“Recognising Aboriginal Publics: European Australians Listening Instead of Talking”

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Introduction
This paper explores the, often, ignored understanding that Indigenous views should valued in their own right and as everyday opinions. It explores what it means for an Indigenous public to offer their understanding of European-Australian communities and institutions, but also what it means for European Australians to hear and listen to ideas about them as a specific cultural group. Both historically and in the present when Indigenous truth telling emerges it tends to be in moments of crisis and the European-Australian public gaze is most frequently brought to bear on their sufferings. Alternatively Indigenous truth telling takes place around issues that have been set out by the state or Euro-Australians. So though many times Australians hear from, and about, Indigenous people when they succeed or are happily discussing literature or sports, it is also the case that more often Indigenous people become objects or subjects of discussion when things are going badly. As sociologists we can often focus on Indigenous people as a source of crisis data So for example, Indigenous peoples perspectives are sought principally ‘as targets for social services’ (Environics Institute n.d.: 7; Maddison 2012) in areas such as health or for specific interventions. Such moments are important and are often used to leverage economic resources for these communities, but they tend to reinforce the idea of a problematic community. Both these circumstances can leave untouched or unchallenged the dominant representations of Indigenous subjects as dystopian or romanticised objects of mainstream stereotypes.

In this paper I reflect on some key historical moments when Indigenous people spoke up to Euro-Australians as activists and citizens., which tended to be in crisis moments. I also provide some examples on the different spaces where the crisis representations can appear. The paper also explores the types of conversations that are emerging in Australia after the 1990s decade of reconciliation. I conclude by reflecting on some of my own work with Indigenous researchers and communities, with some ideas about the methodologies that need to underpin research with and about Indigenous peoples.

The uneveness of race relations since British colonization has meant that Indigenous perspectives on race relations are not well known (Mellor 2003; Dunn et al 2010). Or perhaps more accurately Indigenous perspectives on race relations tend to be continually forgotten and so need to be continually re-presented in order to re-inform an ignorant white public about the past. This is the phenomenon of the repeated questions ‘why weren’t we told?’ in circumstances...
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where we were told. Further as colonized subjects Indigenous people have a long history of being silenced by mainstream institutions and are provided with few opportunities to tell their own truths.

One key issue that underpins this issue is demographic and social. The 2006 census showed that most non-Indigenous Australians live their lives in an Indigenous-free zone (Walter 2008). Across most Australian cities and towns there is little overlap between the places where non-Indigenous and most Indigenous people live (Atkinson, Taylor and Walter 2010). Even when Indigenous people live in the same places as non-Indigenous people, they are socially, culturally, economically and spatially segregated. Fewer than 10 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians mix regularly with Indigenous people. For most Australians, Indigenous people are not their neighbours, their workmates, their service providers, or their friends (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2011). Further, for many decades Indigenous people were absent from the education system, the bureaucracy, politics and even community groups. Again, this meant there was no formal work or political interaction as well as the geographic social gap. As a result Indigenous ideas, attitudes and opinions were not heard in the sites of power as well as in everyday spaces. If information on the lives of Indigenous people was needed it was most often provided by European-Australians.

From the late nineteenth through to the early twentieth century Indigenous people began to figure in the consciousness of Euro-Australians as a public, in the sense of these communities being perceived as a group that is informed by, and responds to, the values, interests, ideas, and judgments, shared by its members. An early example of this is the circulation of petitions by Indigenous peoples as a means of making their grievances known to Australian or British authorities. Many petitions, signed by an Indigenous community, originated in Aboriginal Reserves where the residents protested their maltreatment. The audience for the petition varied, depending on who the petitioners saw as the most useful government to approach – the local Australian ones or the British Crown.

A little later the use of strike action as a means of making claims for equal wages and fair treatment was taken up by some communities. The 1946 strike in the Pilbara is a good example, It was a long fought labour rights battle. The strike was led and organized by three Aboriginal men Clancy McKenna, Nyangumarta man Dooley Bin Bin, Nyamal man Peter Kangkushot Coppin and one Euro-Australian Don McLeod, and involved around 700-800 stock workers. As isolated workers this strike was not uppermost in the daily lives of city dwelling Euro-Australians, but news of it circulated through the trade union networks. It reemerged in the national consciousness in 2006 when the Museum of Australian Democracy in Canberra working with a number of Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara designed a photographic travelling exhibition to re-kindle and share the memories of this significant action. Local community members who had been in the strike or remembered it or who had been told about it were photographed and asked to
write a short reflection on the action. So in his memory of the strike Teddy Allen notes

"Living condition was no good, we camp in the river bed, no house. That's why we went on strike, not enough money, we working hard, hard life"(1)

A much younger child – Dylan Corbett – responds to what he has learned about the strike by saying “the strike made me proud.” The long strike was eventually successful and its revitalization through this community exhibition enables the voices of the past to be heard alongside those of the contemporary community. Other classic moments of Indigenous voices being heard and in time recognized are the 1938 Day of Mourning (which eventually turned into NAIDOC Week) and the 1967 referendum which is now commemorated in Reconciliation Week.

Since the late 1960s, and then more insistently since the 1990s Indigenous peoples have made their way into all aspects of Australian life and their knowledge and ideas are more widely available. In the early 1990s the Australian government began a process of national reconciliation. This formally mandated ten year period of reflection and community building was organized around the binary logic of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the nation being at odds and needing to repair or improve their relationship. In many ways this decade was the beginning of a long revelation to non-Indigenous people of Indigenous peoples as a Public, in the sense of a being a group that is informed by, and responds to, the values, interests, ideas, and judgments, shared by its members, instead of a being a subset of the normative white or Australian public. This decade in some ways brought together all the small public victories and losses of Indigenous people and under the auspices of a Parliamentary Act provided a formal and broad space and significant amount of time for non-Indigenous peoples to get to grips with the past.

Across this decade a series of profoundly important social and legal decisions were made within national institutions. For example, the Mabo decision in 1992 which recognised the existence of Native title set off a new broader discussion about land and ownership in Australia, the Wik decision in 1996 extended this discussion to include ideas about co-existence. The HREOC Bringing them Home report in 1997 worked through the logic and implications of the state policy of Indigenous child removal. And the decade was organized to end with the recognition/celebration of the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Australian state in 2001.

Reconciliation, by definition, must be a reciprocal process (Gunstone 2007). Yet as has been pointed out by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars the imperative for mutual understanding belies the fact that most Aboriginal peoples have a good understanding of Euro-Australians, having had to work within this dominant legal, political and social system. Further, it also emphasised a notion of togetherness. As the relentless images of a dark and light set of hands shaking made clear this was a process of mutual interaction. As the events such as
the *Bringing Them Home* demonstrated this process was mostly one where non-Indigenous people learned about Indigenous peoples. As noted earlier it was often the trauma and violence that captured the imagination and hearts of the listening Euro-Australians. So the stories of sexual and physical abuse meted out to Indigenous children, made available through their HREOC testimonies were continually reproduced. Popular representations of the policy in films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* enabled non-Indigenous peoples to express their emotions about this part of colonial life.

Yet, so much of this work was done by Indigenous peoples. Of course many were eager or at least willing to take part in this national education process, but it was still hard work. And for many the cost is too great. In a “Comment is Free” article in the Guardian this July Nakkiah Liu explained why she would not be participating in NAIDOC. First Liu notes the shift of NAIDOC from its origins on January 26 to the more neutral time of July. She also notes the increasing emphasis of the Week to include non-Indigenous peoples:

NAIDOC is still not recognized as a public-holiday and as a result participation is mostly voluntary. It is no longer about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in this country. When you look at the funding guidelines for NAIDOC, there is now a selection criteria that relies on the extent to which non-Indigenous people are engaged\(^2\).

Liu’s point is that the political impetus of NAIDOC has been brought round to the ‘reconciliatory logic that permeates the normative state views of co-existence. Here the issue is that that story that Indigenous people share is one that is generated by white people. So listening is not sufficient. There must be mechanisms where Indigenous peoples have the capacity to shape and direct if not set the parameters and topic of the conversation.

I will now just briefly describe this process in a research project in which I am involved. It is a good example of how central non-Indigenous people are (or can make themselves) even in times where their intention is the opposite. So in the project I am undertaking in Darwin our mixed research team grapples with similar problems to those articulated by Liu but at the micro scale. In this ARC Linkage project with Larrakia Nation in Darwin our aim is to design a project with local Darwin Aboriginal peoples, the Larrakia, in order to listen to and learn about their everyday lives. So it seeks to move from research that (necessarily) focuses on how non-Indigenous people do racism. It also seeks to shift from a focus on crisis to a focus one of the everyday. Though as a team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers and participants we have a mutually agreed outcome, the different ideas we have about approaching the issue of listening to Aboriginal voices are significant. So it is important to let Aboriginal people frame the discussion and set the questions and provide the answers. These issues may or may not be what non-Aboriginal people think are the important ones. However, if Aboriginal people talk then
European-Australian people need to listen. Do Euro-Australians have an interest in topics not set by them. How do we manage hearing negative reflections on ourselves?

I conclude this paper by noting an ongoing national discussion that brings to the fore these issues. In recent years a campaign has emerged to Recognise Indigenous peoples. Initiated by the federal government an Expert Panel - which included Indigenous and community leaders, constitutional experts and parliamentarians - consulted extensively across the nation and reported to the Prime Minister in January 2012 about how to include Indigenous people more comprehensively in the nation state. It recommended that Australians should vote in a referendum to:

- Remove Section 25 – which says the States can ban people from voting based on their race;
- Remove section 51(xxvi) – which can be used to pass laws that discriminate against people based on their race;
- Insert a new section 51A - to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to preserve the Australian Government’s ability to pass laws for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- Insert a new section 116A, banning racial discrimination by government; and
- Insert a new section 127A, recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were this country’s first tongues, while confirming that English is Australia’s national language.

The Parliament set up a Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in November 2012. And is now in a further state of consultation on the model, and to help to ensure secure and strong cross-party support so that a proposal can be put to the Australian people at a referendum.

Celeste Liddle has noted that the Expert Panel: “reported that the Australian public would vote against any proposal using the words "sovereignty" or "treaty"”.(3) She goes on to ask: "Does that negate our ability to go and negotiate a treaty and be recognised as sovereign peoples of the country?" Liddle is asking the question about how to manage a situation where again white people set the agenda, we get the answer to the question we chose.

Notes:
(2) Nakkiah Liu Why This Year’s Naidoc Week will be my Last. The Guardian online, 15 July 2014.