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## *What is Happening is Real*

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**Abstract:** Australia's history parallels the movement of modernity towards neo-colonial enterprises encapsulated in globalisation, while Australian identity lends itself to the fragmentation inherent in the conflicting discourses of national identification that make up its history. The psychology derived from this is startlingly apparent in our more recent history as we battle to come to terms with new and insidious incursions into Indigenous human rights. The bicentenary year gave Australia an opportunity to highlight the "coming of age" that emerged from being mature enough to admit that white Australia has a black history. A tension between a utopian notion held by some that the celebrations marked a time when Australia had reached a coming of age and others who were ambivalent about the nature of the celebrations has led to a re-evaluation of Australian ideas of nationhood. *What is Happening is Real* is an exploration of the tensions that gave rise to a continuing engagement in the ongoing challenges that 1988 presented to all Australians.

**Keywords:** Australian identity; Indigenous human rights; cultural challenges

On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009, Patrick Dodson, in his address at the opening of the Indigenous Policy Dialogue and Research Unit at the University of NSW, discussed the need for a new national dialogue in Australia that incorporated ritual and ceremony as a way of recognising Indigenous people. He referred to Prime Minister Rudd's desire to 'turn the page' on the national narrative. For Pat Dodson it is not a matter of turning the page but of writing a trilogy. The first volume would focus on the occupation and use of the land by Aboriginal people, beginning with their creation stories and tracing the thousands of years that Aboriginal people have walked in their own country. The second book would describe two centuries of colonial engagement, dispute and conflict between people over occupation. The third book would focus on the social, economic and environmental concerns of Australia; it would be a tale of taking up the challenge of a global economy and environmental sustainability and, at the same time, involve Australians in regional reconstruction where standards of health and education would be equal for all. He described how the Indigenous Policy Dialogue and Research Unit

aimed to construct a new national framework with a philosophical underpinning that would guide the development of a just relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The utopian trope that Dodson's literary metaphor of the trilogy provides, combined with the framework for creating a national dialogue that takes into account Indigenous spirituality and creation stories, acknowledges that white Australia has a black history and looks to a future where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians engage in equal dialogue, is a compelling one. As I listened to Patrick Dodson speak, I began to feel the kind of hope that had not been in my heart for a long time.

Maryrose Casey describes events such as the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations and the 2000 'People's walk for reconciliation' as being moments 'where Australians performed their "values" and identity on national and international stages' (2006, p 137). In this article I will explore the ways such events as these have provided an opportunity for the kind of dialogue I imagine Dodson might be referring to in his speech. I will also draw on my personal experiences and involvement in reconciliation as a member of the Rock Against Racism in the 1980s and my continuing engagement with issues of race and human rights over the last four decades to give a personal perspective of my involvement in the dialogue for Indigenous rights in contemporary Australia.

As a musician in Melbourne in 1979 I helped organise some gigs for two Aboriginal bands, No Fixed Address and Us Mob, who had come over to Melbourne from Adelaide. The resulting friendship with these bands gave greater clarity to my awareness of Indigenous Australian life and my involvement in the growing movement for Aboriginal land rights in Australia. In 1980, after moving from Melbourne to Sydney, I became involved with the Rock Against Racism movement. This was an inspirational time for me bringing my creativity and my ethical beliefs together in an exciting and empowering way. From 1980 to 1985 Rock Against Racism concerts flourished in Australia. Styled after the movement of the same name in Britain, large concerts were held in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, raising funds for particular causes as well as awareness of racism, and providing audiences for Aboriginal bands such as No Fixed Address, Us Mob, Black Lace and Coloured Stone. In order to bring these issues to an international arena we contacted musicians like The Clash, Stevie Wonder and UB40 when they toured Australia. These meetings occasioned some memorable moments when these bands used their popularity to show their support for Aboriginal Australia. When The Clash played at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney they draped Aboriginal flags over all the amplifiers. Activist Gary Foley addressed the audience in a rousing political rap while The Clash backed him up with a tough reggae beat, blending the Brixton elements of the British Rock Against Racism movement with specific Australian concerns.

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If we can survive, anyone can survive. And I think the way we carry through, particularly in this difficult social area, will determine the 'grown-up-ness' of Australians and the way Australians as a people are capable of meeting the future (Wilmot E. 1988, P 11).

In the quote above, Eric Wilmot refers to the potential for Australia's bicentenary year, to highlight a coming of age; of being mature enough to admit we have a black history. This maturity is in a continuing state of evolution where the waxing and waning of ethical positioning on Indigenous issues by contesting political parties has a long history that repeats itself in events that Casey describes as holding 'a powerful place in the social imaginary through the translation of events into the social memory as performative acts' (op. cit., 2006, p 137)

Nations are 'contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimise people's access to the resources of the nation state' (ibid, p 353). The lie of Terra Nullius enabled Captain Phillip and the officers of the First Fleet to go against their own sovereign laws to draw up treaties with the Indigenous peoples they encountered and to simply claim the lands they found for the British. The survival of Aboriginal Australians and the way they give voice to this survival is a constant reminder that this country was not a land without people in 1788 and is therefore to this day an occupied country. The declaration of Terra Nullius participates in this contested legitimisation of an imperial project that has been built on a denial of the existence of Indigenous peoples. In her examination of global colonial practices Annie McClintock writes:

Nations are not simply phantasmagoria of the mind but are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed. Nationalism becomes as a result, radically constitutive of people's identities through social contests that are frequently violent and always gendered (1995, p 352).

This tension between historical practice and social difference is very apparent when examining the historical reinventions of January 26, 1788, the day the First Fleet landed at Sydney Cove. While celebrated annually as the beginning of the nation we now call Australia, it also marks the first day of a progressive invasion of Aboriginal peoples. Firstly the Cadigal, Wallamatagul, Bidjigal and Camaraigal peoples of the immediate area of what we now call Sydney Cove, then spreading further north, west and south, overwhelming other Aboriginal nations everywhere they went. Over the following two centuries this strategy of invasion and settlement was repeated throughout Australia. For many, an awareness of this was anything but settling and in the build-up to the bicentennial year we struggled to find a way to express our discontent with the celebratory elements that this recognition of Australia as a nation entailed.

McClintock describes the way any celebration of nation is achieved through a 'capacity to organise a sense of popular collective unity through the management of mass national commodity spectacle' (ibid, p 374). The collective engagement expressed in the moment of belonging to a nation's beginnings is enabled through the denial and silencing of other narratives of nation that might contradict the sense of popular, collective unity that is the purpose of such celebration. Questions of whose nation and whose stories of nation become integral, as well as contradictory to, that sense of unity.

In 1888 the first centennial celebrations were held and a boycott of the celebrations by Indigenous peoples went almost unnoticed by mainstream Australia. By 1938 though, Aboriginal people were becoming more organised in their political activities and in their preparation for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of British arrival at Sydney Cove. The Aborigines Progress Association declared the 26<sup>th</sup> of January a day of Mourning and Protest and a

conference was organised in Sydney. Anita Heiss writes about the event being moved to the Australia Hall in Elizabeth Street after they had been refused use of the Sydney Town Hall:

The meeting was the first Aboriginal civil rights gathering and was a major step towards redressing the wrongs of history against Aboriginal people. It attracted some 1000 Aboriginal men and women and was the culmination of ten years of action by Aboriginal people against the policies of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (*Barani, History of Sydney City*, online).

The success of the Day of Mourning and Protest was offset by the awful contrast of the re-enactment. Unable to get any Aboriginal organisations in Sydney to participate, Aboriginal people had been brought in from outside of Sydney. The Aboriginal visitors were locked up in the Redfern police barracks and members of the Aboriginal community were not allowed to meet with them. After the official re-enactment the visiting group took part in a float parade along Macquarie Street.

In 1967 a referendum provided a further catalyst for contemporary debates about the rights of Aboriginal Australians by changing two clauses in the Australian constitution that improved the legal status of Aboriginal people. One removed the need to make special laws for Indigenous Australians enabling 'the Commonwealth Government to legislate in relation to Aboriginal people' (Casey M. 2006, p 146) and the other making them part of the census collection and thus counting them as citizens of Australia. This has become a turning point in the history of Indigenous human rights, one that is emblematic of the acceptance of Indigenous Australians as citizens in their own country. But the optimism attached to the change in the constitution was short lived as the government of the day did not enact any legislative change that made a difference to the living conditions of the majority of Indigenous Australians. Arguments continue to this day around the performative notion of goodwill as a 'salve to white conscience' (ibid, p 148) contrasted with the failure of successive Australian governments to enact legislation that has benefitted Indigenous Australians in any tangible way. The tensions that arise between an Indigenous need for social and political change and non-Indigenous Australian notions of reconciliation as an expression of goodwill have continued to be exacerbated over time. A well-meaning non-Indigenous performing of reconciliation where a show of goodwill is seen as a primary act of reconciliation stands in sharp contrast to the hopes of Indigenous communities living the harsh realities of what it means to be Aboriginal Australian and their need for more concrete 'social and political change brought about through legislative change' (Casey, M. 2006, p 146). This kind of paradox is epitomised by a common phrase I heard used by blackfellas in Rock Against Racism back in the 1980s. When describing those whose commitment they thought was only skin-deep they would call them the "I'm alright, I've got the T-shirt" brigade.

The bicentenary celebrations of 1988 were fraught with such paradoxical concerns. Even the bicentennial theme 'living together' with its gesture towards diversity and acknowledgement of difference begged the question of, 'How'. The build-up to 1988 was steeped in debate about whether or not to celebrate, but what became obvious was that a visible and dissenting presence was still needed to counteract a mindless and uneducated celebration of an innocent, white Australian history.

How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged (Read, P. 2000, p1)?

These words from Peter Read epitomise a central question that many non-Indigenous peoples were asking in the lead up to 1988. To celebrate or not was also the question they asked. The debate that ensued revolved around two equally defining rubrics for January 26: Invasion Day and Survival Day. The notion of invasion turned the erstwhile celebration on its head by speaking directly to white Australia and saying, this day you celebrate is contingent on the systematic invasion and genocide of Indigenous peoples, while the notion of survival enabled Indigenous Australia to celebrate their endurance in the wake of the same systematic invasion and genocide. In addition the grief entailed in both invasion and survival made the declaration of 1988 as a Year of Mourning an equally defining aspect of Indigenous expression.

As Graeme Turner suggests, a project that attempts to 'celebrate a nation which is united but diverse, on a day which is the moment of both settlement and invasion, through rhetoric which foregrounds difference and reconciliation over uniformity and assimilation' (1994, p 70) involves a complex exercise in public relations. In the lead-up to 1988 the Australian Bicentenary Authority's 'celebration of a nation' theme relied on a collective nationalist spectacle that would make the nation visible; the waving of flags, the singing of anthems, the overt display of uniforms, logos and the organisation of what McClintock terms 'fetish spectacle' (op.cit., p 374) alongside an array of other events that were designed to be representative of the layers of diverse culture brought about by progressive migrations to Australia over the last 200 years.

In a forum aired on the ABC in 1985 and chaired by Michael Mansell, the focus was on the question, 'is there anything to celebrate?' A number of noted speakers gave diverse answers. Pat Dodson and the late Neville Bonner talked about the way that prior to 1788 Indigenous people owned what we now call Australia and called for 1988 to be a time when unceded sovereignty of the country by Aboriginal people could be recognised. 'Aboriginal people have nothing to celebrate,' Gary Foley declared, going on to discuss the way that in the ten years prior to 1988, numerous Aboriginal groups had established contact with sympathetic groups overseas and started campaigning for international consciousness raising. As a member of Rock Against Racism he had experienced the powerful feeling that comes from an international movement for change. 'We are no longer the little isolated group we were in 1972,' he proclaimed, then went on to predict that in 1988 there was 'going to be numerous progressive supporters throughout the Western world' marching alongside the 'supporters of Aboriginal people, progressive people within the Australian community' (Foley in Kavanagh, 1985).

The organisation of Indigenous events for 1988 produced an enormous cross-fertilisation of cultures and peoples all concerned that Indigenous issues would be highlighted during 1988. The 'Long March for Freedom Justice and Hope' was to be an alternative celebration to mainstream bicentenary events. The build-up to the march was marked by a groundswell of support that grew exponentially as the dissemination of information about the importance of the event gathered momentum. Through the resources of a combined network of people, from a broad spectrum of cultures, many alternative events began to take shape. The resources needed were enormous, but there was tremendous impetus borne out of an optimism that was epitomised in the

possibilities promised in the three words, freedom, justice and hope. More than 20,000 Indigenous Australians, plus approximately 20,000 or more supporters from all over Australia and from overseas took part in the march. The empathy and support for Indigenous Australians was absolutely evident in the sight of so many Aboriginal participants gathering first in the Redfern Oval for ceremony, painting up and then marching to Belmore Park near Central Station where they were met by their supporters who marched with them to Hyde Park for an afternoon of speeches and entertainment. The sense of empowerment and the sheer joy of visibility were incredible to experience. The march could have been overwhelmed by the mainstream celebrations but the groundswell around the bicentennial protest ensured that a display of nationalist unity was well undermined. As Gary Foley writes 'the Aboriginal storm clouds that gathered' made it 'apparent that the major divisive issue ... was to be the contest of spirit with the large numbers of Kooris expected in Sydney from all over the country' (Foley G. 1997, *Kooriweb*, online).

On the morning of January 27, 1988, Gallarrwuy Yunupingu, at the end of an all night ceremony at Kurnell Point, stood, arms akimbo, on the shores of Botany Bay and yelled, 'What is happening is real,' over and over again to the crowd making their way home. As I reluctantly walked up the hill away from the events I had just been involved in, I translated his plea about the reality of what we had just experienced, as being a reminder that the ceremony was just as real as any whitefella ritual we may have put our faith in. In my novel *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* (2010) I have struggled to articulate this difference, this space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous realities, from my own point of view as a non-Indigenous person who has had the privilege of close contact with Aboriginal Australians and my novel includes my experiences of that night, which, however difficult to express, were nonetheless real to me.

Over the years following 1988 the alternative celebrations to Australia Day have grown in strength. In January 1992 the first Survival Day concert featuring Aboriginal bands and other supportive musicians was held at La Perouse. The concerts became so popular that they had to be moved to Waverley Oval, Bondi. Then the 1997 release of the "Bringing Them Home: the 'Stolen Children' Report" from the national inquiry into the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents, brought growing pressure on the Howard government to say sorry to the stolen generation and to all those who had been affected by these policies. But, to no avail. Things began to backslide once again.

In 2000 the optimism generated by the new millennium brought more than a quarter of a million people to a march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support and recognition of Indigenous Australia and reconciliation. The walk, led by Aboriginal elders was a celebration of the national foundation for reconciliation and many other parallel marches were held in different regions around the country. The Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation's organisation of the numerous Sea of Hands events that took place around the country also drew a lot of support. More than two-hundred-and-fifty thousand people signed their names on the back of plastic hands as a sign of support for both native title and reconciliation.

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The recent Howard Government's take over of NT Indigenous communities demonstrates the fundamental importance of a formal process that enshrines Indigenous people and their ancient cultures into Australian nation building, especially in the constitution (Dodson P. 2007, p 21).

In February 2007, I was invited to the Thai/Burma border to work with Burmese women refugees to run writing workshops that would help them to tell their stories. These were collected and published in the anthology, *Burma Women's Voices for Hope* (2007). Women from a broad range of Burmese ethnic groups attended the workshops. They wanted to write about what had happened to them under the jurisdiction of the Burmese Junta, who have waged a long war on their own people. It was my brief to help them. Together we moved from difficult telling, to a type of writing that enabled the women to describe the visceral details of their stories. Many had risked their lives going over the border to collect statistics on human rights abuses, now they were describing the details in a more in-depth way. The stories they wrote about rape and violence and abuse by the state are hard to comprehend for those of us not in the grip of a military regime.

One affect of my involvement in their stories was to make me eternally grateful for my home in Australia, so grateful, that in June 2007 when the military intervention into the lives of the Northern Territory remote Aboriginal communities was announced by John Howard and his minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, I separated the two concepts, military intervention and Aboriginal communities, into two different stories, thinking that there had been an intervention in some other country and there were some separate problems within remote communities. Internal politics of the likes of Burma did not happen in Australia. But in the workshops I had also told the Burmese women about what had happened to Indigenous people in Australia and watched their eyes widen in surprise and horror and then their mouths tighten in defensive anger? When the two concepts came together and I realised that military intervention was happening in Australia to Aboriginal people, anger and disbelief shot through me like a volcano. But it was also a wake-up call, I had lost my sense of vigilance around these issues, like my Indigenous friends had so often pointed out, I had walked away from them because I could. But I was angry in that moment and frustrated that it had finally come to something like this, but as Marcia Langton and many others have said about the intervention, it has been obvious for decades that something needed to be done. But something like this? As Patrick Dodson writes:

The tragedy of the Howard Government's eleven-year hold on power is that Indigenous policy has focused on destroying the potential for this nation to respect and nurture the cultural renaissance of traditional Indigenous society. ... The Howard Government's intervention in the Northern Territory highlights the perennial crises that engulf this nation over its relationship with Indigenous people (Dodson P. 2007, pp 22 & 27).

With a world focus on war, terrorism and global economic policies plus the rise of a new global conservatism, indigenous issues the world over have lost visibility once more. Lorraine Johnson Riordan asks of the decolonising race struggles that address new forces of Empire and globalisation:

Can postcolonial movements seeking to hold onto the unique position of difference of First Nation Peoples effectively negotiate with the state in the face of this latest imperial push to assimilation? Does a raceless 'rainbow coalition' characterize (post) Empire or cover over an assertion of white hegemony – indeed, white terror in new guises' (2005, p 13)?

Since the advent of September Eleven, the whole language of military intervention has contributed to a breaking down of the boundaries between civilian and military sectors of society adopting a crisis management rhetoric that too easily overrides notions of civil liberties. To enact military intervention requires a need to declare a national emergency. John Sanderson in discussing the failure of neo-liberal globalisation sees 'reconciliation as the foundation of all successful strategies' and, '[E]nforcement as not' (2007, P 35). He points out that any attempt at involving the military in assisting Indigenous people has to be in the spirit of reconciliation. And I agree. What is wrong with the intervention is not that something is finally being done about the appalling living conditions for Indigenous people in the NT, but what sort of action is being taken and the way it is being carried out.

In an act of ultimate irony the Federal government finally passed the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill to supposedly do something about what they saw had become a state of emergency. The declaration of a state of emergency allowed for extraordinary measures to be taken. A team of doctors was sent in to do health checks on Aboriginal communities. As Professor Larissa Behrendt writes, it was a 'text book example of why government policies continue to fail Aboriginal people'. She describes the 'spurious links to improving school attendance' (2009, online) by quarantining welfare payments. This measure has done little to improve living standards for Aboriginal people. As many Indigenous Australians attest to, a plastic card that will not work until its activated or where people have to travel two hundred kilometres to find a store that will take them, is not protecting anyone let alone the sacredness of children. While acknowledging that abuse and alcohol related violence is going on in Aboriginal communities it is important to go back to the second volume of Australian history that Patrick Dodson would have us write and acknowledge that more than two hundred years history of white on black violence has generated a particular set of experiences that are part of generational historical circumstances for all Indigenous Australians. It is also important to understand that even in contemporary times sexual abuse of Indigenous women and children is often perpetrated by people outside of Aboriginal communities. Anyone who has watched Warwick Thornton's award-winning movie *Samson and Delilah* (2009) will have an idea of what I am talking about.

In December 2007 when Kevin Rudd was sworn in as Prime Minister, hope for true dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia returned. The flames of this hope were fanned in November 2009 when he took the step that Howard could not and said sorry to the stolen generations. But the rhetoric of supposedly benign military intervention continues against a background of heartbreaking statistics on Aboriginal people's health, incarceration and general living conditions, while the rhetoric around the intervention policies seem to do little but further demonise Indigenous Australians.

On February 13, 2010, a march was organised to mark the second anniversary of the apology where Kevin Rudd committed the government to 'a future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again' (cited



in *Stop the Intervention*, online, 2010). The march from La Perouse to Redfern was organised by the Stop the Intervention Collective of Sydney and also served as a 'walk against racism'. A statement from the group reads:

Racism is not a special measure. The demonisation of Aboriginal people at the core of Intervention is leading to increased racism across Australia. Indigenous incarceration rates have risen 10% in the past year. Juvenile detention now stands at 30 times the national average. Aboriginal organisations everywhere face aggressive mainstreaming.

Turning around the unacceptable disadvantage facing Aboriginal people requires massive increases in resourcing of community controlled organisations – not mere racist laws.

No more broken promises; it's time to break the intervention (ibid).

If we are to enact Patrick Dodson's notion of a national framework that involves a just relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians then we need a dialogue that involves listening to Indigenous people. Like that night at Kurnell Point when the tables were turned and Aboriginal people performed rituals to vanquish the spirits trapped by the violence of Australia's past, we need to understand the past inequities of white Australia's black history and incorporate Indigenous knowledges, spirituality and ceremonial practice into our national infrastructure as well as acknowledging the influence of their cultural practices on the Australian psyche.

As a writer and long-time human rights activist I hope my own work will continue to play a role in an Australian literature that Alexis Wright describes as one that explains 'what is happening in the home of humanity, by speaking honestly to a world where those who represent us politically do not' (2008, p 169). I imagine opening the next volume of Patrick Dodson's trilogy and reading this tale where Australia takes up the challenge of a global economy and environmental sustainability while at the same time involving itself in regional reconstruction where standards of health and education are equal for all. And I want it to feel real, not a metaphoric or idealist fiction; I want it to feel real, right down to the bottom of my soul.

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