

Re-historicising 'Racism': Language, History and Healing in Wayne King's 'Black Hours'

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During times of political crisis, certain verbal signs become a focus of intense social struggle. Rival groups try to capture each other's biggest word-guns and turn them against their former owners. Debates erupt over what these powerful words 'really' mean, how they might legitimately be used, by whom, and for what purposes. As different groups fight for control of these strategically crucial signs, the latter become manifestly multivoiced and semantically volatile.[1]

Recently in Australia, the words 'racist' and 'racism' have become a subject of contention. These terms were once monopolised by supporters of Aboriginal and migrants' rights, who used them – sometimes glibly in a shorthand manner that emptied the words of their meaning – to castigate those who practised discrimination, prejudice, or intolerance towards non-Anglo-Celtic peoples. Today, in the late 1990s, this monopoly has come to an end. A new, right-wing, nationalist rhetoric has emerged which identifies the 'real racists' as those who want special rights and benefits for Aboriginal people. In her 1996 election statement, Pauline Hanson claimed that the Government was 'looking after the Aborigines too much... I simply think everyone should be treated equally. If Aborigines get paid to send their kids to school or get this or that benefit, I should be able to get the same' (qtd in Kingston 29). John Howard has implicitly endorsed Hanson's re-definition of 'racism' by stating that the Liberal Party has 'clung tenaciously to the principle that no one group in the Australian community should have rights that are not enjoyed by another group' (29). Similarly, the anti-Native Title lobby (in a semantic switch that denies a two-hundred-year history of racial oppression) vilifies its opponents as 'racists' in an effort to win the high moral ground and hence the land itself. In each case, Aborigines and 'ordinary Australians' are envisaged as two mutually exclusive groups, yet the charge of being racist is deflected by redefining 'racism' as discrimination against non-Aborigines. In 1990s Australia, racism thus disavows itself; it wears an egalitarian, anti-racist mask (Lattas).

In the context of this war over words, Wayne King's autobiography, *Black Hours*, works to reassert what 'racism' means to most Aboriginal people. King's narrative allows us to see that racism's current disavowals and disguises are nothing new, but are merely the most recent manifestations of a continuing practice of national denial. *Black Hours* counteracts both the semantic emptying of 'racism', and the current right-wing misappropriations of the word. King wrote his life story as part of his own healing process, and to help white Australia understand Aboriginal Australia's hidden history. 'White Australia needs Aborigines to teach them what constitutes racism', he argues, 'because we've suffered it. Racism crushes the soul'.[3] King's life-story unpacks the word 'racism' to disclose in concrete terms how and by whom it is perpetrated, and how deeply it damages people, even when, like King, they have been able to achieve relatively high levels of affluence and success in their careers.

Although Wayne King identifies as an Aboriginal human being first, and although his primary target is the racism that pervades Australian culture, his narrative dramatises very clearly the ways in which differences of gender, sexuality, class, place, and nationality can complicate the binary black/white politics of racial prejudice and discrimination. At high school in the early 1960s, for example, King had to choose one of three elective programs: ‘academic’ which centred on maths and science, ‘industrial’ (carpentry and technical drawing), or ‘commercial’ which involved shorthand, typing, and bookkeeping. He chose the commercial program, even though it ‘was considered to be a ‘girls’ course’ and the boys doing it (five including me) were considered to be sissies’ (42). Although education rarely fulfilled its promise to open doors for Aboriginal people, the ‘sissies’ course’ allowed King to earn good money, remain in steady employment, and avoid what he calls the ‘manual labour mentality that pervaded the Aboriginal community’ (44). His office skills also proved to be his ‘passport out of Ipswich’ (43).

King was born in Ipswich in 1948, and grew up in the suburb of Dinmore with his parents and thirteen brothers and sisters. His early years in the family home were unhappy and he yearned to leave as soon as he could. ‘I would stand on the back veranda of our home’, he reflects, ‘and watch the planes flying high overhead... I wanted to be on one of those planes. Never looking back. Never coming back’ (1, 3). He applied successfully for office jobs in Canberra and Sydney – where he came to understand he was gay – and in 1971, left Australia to take up a position in the United Nations’ New York headquarters. He loved living in New York because, for the first time, ‘the racism wasn’t directed against me. Being an Aborigine wasn’t an issue...’ (98). As a UN staff member, King worked in New York, Bangladesh, Bangkok, Cairo, and Damascus. He liked the adventure of living abroad, made some good friends along the way, and enjoyed success and fulfilment in his work. Without doubt, the ‘girls’ course’ took King along life-paths rarely travelled by Aboriginal men. Yet ironically, had he been a woman, some of these paths would have been off limits. Being a man, King could accept United Nations jobs in parts of the world which, as war zones, were closed to female staff: ‘If women weren’t allowed to go, it meant that I could’ (101).

King has found himself in a number of complicated political situations. As an Australian in the UN Headquarters in New York, he earned around half the pay of Irish and Scottish women doing the same job as him: ‘In Australia I had been discriminated against for being Aboriginal; now, thousands of miles away, I was being discriminated against for being Australian!’ (99). Yet as a staff member of a powerful Western institution like the UN, he was able to enjoy levels of wealth and privilege rarely attained by the local people on the non-Western countries in which he was stationed. In Bangladesh, he watched ‘as embassy staff – people who, in their own countries, had been nobodies – looked down their noses at the local people’ ♦ Whilst I felt for the Bengalis, I didn’t say anything. I would just do my job and hold my peace’ (110). Feeling somewhat junior and insecure about his own position in the professional hierarchy, King was reluctant to criticize his ‘superiors’. Furthermore, when confronted daily with the poverty-damaged faces and bodies of people in the streets, he experienced compassion-fatigue and realised ‘how easy it is to become hardened to the sufferings of one’s fellow man’ (105).

Expatriate professional communities are often insulated from the social tensions of both home and the country in which they are stationed. As a gay Aboriginal, however, in racist, homophobic Australia, King was doubly marginalised on the basis of both race and sexuality. He experienced racial prejudice from the gay community, and homophobia amongst sections of the Aboriginal community. He recalls being picked up by a gay man in a car, and thrown out again as soon as the man learned he was Aboriginal. Even more hurtful was his discovery of the depth of racial prejudice amongst his gay friends:

Rejected and spurned by society for being homosexual, they had spoken angrily of the discrimination they had to face. Yet they saw nothing wrong in their attitude towards me; saw nothing to condemn in themselves... Those white boys in that room thought that a racist was some yobbo in a blue Chesty Bond singlet, shorts and thongs with a beer can in one hand, the other scratching his balls. The subtlety of racism had escaped them. If you had an education, you couldn't be racist. Terry's racist comment [that the right place for Aborigines was in the bottom of an ash-tray] had tipped the scales for me. Gays may have been outsiders, but as a gay Aborigine, I might as well have been from Mars. (75)

King explores the workings of racism in contexts where social relations and identity politics are shifting and ambivalent. Yet one point remains clear: racism never lets up. The book's title, *Black Hours*, comes from a sonnet written in 1885 by English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. King uses part of the poem for his epigraph:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life.

Hopkins was wrestling with his Christian God; King, with racism and alcoholism. For people who have never been victims of racism, it is an issue that comes and goes. The media pick it up and drop it; between times, Anglo-Australians can forget it and get on with their lives. Yet King shows racism to be a practice that impinges daily on the lives of its victims. For them it is no passing issue, no night of torment that ends with morning light. Their struggle goes on for hours, years, for an entire life – and from one generation to the next.

No matter how much time and distance King put between himself and his past, he found that his sense of identity was tied inescapably to home and family history. Some years after leaving Australia, while working in Bangladesh, he suffered a brief episode of suicidal thoughts and horrifying nightmares, which descended on him for no apparent reason at an otherwise happy time. A few years later in New York a 'nameless discontent' descended on him (118-9). He tried returning to Australia but found the racism too oppressive, so he left again in 1976, vowing to wander like a gypsy for the rest of his life rather than return home. In Egypt, however, King's nightmares returned and

this time they stayed. He began drinking heavily. This was the first time he had ever been dependent on alcohol:

I didn't want to end up a drunk like Dad and the rest of them. I promised myself that I would never turn into a drunk. No white person was ever going to look at me with that sanctimonious, self-righteous sneer and say, 'typical'. (57)

But in Egypt he felt very alone and afraid; he drank to numb himself into sleep and to avoid coming to terms with the problem identified by both his closest friend and his psychiatrist – his lack of self-esteem.

Outwardly King had made a success of his life; inwardly he could not escape 'the psychological pain of rejection [of Aboriginal people] as individuals as human beings. A pain that crushed and impoverished the spirit' (58). Time and distance hadn't obliterated the past after all: 'I thought I had run far away from Dinmore, but it seemed I hadn't' (143). Realising that 'the fastest way forward is to go back' (166), King returned home to Australia in 1980. King's life story is structured as a circular journey away from and back to his home.³ In many settler society autobiographies (as well as in the popular imagination), the subject must travel to England or Europe – to the cultural and historical motherland – to complete their education and attain self-understanding and maturity. King turns this narrative tradition on its head in *Black Hours*: for him, international travel was a diversion, a way of postponing rather than accelerating self-understanding.

For King the key to self-understanding proved to be his family's history. Returning to Australia in 1980 he realised he knew virtually nothing of the past prior to the events he himself had experienced as a child:

There were no sepia-coloured photographs of the older members of my family in their youth. There were no stories of happy childhoods, stories that give a child a sense of who they are, where they've come from. Not from anybody. There had only been oblique references to childhood: ♦You kids don't know how well off you are♦. (224)

This truncation of history occurred because King's mother, Mary Dalton King, and her siblings (Wayne's Uncle Doug and Auntie Nell) were members of the Stolen Generations, and had been raised on Purga Mission near Ipswich. Like Daisy Corunna in Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), they had always kept silent about the past. Their own pain-induced silence, in effect, worked alongside white guilt and shame to keep the black side of Australian history in obscurity. As Wayne's mother, Mary, explains:

You know they say that children bounce back. It's not true. A little piece dies as you realise that you're all alone in an unsafe world. You carry a bruise, a dark stain on your heart. That's why God made dark and light, I think. You can hide things in the dark. To survive, you bury the hurt and pain in the deepest, darkest recesses of your heart. So deep that they won't come back again. So dark so that you will forget them. You have to, otherwise how do you get through? (193)

After some months of persuading, Mary finally agrees to tell her story to Wayne, with the help of her brother and sister, but ‘only because I was writing this book... and it was important for them [whitefullas] to know what had happened’ (167-8). Mary Dalton King’s story – an autobiography within an autobiography – is the longest chapter in the book. In its own right, it joins the growing body of stolen generations stories coming out into the public domain. For Wayne, Mary’s story provides a major clue to his own breakdown. ‘If I felt worthless’, he writes,

was it any wonder? Who had been there to teach me? My parents? They had taught us exactly what the Christian missionaries had taught them – that as an Aborigine you are worthless. To teach self-worth was beyond my parents. You can’t teach what you don’t know. (221)

Previously, whenever Wayne or his siblings had asked their mother about her early life, she had always deflected them with three standard anecdotes: ‘They were funny, and every time she told us we laughed and left it at that’ (167). King is sensitive to the many varieties and uses of humour. As well as diverting attention from issues that are too sensitive to speak of, humour can be used as a weapon, deliberately or inadvertently. Many Anglo-Australians pride themselves on their sense of humour, as though humour were a virtue in itself, irrespective of its effects. But King shows clearly how hurtful racist jokes can be, especially if they are used as a sly, cowardly way of giving insult, or if they are used by ‘friends’ who remain persistently oblivious to the wounds they inflict. One of King’s white friends tells him a racist joke and can’t understand why he is not amused: she says, ‘we had to be able to laugh at ourselves’ (159). Her universalising use of ‘we’ blurs over the crucial fact that the joke is about his people, not hers. To share the joke with her, King would have had to align himself with her and laugh derisively at Aboriginal people’s economic disadvantage.

This is not to say that King can’t laugh at himself or at members of his family; the effect of jokes depends on who is telling them and in what context. *Black Hours* is full of wit that is often verbal, and a gentle, self-deprecating irony that emerges as King re-reads his experiences with the wisdom of hindsight. Sometimes King laughs at his childish reasoning: for example, when his mother is winning a particularly violent fight with his father, he reflects, ‘She was so angry I was frightened. Maybe she would kill him and go to jail? Then we’d be left with only Dad to take care of us’ (12). As the story unfolds, the gap between the narrating consciousness and the self about whom he is writing steadily diminishes, and we can see King evolving into the person he now is.

As King’s self-understanding grows, so too does his understanding of others. During his childhood, Wayne felt rejected, fearful, and bitterly angry towards his father, and he resented his mother for failing to protect him from his father’s abuse. Not until he was a mature adult did he begin to understand his parents as human beings struggling to cope with problems that, as a child, he could not fully understand. Wayne’s father, Aubrey King, was violent, abusive, angry, and often drunk, and Wayne grew up feeling afraid of and unloved by his dad. Yet his account of his father’s life dismantles the racist

stereotype of the drunken Aborigine by explaining Aubrey's behaviour as an outcome of financial problems and gender anxieties rooted in his early life on the Purga Mission.

When Aubrey was a young boy, his mother had abandoned him and his siblings to marry a new man. The children ended up being sent to the mission. The only 'fathers' Aubrey would have known were those on the mission. Furthermore, Aubrey's masculinity took shape inside a life-long physical rivalry with his twin brother, Bill. Wayne remembers his father as 'a big man' (5), a sportsman who 'had played all those sports that men are supposed to play' (5). He was a man's man who had never forgiven his mother, and who nursed a grudge against women in general (204). Aubrey provided for his family by working with the Queensland Railways. His job involved checking the brake systems, a task which required him to climb underneath the trains. At the age of thirty-five, however, Aubrey's life changed dramatically when a train rolled over his left leg, severing it above the knee. After losing his leg, he was relegated to a clerical position. He began drinking heavily; money became scarce. As an adult struggling with alcohol himself, King comes to understand that his father's behaviour towards his family was an expression of 'his fury at the hand life had dealt him' (12).

In the process of recounting his own life story and that of his mother and father, King provides many brief but telling cross-references to incidents in twentieth century Australian history. He refers to stories told by old people about white men who buried Aboriginal babies in the sand, and then kicked off their heads for sport (83). He also alludes to stories told by his Uncle Jack (his grandmother's brother) and other men of his grandparents' generation who were removed as children to work as unpaid drovers (25-6). In addition, King writes of contemporary events that took place during his own lifetime – Charles Perkins' 1965 freedom rides through rural New South Wales; the Gurindji strike at Wave Hill station in 1966; the razing of the Wikmuken settlement of Mapoon to make way for the Comalco bauxite mine; the 1967 referendum; and the 1970 bicentennial celebrations of Cook's 'discovery' of Australia.

King's historical references reach right up into the present. He compares the shocked outcry over the jail beating of (white) Jamie Partlic with the public apathy and official inaction over the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. He compares the fulsome official apology and automatic monetary compensation for the non-fatal police shooting of (white) Darren Brennan, with the callous official response to the fatal police shooting of David Gundy. By retelling the history of the present, and emphasising its continuity with the past, King counters the common misapprehension that the bad old days of racism are now behind us.

King demonstrates clearly that racism in Australia is a more complex phenomenon than discrimination based on skin colour or cultural difference. He points out that during the Vietnam War when American soldiers came to Sydney on leave, black American servicemen could enter bars and nightclubs freely while Aboriginal men and women were physically stopped at the door. In the 1970s the Australian public embraced black American singer Marcia Hines, yet Aboriginal fans were refused entry to her concerts in certain towns in outback New South Wales (123). And while governments adopted

multicultural policies and passed anti-discrimination laws, Aboriginal people continued to feel the effects of racial hatred and institutionalised discrimination.

King suggests that the arrival in Australia of African-American servicemen and entertainers, and of migrants from non-Western cultures, did not result in a break-down of the Anglo majority's racist attitudes towards Aborigines. On the contrary, King argues, these accommodations of the foreign fuelled anti-Aboriginal sentiment while at the same time affording new opportunities for denying prejudice:

When I told the [ABC] reporter of the way racism locked Aborigines out, she was offended at the suggestion. She said that blacks could make it in Australia, I only had to look at Marcia Hines... Blacks were acceptable but Aborigines weren't. I told the reporter this. She then launched into a tirade about what Aborigines were – lazy, dirty, dishonest. I'd heard it all before. (123)

King's analysis suggests that racism in Australia is born out of history and guilt, that it is perhaps an expression of displaced anxiety experienced by members of the group which perpetrated and/or benefited by the wrongs committed against Aboriginal people since 1788. Blaming the victims, crushing them down, locking them away out of sight, pretending oppressive practices either don't exist or are justified, natural, and, inevitable – these are some of the ways racism works in Australia. Racism thus grows out of, and reproduces, both a series of shameful actions and a series of silences in the dominant historiography. 'History! Don't worry about history', King's mother exclaims: 'That's only whitefullas telling you their side of the story. Aborigines can tell you stories about the way they were treated that would make your hair curl' (216).

Speaking about the relation between history and identity, King dares to do something no other Aboriginal writer has done quite so explicitly before: he speaks of his own predicament as analogous to that of the Australian nation as a whole. In times gone by, writers personified the spirit of Australia in the figure of the bushman, the digger, the battler – white, male, and (sometimes neurotically) heterosexual. King personifies Australia in the figure of his former self: a gay Aboriginal alcoholic in a state of denial about his problems in the present, and a state of ignorance about the roots of those problems in the past:

Like an alcoholic in denial over his drinking, Anglo-Australia was in denial over its racism, and over what it had cost those Aborigines who had borne the brunt of that racism. There were rumblings in Australia about becoming a republic in an effort to establish its own identity. What was not acknowledged was that the past is part of that identity. Indeed, individually and collectively, we are only composites of our past. How would Australia ever mature without looking clearly and honestly at its treatment of Aborigines? Part of my own recovery from alcoholism had been to make amends to those I had hurt... (237)

Although King's plans to write his autobiography were born many years ago, he wrote *Black Hours* while participating in the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Initially, he had

been fearful of joining AA; it meant facing up to a lot of hard truths. Yet for both the individual and the nation, telling the truth is the first step towards recovering self-respect, because 'you can't treat a problem until you admit you have one' (229). *Black Hours* is about truth-telling, identity, and healing, among other things. Truth-telling is an essential first step in any healing and reconciliation process, both for the victims of racial oppression, and for those who, unwittingly or not, perpetrated and/or benefited from it. 'Racism' is a hard and ugly word to face up to because, as white Australians are now learning, it alludes to innumerable hard and ugly historical truths.

Words carry social memory down from one generation to another. They are one of the most important repositories of historical knowledge. It's well known that when a people lose their language, they lose access to vast portions of their past in the process. Similarly, when traditional meanings of individual words within a living language are superseded, aspects of the past are no longer easily accessible. Under such circumstances, the erosion of historical knowledge is insidious; the language resembles a moth-eaten cloth, cleverly patched so that its surface appears intact. When today's right-wing anti-Aboriginal polemicists use 'racism' to mean 'special benefits for Aboriginal people', they make a hole in the known, but patch it over so we don't see what is lost. They are using language in a manner that re-consigns Australia's black history to oblivion. King's counter-analysis of 'racism' exposes the oppression of Aboriginal people, and resists the suppression of Aboriginal historical knowledge. *Black Hours* fills the word 'racism' with the meanings it has accrued over time in the minds of those who have suffered its effects.

Works Cited

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Notes

1 For a theoretical elaboration of this phenomenon, see V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [1929], trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, New York: Seminar Press, 1973.

2 Author's interview with Wayne King, 16 June 1998.

3 King has recently decided to complete the circle, by moving from Sydney back to Queensland to be closer to his family. Author's personal communication with Wayne King, 5 August 1998.

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