

FORUM INTRODUCTION | 24 MAY 2001 SUVENDRINI PERER

When does Nobby's story begin? With his birth...? Or further back with my struggles as an Aboriginal woman raising nine children mostly on my own? Or maybe Nobby's story starts even earlier than that in the 1880s, when my family went to live on Box Ridge Mission after their traditional lands were taken over by the first squatter up in the north of New South Wales. Thinking about it, I'd say Nobby's story has its roots way back. It's part of a bigger historical picture and a longer story of hardships passed down from one generation to another. This story continues today (Ginibi 1).

So begins Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Haunted by the Past*. The story of Ginibi's son, Nobby, and his repeated experiences of imprisonment, the passage tells us, cannot be separated from a 'bigger _ picture and a longer story' starting with the removal of the Bundjulong people from their lands. *Haunted by the Past* continually moves between past and present, between personal and public, linking different forms of institutionalisation of indigenous peoples, and making connections between collective and personal stories of home and loss and return. It interweaves Nobby's testimony with stories and poems of other young indigenous men in prison, young men whose names have become only too familiar in a litany of pain, injustice and death: David Gundy; John Pat; Robert Walker; Eddie Murray; Daniel Yock. And many more.

Write of life
the pious said
forget the past
the past is dead.

But all I see
in front of me
is a concrete floor
a cell door
and John Pat.

Agh! tear out the page
forget his age
thin skull they cried
that's why he died!

But I can't forget
the silhouette
of a concrete floor
a cell door
and John Pat.

The inclusion of Jack Davis's famous poem, 'Dedicated to Maisie Pat and to all mothers who have suffered similar loss' (Ginibi 80-81), explicitly links Nobby's story to the issues of Black deaths in custody and the disproportionate representation of indigenous peoples in the prison system.

Haunted by the Past is an extraordinary work, unlike anything else in Australian writing. Drawing on a remark made by Romaine Moreton about the part that love plays in the writing of indigenous women, I have been thinking about Haunted by the Past as a work of love that provides nothing less than a racialised genealogy of the Australian prison system. Racialised genealogy is a term used by Angela Davis to provide an alternative to Foucault's genealogy of the prison with its obliviousness to questions of race. A different genealogy of the prison in the U.S. Davis writes,

would accentuate the links between confinement, punishment and race. At least four systems of incarceration could be identified: the reservation system, slavery, the mission system, and the internment camps of World War II. Within the U.S. incarceration has thus played a pivotal role in the histories of Native Americans and people of African, Mexican and Asian descent. In all these places people were involuntarily confined and punished for no other reason than their race or ethnicity (97).

A racialised genealogy of the Australian prison would show that since colonisation the history of institutionalisation of indigenous peoples has taken different forms: expulsion away from traditional country to distant camps as the most productive lands were claimed for grazing sheep and cattle; incarceration in penal settlements like Palm Island for those deemed uncooperative; and the systematic forced removal of children. This removal of Aboriginal children continues today in different forms through practices such as detention and child substitute care. Mandatory sentencing is in effect the latest mechanism in this long continuum of incarceration (Perera 2000). And, as Haunted by the Past recognises through the story of Nobby's Maltese-Australian friend Joe, the genealogy of the Australian prison also includes the containment and punishment of other racialised populations of nonindigenous people.

This history of racialised punishment for nonwhite or non-Anglo migrants includes various forms of quarantine, immigration control and internment, from ghettos like the so-called Japtown in Broome in the early 1900s to the internment camps of World War 2. And in the last 10 years it includes the creation of prison-like conditions for the mandatory detention of mostly non-Anglo asylum seekers. Racialised punishment, then, is a term that underlines often invisible or silenced connections between criminalisation, confinement and race/ethnicity. Haunted by the Past, I've said, is a work of love. But love is a rather discredited word in Australian public discourse; it's a scary and compromising word. Despite the powerful responses that I've heard to Haunted by the Past from friends and students, some reviewers suggest that the book is in some way compromised by love (e.g. Morrissey). "The bias of mother love" is a term that even appears on the back cover of the book. The bias of mother love.

My own mother, like people in many different parts of the British Empire, belonged to a generation that was penalised with either beatings or fines for speaking their own languages at school. In many ways this punitive system

worked, and she (like me) became the successful product of a British colonial education, programmed to think and feel almost exclusively in the English language. But there are moments when English becomes utterly inadequate. One phrase my mother used during those times has come back to me recently; it's one that Tamil speakers in the audience may recognise: vaithai pathi eriyuthu. This is an untranslatable phrase that refers to a kind of blazing, anguish of despairing love. It's the only phrase I can come up with to articulate an image I haven't been able to get out of my head for several weeks: the image of a father, Shahraz Kayani, who set himself ablaze outside parliament house in Canberra. As his sister put it, very simply, 'His heart was broken' after six years of battling the immigration bureaucracy (Horin).

The image of Shahraz Kayani takes me back to a moment from Alexis Wright's novel *Plains of Promise*: Here a succession of indigenous women whose daughters have been taken away go up in flames one by one in an agony of longing, and loss and despair, and love. It is an indescribable scene. But I find that after all there is an English word, at least in some vocabularies, to describe these images of anguished, despairing, hopeless love. The word is - UnAustralian. This was the response of Minister Philip Ruddock to Shahraz Kayani's action. As anyone who followed the media coverage knows, the chief concern of the authorities around parliament house that day was to protect innocent Australian eyes, in this case represented by a group of private school boys getting a firsthand look at the working of Australian democracy, from this distasteful spectacle. The covering over of the sight of Shahraz Kayani's wounded body, like the attempt to cover over the stories of the stolen generations, is part of an ongoing process of denial, and equally important, it is part of the consolidation and reinforcing of a particular vision of Australian society.

While pains are taken to spare the sensibilities of some Australian children from distressing sights, let's not forget certain other children in Australia. Let's remember the fourteen-year-old boy who died, not much more than a year ago, in the Don Dale detention centre after a mandatory prison sentence was imposed upon him. And let us not forget that more than four hundred infants and children who came to Australia seeking asylum with their parents now lived in detention camps-- in some cases for over 5 years. They face mandatory, indefinite detention despite the fact that neither they nor their parents have been accused of any criminal offence. To seek asylum is not a criminal or illegal act. It is explicitly recognised as a human right under the Geneva Convention of 1953. Let's remember also the children who are the subject of Paula Abood's powerful film, *Of Middle Eastern Appearance*, children who have been already criminalised by the language of the police commissioner and premier Carr because of their parents' and grandparents' countries of birth; and let's remember the young people who are serving their sentences several times over in prisons, as Thang Ngo will discuss, while the federal government engages in a bizarre search for somewhere, anywhere, to deport them to. What connects these different forms of criminalisation? I'll quote from Chris Cunneen's discussion (quoting C. Sumner) of the link between the identification of something as a crime and the building and shoring up of national identity and cohesiveness (the latter, of course, a

favourite word of our Prime Minister).

Criminalisation is a key part of the building of the nation and the nation-state through processes of exclusion. Thus 'notions of crime control, the crime wave, the crime zone, crime as a social problem, and the break down of law and order, [are presented] as signs of a moral malaise threatening the constitutional integrity of the state' [Sumner 1990, p.49]. (Cunneen 9-10).

The generation of a moral panic around certain groups and the racialised criminalisation of certain populations work to publicise a vision of the nation and its morality, and the illusion of a national consensus. I call it an illusion because it can be achieved only at the cost of leaving out or denying certain segments of the population. These exclusions extend both to indigenous people, whose legal ownership of the land is erased, and to migrant and refugee populations who challenge or disturb the coloniser's sense of self. Themes of crime and contamination, of asylum seekers as potential disease carriers or terrorists against whom fortress-like barriers must be erected, resonate deeply with the historical anxieties of the white Australia policy. Similarly, as Ray Jackson can elaborate, acts of resistance by indigenous people to the stealing of their land have to be recast as acts of criminality in order to repress the original act of colonisation.

As a migrant, I bear responsibility, like all nonindigenous Australians, for the ongoing dispossession of the owners of this country, and I am responsible for working to end that dispossession. What I've said isn't an attempt to write over the differences between indigenous peoples and non-Anglo migrant populations. What I do want to suggest, and what I hope will become clearer as today's forum proceeds, is how the different ways in which these two groups are racialised and criminalised interlock to reinforce the dominance of whiteness, of a white view, a whitewashed view, of Australia. In this campaign we want to highlight how racialised punishment functions as a set of interconnecting practices that targets specific raced and ethnicised groups in different ways. When I speak of whiteness I want to remind you of a distinction made by James Baldwin, between white as a term to describe a certain kind of skin, and White with a capital W, for people who make a political choice to be White, and to reinforce and benefit from white supremacy. If you think you're White, Baldwin says, there's no hope for you. The various racialised processes through which certain groups are criminalised, that is, how they are marked as in some way predisposed to crime, reinforce the hierarchies of whiteness by which dominant relations of power are maintained in Australia.

'Prisons, Angela Davis has said, are a receptacle for social issues that are too hard to think about'. Prisons are our answer to the problem of homelessness; to the problem of addiction; to the problem of mental illness; to the problem of poverty; and also, especially, to the problem of race. Prisons block our ability to think critically about these social issues, by providing a ready-made answer to them. Almost seamlessly, prisons have become our answer to nonwhite refugees. No longer viewed within a human rights framework, asylum seekers, although convicted of no criminal offence, are transferred to prison-

like detention camps, where they are exposed to unprecedented levels of violence: for example, last year the inmates of the detention camp at Woomera became the first group of people in Australia to have water canon used against them. Levels of violence against individual detainees are also quite shocking. Only a few weeks ago a guard from the Curtin camp was convicted of severely bashing a handcuffed detainee, who at the same time was also being held down by other prison guards. The judge let the guard off with a suspended sentence, because his Honour thought that the guard was under stress! Also important to underline are the levels of violence that women detainees in particular experience in these places; there is a complex silence around this issue that needs to be unpacked. Paula Abood will speak more about this topic, and we'll also hear from Maqsood Alshams, himself a former detainee.

The distinction between prisons and the so-called detention centres is increasingly blurred by their staffing by employees of global punishment industry who move between the two systems. At the same time, it is very worrying that individual detainees are able to be transferred from detention camps to state prisons, where they have been held without charge for long periods of time. While the increased policing of both indigenous people and asylum seekers is, as I have suggested, something that has deep historical roots in Australia, at the same time in other ways it is part of something new - the global boom in incarceration. In his discussion Charandev Singh will address the ways in which incarceration became a Fortune 500 business in the 1990s.

I will end by marking the connections between a sequence of things that all of us in Australia ignore at our peril: how established democratic and judicial processes are being eroded in recent years by initiatives such as mandatory sentencing, zero tolerance policing and immigration/refugee policy, all cast as legislative responses to what Mr Ruddock recently described as judicial activism; secondly, the flouting of international treaties and conventions and the moves by the federal government to disconnect Australia from the UN committee system. On the other hand, there's the increased involvement of private capital in racialised punishment, and the increased surveillance and racialised targeting of selected groups in the community. This has implications not only for those who are incarcerated, but also encroaches on those of us outside. For example, only a couple of days ago a Redfern elder, Allie Golding, spoke about the appearance of private security guards patrolling the streets of Redfern and Chippendale -- "it's as if we're living in a detention centre", she said (Law Report, ABC Radio National 24 May 2001). We need to consider then, the challenges posed to democratic rights by forms of collaboration between state and transnational forces not only in reinforcing historical forms of racialised repression, but also at the same time their capability of producing new forms of this racialised repression. Today's forum, we hope, can provide an initial space for identifying the connections between these things, against which some of us have been working separately for many years, and perhaps can show us how we can collaborate in our efforts to end them.

And finally, before I conclude: When the organisers first discussed the idea of this forum, we had hoped that Edward Said would be able to participate. This has not been possible, but he sends us his support and solidarity and love today. Edward Said has long been an enabling presence for many of us here, a public intellectual of outstanding courage, generosity of spirit and rare integrity. I'll end with some words he wrote, in an essay called 'Truth and Reconciliation'. The essay relates to the violence against Palestinians, but these are words I hope we also can take with us today: Unfortunately injustice and belligerence don't diminish by themselves: they have to be attacked by all concerned. Now is the time (321).

For all of us opposed to racialised punishment in Australia, Now is the time.

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