

## Racism...the bone deep poison.

Jeff McMullen

Racism is the jarring dissonance that negates human respect and mutual understanding. Racism therefore holds us back from pressing on towards genuine human equality. From my experience after sixty years of world wandering, racism like violence, is a contagion. It spreads organically, surfaces, subsides and re-surfaces whenever certain volatile conditions are present. We may believe that we are living in a scientifically minded era but in fact many people cling to the old notion of race as a means of ascribing inferiority or superiority to one group of human beings. While there are small DNA variations among humans, the emphasis on skin deep differences tends to obscure the truth that we are all connected as members of the human species, a very young species, that from this point on I will refer to as the human family. Racism, on the other hand, arises when some people seek to assert superiority over others. As the writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, puts it, too many people believe in race as “a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then to humiliate, reduce, and destroy them –inevitably follows from this inalterable condition.”<sup>1</sup>

I have witnessed some terrifying culminations of racism on several continents. In Guatemala in 1982, a Christian zealot President Rios Mont headed an army of soldiers who wore crucifixes around their necks as they slaughtered at least 250,000 of the Maya Quiche people. Girls were raped in front of their grandmothers, baby's heads were crushed on rocks and bodies sometimes were impaled on wooden stakes. In Guatemala, the Spanish speaking oligarchs had reduced the dominant population of First People into a sub-human species, using words like diablo or 'devil' to describe them. I had witnessed the same genocidal pattern in the Amazon in the early 1970s when Brazilian commandoes slaughtered Amazonian Indigenous people, seeing them as savages and a barrier to human development. Keep in mind that this pattern reduced the First Peoples of Brazil from some 5 million when the Portuguese first arrived to just 200,000 today.

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<sup>1</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi, “*Between the World and Me.*” Spiegel and Grau. New York. 2015 p. 7.”

Undoubtedly, racism underlies some of the most terrible genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century including the Holocaust with the loss of over 6 million Jewish people, millions more killed in Cambodia's *Killing Fields* and then of course the terror in Rwanda. I reported on over thirty conflicts around the world but nothing prepared me for the extremes of violence I saw on two journeys to Rwanda. I camped in the grounds of a convent where nuns had joined in the butchery, the walls were splattered with blood and I heard the dogs crunching on human skulls in the bushes. The roadsides were littered with many corpses. People were cut down with machetes after being rounded up in churches. I saw the corpses of women holding their babies with a wooden stake driven through both bodies. It made the cameraman and I wretch. What was most frightening was that the political group in power who were Hutus had used radio just like the Nazis did in Germany to brainwash virtually the entire population. Through relentless propaganda they convinced the Hutus that the people they had lived alongside for over a thousand years, the Tutsis, were bent on their destruction and therefore had to be slaughtered *en masse*. What was instructive to me was that the outside world saw this as merely 'black savagery', that Heart of Darkness stereotyping that suggested all African people were violent and therefore intrinsically inferior to white, ascendant civilization. Up close to the Rwandan horror, I saw that racism is in fact a *manufactured* distinction. The intense competition for scarce resources in that tiny Rwandan nation allowed the Hutu kitchen cabinet to manipulate people into believing that their own survival depended on slaughtering the Tutsis. It was the swiftest genocide in history with somewhere between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsi killed in just thirty days.

From experience, I came to see that racism arises because all human beings exist within a distinctive cultural matrix. You might instantly think of the virtual world in Steven Spielberg's new film, *Ready Player One* or the *Matrix* in the Keanu Reeve's film by that name. Certainly, digital media and in particular social media are part of our matrix. But there is much more to it. The matrix we all occupy is our perception of the world, a so-called 'reality' that is largely built on our self-interest. Let me be very specific. Here in Australia we live in a matrix of self-interest that maintains control of Aboriginal people. Our self-interest is shaped by the degree of our family wealth and comfort, cultural upbringing, education and, to a considerable degree, by our fear of difference. This fear is partly an evolutionary trait. As biologist Edward O. Wilson points out, we have a natural suspicion that anyone different is a threat to our concerns.<sup>2</sup> Our fear in Australia also arises from guilt and unease over the shaky legal foundations of a nation founded on invasion, Frontier War and no treaty of settlement. Since English sails entered the

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Edward O. *The Future of Life*, Abacus. 2003.

waters of the Great South Land it has usually been a case of 'us' and 'them' as racism creates a permanent negative discourse on most Aboriginal issues.

What the rest of us do know about the First Peoples is shaped by information we receive in the matrix and a good deal of this has racialized undercurrents. This includes mass media, popular culture, government information, product advertising, special interest group messaging and the growing influence of social media. The challenge is to establish what is authentic information about Aboriginal people and what amounts to a 'false reality'. When the American political strategist, Karl Rove, spoke of this manipulation of the messaging he bragged that the political spin doctors could create what he termed a new political reality even before the public had digested the previous reality. In other words, beware of three word slogans such as 'Closing the Gaps' in Indigenous disadvantage when in fact most of the gaps are static. Beware of government renaming the oppressive and unlawful Northern Territory Intervention as a decade of controlling and discriminatory legislation branded as 'Stronger Futures'. In effect the matrix is conditioning us for the relentless process of assimilation of Indigenous people on the basis that they are inferior unless they somehow become like the rest of us. Why would Aboriginal people ever really want to be part of such an oppressive, racist society?

To shatter the matrix and arrive at the truth without racism, I believe that journalism offers useful standards as does history, anthropology and medicine. What we want to do is test the veracity of so called 'facts' about Aboriginal people. Consider a commonplace example. Are endlessly looped images of drunken Aboriginal people staggering through the streets of impoverished communities authentic or racist stereotypes? Well yes, sometimes this image might be justified, but too often in Australian media it's a racist stereotype, demonising all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when statistics confirm that many are less likely to drink alcohol than non-Indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> By resorting to the stereotype of the 'problem drinkers' some sections of the media create a near permanent reality linking Aboriginal men and women to in this case a drunken inferiority. Pretty ironic in a nation of almost mythological binge drinking.

The cartoonist, the late Bill Leak, stuck his pen bone deep into this sensitivity when he sketched an Aboriginal father so hopelessly drunk and dysfunctional that he couldn't remember his own son's name. This stereotyping has a very long history in Australia but it is constantly defended as an expression of the right to free speech. Bill Leak

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017.

explained that he was a satirist and was using these cartoons to offer challenging social commentary. To all of that I can only say, put yourself in the shoes of an Aboriginal father. Can any of us really imagine that such a cartoon does not cause deep hurt to Aboriginal people. In addition, it is a critical part of the deficit discourse that maintains the long-established fallacy that Aboriginal people themselves are “the problem”.

We heard an echo of the deficit discourse recently when one of the most listened to broadcasters in Australia, Alan Jones, took aim at the NSW Government’s adoption of a national strategy to improve Aboriginal access to health care in hospitals. Sarcastically, Jones introduced the NSW Health Minister, Brad Hazard, as the “Minister for Apartheid” and then asked whether the Government was going to insist on separate places for Aboriginal people in pubs, as well as in hospital waiting rooms. For goodness sake, Jones added, “***we are trying to integrate these people.***”. He said “***these people***” needed to toughen up, I quote, with a “***teaspoon of cement***”. The language is not accidental or casual, it is calculated derision, laced with verbal poison. As a consequence, there was a missed opportunity to inform Australians in a thoughtful way how the very serious problem of Aboriginal patients leaving the emergency department before treatment or discharging early against medical advice are intrinsically connected to the chronic illness plague that is cutting the heart out of another generation of Aboriginal people. Brad Hazard tried to tell Alan Jones that a trial of culturally supportive waiting rooms at some hospitals and better training of hospital staff had halved the number of Aboriginal patients leaving without treatment but the broadcaster insisted, “***If this isn’t apartheid, what is?***”

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care has urged all hospitals dealing with large numbers of Aboriginal patients to improve their staff response and create a more supportive environment, including a place where families can be informed of the medical issues facing their loved ones. The truth about what causes heavier burdens of chronic illness and disadvantage, as well as how to overcome these problems, is obscured by racialized stereotyping in cartoons and commentary.

In my view, many prominent media players collude, not for the common good, but for maximum attention and even applause. It is apparently good for their ratings or their advertising revenue. As a result of this negativity the public loses interest in policy solutions. The humanity of individuals and entire communities is diminished by a media gaze that pins them to a victimhood supposedly of Aboriginal making. Consider how the mass-media contributed enormously to the demonising of all Aboriginal men through the government Big Lie that preceded the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention alleging paedophile rings of Aboriginal men were abusing children. Although rejected by the

Australian Crimes Commission, these unfounded claims about paedophile rings were widely circulated as 'fact' in the mass media. The false reality created by such distortions makes it all the harder for Aboriginal health teams to gather the support they need to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. A confected outrage over the safety of little children has not led to any substantial improvement as reflected in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's latest "*Closing the Gaps*" report on Indigenous disadvantage. Significantly, too many Government approaches in many parts of this nation follow the deficit discourse, blaming the victims but rarely acknowledging that it is the policy approaches that are fatally flawed.

Aboriginal people have long complained that it is almost all 'bad news' for them inside the Australian matrix. Amy McQuire, the BuzzFeed reporter and former editor of *The Tracker* and *National Indigenous Times*, has argued persuasively that 'reality' television especially exploits Aboriginal poverty, trauma and even the vulnerability of children as a form of 'entertainment' based on conflict. Such media rarely challenges the frequent outbursts of blatant racism by some of the non-Indigenous 'celebrity' commentators that make these choreographed 'reality TV' programs popular.<sup>4</sup>

We could add as additional evidence of the damage caused by the deficit discourse, the poorly informed comments on the Sunrise Television program on the Seven Network about the Stolen Generations, adoption and fostering of Aboriginal children at risk. At least one of the Sunrise team appeared to be arguing that another Stolen Generation would be good for Aboriginal children. Others jumbled the facts about adoption and fostering. The Sunrise discussion was prompted by a Nationals politician, Dr David Gillespie, Assistant Minister for Children and Families in the Turnbull government, allegedly advocating in a News Limited report 'white adoption' of abused Indigenous children. Dr Gillespie disavowed this report, saying that he had not spoken of 'white adoption' but only his belief that it was important to provide more permanency for children removed from family after abuse. In the matrix, you see, basic facts are ignored or confused in the relentlessly negative assault on Aboriginal people. In practice, most children at risk are usually placed with kin and adoption only follows a period of fostering. In addition, while many foster families may have good and generous intentions these children at risk do often have vastly disproportionate levels of engagement with the criminal justice system. The cross generational trauma associated with the original Stolen Generations flows on to exacerbate the multipole stresses impacting a large number of children and families today. This fuels the dangerous surge in contemporary child removal and so the cycle churns on. Both Dr Gillespie and the

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<sup>4</sup> McQuire, Amy, "*First Contact: Poverty Porn and Trauma TV, With Bonus Celebrities.*" The New Matilda. 30 November 2016.

Sunrise Program should know that such a painful social issue requires a concerted response to prevent abuse and protect children by improving the settings into which they are born. Any time an individual Aboriginal child is alleged to have suffered abuse you can depend on some sections of the media to suggest that Aboriginal culture is the problem. We know the damage that kind of verbal abuse does to Aboriginal children, how it alienates and angers, leaving them isolated and confused about where they belong in their own land. This deficit discourse also dangerously distorts the realities that must be faced to improve the wellbeing of all of our children including overcrowded houses, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness and domestic violence.

In 2004 as a contribution to Reconciliation Australia's efforts I surveyed the media coverage and how it impacted the national discourse.<sup>5</sup> REDFERN RIOTS, PALM ISLAND BURNS, BLACKS DRAGGED ON LEASHES, PM'S BLACKS NOT THAT SORRY, SIT-DOWN CASH ENDS FOR BLACKS and WELFARE PLAN RACIST, the newspaper headlines screamed of conflict.<sup>6</sup> This is how Australia began the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

It is confronting to discover, however, after examining the longer timelines of this racist deficit discourse that while some things have changed such as the visibility of Aboriginal people in commercials, magazines and media generally, there is nonetheless a deeply troubling fatalism that has maintained the space between us for over two centuries. In the colonial period, newspapers reflected settler concerns with 'marauding blacks', brutal tales from the Frontier Wars and only occasional editorialising against inhumane treatment of Aboriginal people. After reading fifty such newspapers, Professor Henry Reynolds was "shocked" to see graphic accounts by journalists boasting of taking part in atrocities and editors calling for a 'war of extermination'.<sup>7</sup>

The racist construct of separate and inferior races, despite its scientific invalidity, is still frequently taken up by some in Australian media, some politicians and some academics. It's intrinsic to the ongoing assimilation project. Calls by Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party for all Australians to be 'treated the same', her insistence that she too is 'Indigenous' because she was born here, and her diatribes about this year's Commonwealth Games opening ceremony being an 'over the top' celebration of Aboriginal culture, clearly are amplified by mass media. What is hard to measure and deserves more research is how this relentless negativity feeds the outright racialized

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<sup>5</sup> McMullen, Jeff, "*Words, Mere Words.*" Reconciliation Australia Annual Review. 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, Henry, "*Why Weren't We Told*", Penguin 1999. p 11-120.

abuse, such as a young girl jeering at Sydney Swan's footballer, Adam Goodes, calling him an "ape" or Penrith Panther Rugby League fans abusing another champion, Greg Inglis.

To deal with persistent institutionalised racism in the matrix we need to examine how the best and brightest journalistic practice can give voice to the gravest Aboriginal concerns and help shape a more positive national dialogue. After the ABC's *Four Corners* investigated the death of an Aboriginal man in a West Australian prison transport van, a revealing inquiry followed. A *Four Corners* report on the Northern Territory's treatment of juveniles in Dondale Detention Centre led to a Royal Commission with relevance to over incarceration of young Indigenous men and women around the country. These outstanding media investigations create some positive change by bringing abuse into the open glare of public attention. Unfortunately, Aboriginal people are still let down by the reality that in the contemporary era no police or prison officer has been convicted for the deaths or abuse of Indigenous people in custody. Look at what happened on Palm Island. Despite the brutal death and two subsequent suicides following that tragedy the police culture, deeply infected with racism, did its best to cover up the grave injustice.

I believe that we need researched based evidence that explores the link between the negativity of media and politics and the pattern of police violence and over criminalisation of Aboriginal people. Several Media studies have establish an additional complexity in that from a public perspective even determined investigations of abuse and over-incarceration have contributed to the pervasive sense that Aboriginal people are addicted to criminal and anti-social behaviour.<sup>8</sup> This is explored in Ruth McCausland's extensive research on the impact of what the media reports and does not report.<sup>9</sup> Media surveys show that the more intractable an issue becomes, the fiercer the conflict in the discourse.<sup>10</sup> This pattern indicates that beyond self-regulation, oversight mechanisms have not modified the most damaging contributions by media to the negativity, misinformation and racism.

Indigenous media spends far more time on innovative solutions to all of the problems I have discussed and they try to show the rest of Australia how racism works. Indigenous films, television, dance, art and literature have conveyed the humanity and diversity of

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<sup>8</sup> McCausland, Ruth, "*Special Treatment – The representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in the Media.*" *Journal of Indigenous Policy* – Issue 4. 2004. pp 93-94

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* pp 84-98.

<sup>10</sup> McCallum, Kerry, Waller, Lisa and Meadows, Michael. "*Raising the Volume: Indigenous Voices in News Media and Policy*" *Media International Australia*. No 142. pp 101-111.

the First Peoples. This is a precondition before closing this space between us and defeating racism. Additional investment in all forms of Indigenous storytelling could help build a more positive discourse. When the media and policy-makers do make the effort to listen carefully we can have an extraordinarily positive influence and help bring about a just outcome.<sup>11</sup> As in the case of public servants and politicians, unless the media is suitably educated to understand the realities of Indigenous life we will fall short of the knowledge required to make sense of the issues. As a simple starting point, journalists could always seek a balanced Aboriginal response to contentious claims that are all too frequently white noise inside the matrix. Ultimately, it is the art of listening that will give voice to Aboriginal people who hold the key to a positive discourse. To make the change we need to listen and understand how racism is a bone deep hurt.

Jeff McMullen Address in Adelaide at a conference on racism sponsored by the University of Adelaide and Duke University North Carolina.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* pp 94-96