. If enough are served up to you, small beers will still get you drunk. The experience of the Foundation President of the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, Dr Louis Peachey, gives insight into the treatment dilemmas facing non-Indigenous health professionals in a non-reconciled Australia — why they may still fail to grasp the full magnitude of the combined effects of social stress and percolating threat within Indigenous life contexts. Peachey was astounded to discover, some years ago, as a young man on a night out with non-Aboriginal friends, that whitefellas didn't feel a need to check every dance hall, pub or party for problematic people, quick exits or, failing that, for the availability of makeshift weapons (reported by Peachey in a speech given at the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association Annual Symposium, Sydney, 2003).

Aboriginal Australians live in a climate of thick air: often the sense is that the storm may break at any moment. The work of the US researcher, Bruce Perry, suggests it can be psychologically fraught to leave the living culture of a Native American or Canadian reservation, a Māori whānau or hapu (extended family or tribal group), or an Australian Aboriginal community to become a “minority” individual in a Western cultural framework.⁵

I grew up with a distinct awareness that I was “Other” to the default setting. For Murri, Koori or Nyoongah men, this doesn't occur in a historical vacuum: a number of authors have noted the concurrent, spirit-sapping loss — through colonisation — of our traditional Indigenous male roles.^{6,7} The “Othering” process, then, extends the experience of loss. The primary way it unfolds is through mechanisms that demean or diminish. In conservative-led Australia, the dominant equation is a simple one: member of a “minority” = reduction in regard.⁸

The infantilisation of Indigenous men has served the colonial project well. Even innocuous-seeming advertisements have played a significant role in reinforcing an image of people insufficiently civilised — or evolved — to be worthy of owning the land that was taken from them. For 40-odd years, from the end of World War I to the diminution of overt stereotyping in the 1960s, Pelaco shirts — crisp, white and tailored just right — became a market leader under the logo of “Pelaco Bill”, a skinny caricature of Aboriginal maleness: brown, maniacally grinning, barefoot — in fact naked, apart from his crisp, white ... You get the drift. Bill's “Kriol” (read “kiddie English”) caption, the original Pelaco slogan, completed the picture:

Mine tinkit they fit.⁹

In an Australia that refuses the cultural imbrication of Aotearoa/New Zealand, or the “we're a *nation* of minorities” pluralism of Canada,¹⁰ “Othering” continues, serving ends related to the apogee of “wedge politics” and notions of being “comfortable” with history. Cultural practices are now the locus of intense attack. Aboriginal “men's business” — the gender-specific cultural imperative alive in urban, as much as remote, settings — is in the process of being repositioned as an archaism, other to “Australian” values. In recent federal government and media forays, it is portrayed as a dangerous, alien tenet — *the* cultural motif underpinning monstrous violence against women and children.^{11,12} Such attacks “sanitise” our history and continue an inexplicable blindness to the contemporary consequences of past policies. In particular, they obscure the disastrous legacy of “Clayton's” apartheid and ignore the contribution of a range of variables — such as poverty, overcrowding, overincarceration and transgenerational trauma — that are well recognised for their potency.¹³⁻¹⁵ They threaten not only to derail promising initiatives that work *with*, rather than *against*, Indigenous culture, but also to subsume a complex public health issue under a simplistic law-and-order response.

Conversely, things are turning around, at least in terms of Indigenous male dynamism for change. In the past decade, Indigenous male health conferences and health service innovations have championed a need to see “men's business” as the positive social force it has always been for blackfellas.^{16,17} In these forums, participants say they want to regain a sense of a valued role for Aboriginal men — a concept quite distinct, it needs pointing out, from hegemonic masculinity, yet imbued with the potential to turn around our health outcomes.^{18,19} The change of heart so evident in that Tamworth function room — people growing up, not just growing older — has not yet made it to Canberra. Demonising Aboriginal men as a precursor to mainstreaming Indigenous services is not only inexcusable vilification, but demonstrably ineffective public health policy.²⁰ As with any distinct population, generic approaches just don't cut the mustard. The only services that are likely to deliver real improvements in Indigenous male health are ones tailored to our cultural and contextual realities. Ask us why we avoid mainstream services, and we'll tell you — we think they don't fit.

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