ARJUNA BENZION WEISS
BONDI, NSW, AUSTRALIA
JUNE 2020

'White Australia has a black history'. That slogan is decades old, and its meaning hints at white Australia's long-standing reluctance to meaningfully acknowledge Aboriginal people and perspectives in the telling of our national history. [1]

This paragraph begins an article in the UK paper the Independent in 2016 in response to the conservative Prime Minster of Australia, Tony Abbott, who had claimed at the time that "Unlike France or Britain, we lack a colonial past to complicate the present". As the journalist comments "it beggars belief". The reality is that in 1770 a British Captain, James Cook, planted the Union Jack on an Aboriginal island known then as Terra Australis and declared this an empty land – Terra Nullius in Latin. This was the 'legal' status of Aboriginal people in Australia until 1967.

I arrived in Australia in the 50's and when I went to school, I was taught that when the British came to Australia it was a 'peaceful settlement'. As a child of Holocaust survivors from Romania, who could barely speak English, who was I to argue. My parents had just survived one of the more horrific racist mass murders in European history, and felt very safe in Australia, a nation that had accepted them as refugees. The whole focus of my parents in this new land was one of survival. There was hardly ever any talk of what happened during the war, it was regarded as something they had left behind in Europe. Now we were in this country where Jews from the refugee camps of Eastern Europe were encouraged to come and populate the nation. My parents found work, saved money, bought a house and sent me to tertiary education as well as Jewish religious education. We became Naturalised Citizens of Australia, which gave my parents the security they sought, as now I could grow up in what they considered a free country. This is a story that many of the 100,000 or so Jews in Australia could relate to.

However, as I grew up and left home, I began to discover that this was not exactly a free country if you were Aboriginal. Aboriginal people consider themselves the original owners of this land, which they never ceded. There has never been a Treaty to recognise the original owners and few Australians would even know there were what some historians call

---

[1] https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/white-australia-has-a-black-history-indigenous-australians-like-me-had-our-country-invaded-not-a6959576.html

100 years of Black Wars. The kind of blatant lies that our political leaders are capable of making, which are then reinforced by the mainstream mass media, has led to the majority of Australians being ignorant of the very racist basis of the formation of this nation. At the time of Federation in 1901, when Australia was formed out of the 6 British colonies, that had been established here through the 19th century, Australia was considered to be a British Nation in the South Pacific. The Constitution that was drawn up at the time and the first laws passed by the new parliament established the White Australia Policy and considered Aboriginal people as being wards of the state, they were not regarded as free citizens in their own country. Most of the massacres of Aboriginal people had not been considered crimes. The injustices perpetrated against our First Nations do beggar belief.

Today in Sydney there are planned demonstrations that began in solidarity with the ones in the USA, but with a local focus, as Australia has a shameful history of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Here's the report from the Guardian Newspaper:

> Australia's record on Aboriginal deaths in custody is a driving force behind protests due to go ahead this weekend in Australian cities, as people turn out to march in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement globally…We found there have been at least 434 deaths since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody ended in 1991.[2]

As I watch these stories unfold in the news, both here and in the USA, I feel deeply saddened and outraged. I'm appalled at the ignorance of so many of my fellow Australians, in relation to this racism. I first became aware of this treatment of our First Nations people in late 60s, when a Freedom Ride happened in NSW to highlight the discrimination that pervaded rural Australia. The influence of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA led to a referendum being held in Australia on the question of Aboriginal citizenship. This referendum was supported by 90% of Australians and pre-empted the beginning of multicultural policies in Australia in the 70s. These policies reflected the change from the British colonial nation of the first 150 years to the culturally diverse nation of today.

I first became involved in this process as a young filmmaker in the 70's when I made a film of Aboriginal people living in a suburb of Sydney called La Perouse. It was just a few kilometres away from the eastern suburbs of Sydney where I grew up as part of the Jewish community. I couldn't believe the 3rd world living conditions of these people in a 1st world city like Sydney. I later became a teacher of Drama and English to migrants. It was part of my support of the multicultural policies Australia adopted from Canada. This led to my teaching for 3½ years at an inner-city high school with 60-80% Aboriginal students and becoming involved in their community. At the time I was researching a doctorate in social ecology on anti-racism through drama education. I was deeply disturbed by the stories of racism I heard from my students, especially those of Asian and Middle Eastern descent. But the more I got involved in the Aboriginal community, I discovered ones that were far worse.

Some of my findings from my research that proved valuable was that racism could be reframed as cross-cultural conflict. There is no scientific basis, either biologically or sociologically, to explain the different human 'races'. They are actually different cultural groups. Genetically we are all part of the same human race! However, the term has a legal status as part of anti-racism laws. From my work in non-violence training and conflict resolution I learnt about the power of reframing as a way to address a difficult issue like

---

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/06/aboriginal-deaths-in-custody-434-have-died-since-1991-new-data-shows

racism. I could use drama education processes like forum and playback theatre to support a group of people to transform cross-cultural conflict into intercultural communication. It was through the non-violence training of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) with Quakers in Sydney that I first became more deeply involved in the Dances of Universal Peace. We even incorporated the dances, which were held in the Quaker Hall, into our weekend training program.

The drama-based whole school anti-racism program that developed from my research was later called Cooling Conflicts, and I was part of a team of trainers that implemented this program into more than 100 schools in NSW, before I ended up teaching social ecology at Western Sydney University. As part of that teaching I also taught a unit on Social Justice for Secondary Teachers, which included Aboriginal Studies.

It was through a Universal Worship in dance in 1996, that I learnt about the *Unity of Religious Ideals* and Hazrat Inayat Khan and Murshid Samuel Lewis. Given my background, both personally and professionally, it was not long after that experience that I became a dance mentee and a Sufi mureed. The recent Spring Renewal retreats that the Sydney Dances have been creating on the land of the Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Noel Butler, on the south coast of NSW are a direct result of this story (see the report below).[3]

Just as in our dance community, over the last 10 years there has been a growing awareness of the situation of Aboriginal people and sympathy towards their culture, within the wider Australian society. This was after a massive demonstration when some 250,000 people marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of Aboriginal reconciliation. In the last few years even the name given to our national day, traditionally called Australia Day, has been debated and some local governments and many communities want the name or the date changed. For Aboriginal people it has been variably called Invasion Day, Survival Day or a Day of Mourning. These grass roots changes have yet to be acknowledged by our national or state governments.

Uncle Noel and me at our recent retreat

---

[3] http://dancesofuniversalpeaceaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Reflections-on-the-Spring-Renewal-Retreat.pdf