

HEALING the WOUNDS of the PAST

An aboriginal woman leader spells out the conditions for genuine reconciliation in Australian society

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

It seems a “standard operational procedure” for anyone doing research on the aboriginal rights movement in Australia to meet with Jackie Huggins. Anyone who learned that I was doing a story on aboriginal women would ask, “Have you met with a woman named Jackie Huggins?” And they would start raving about her. I must admit that this made me both excited and nervous in meeting her. The nervousness or intimidation dissipated instantly when we were finally introduced to each other in a nondescript café in Brisbane.



Jackie with son John

courtesy of Angela Bailey/Aboriginal Studies Press

Jackie radiates warmth. She’s a person with whom you instantly feel comfortable. I think she lends true meaning to that near-liche of a phrase that is sister bonding.

Jackie is the current Deputy Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland. Prior to joining the university, she spent 12 years as a freelancing writer and historian. She has worked extensively on women’s issues as well as on arts and culture programs.

She was born in 1956 in North Queensland, in an area about 700 km from Brisbane. Her mother, Rita, is from the Bidjara tribe while Albert, her father, is from the Birra Gubba tribe. He died when Jackie was two. Singlehandedly, Rita raised her four daughters and a son. Jackie herself is a proud single parent to a fine young boy of 12 named John.

Jackie gained national prominence when she became a state representative to the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Regarded as one of the most outspoken members of this council, Jackie has held this position for the past three years. Following is an excerpt from the interview where Jackie shares her insights on the aboriginal women’s movement. She intimates some very disturbing realities in the movement particularly in relation to the overall Australian women’s movement.

Q: What is the Australian government's reconciliation program all about?

A: The true essence of reconciliation is more than making friends with nonindigenous people. Our motto is united Australia, one that respects the land and the heritage of its indigenous peoples and provides justice and equity for all. I think reconciliation is about changing the structures that govern us and trying to influence opinion leaders in whatever way we can.

It's also about getting our issues into media and acknowledging the presence of injustices which were borne out of the past injustices to our people. I think if we're going to tackle reconciliation we have to have a great understanding of the past and how it still affects us today.

So I guess part of my expectations of the government's reconciliation council was that I'm very keen to see history and culture incorporated in the school system—from pre-school to tertiary levels.

There's so much dissatisfaction with the council both from within and outside. I can really understand why some people feel that it's not getting anywhere. I think there are a lot of angry people. Maybe the future generation will be a lot more radical than we moderates who try to sit down and talk things through and unfortunately not much is accomplished with this way.

Q: You've mentioned that central to the reconciliation program is the rectification of injustices done to past generations. Can you explain further what these injustices are?

A: Our indigenous people in Australia are probably the most policed, the most legislated, the most inquired and researched people on the face of the earth.

When the [British] invasion took place, we were thought to be a land that was for the taking, that there were no people here. They declared Australia *terra nullus*, a land

uninhabited by people. The British government drove our people away from their traditional homes and lands and forced them onto aboriginal mission stations where they received rations and the Bible. A lot of our languages were wiped out during this time because our people were punished for speaking inside the mission stations. That's why we grew up with English being our first language which is such a pity. Our people were also given Anglo names and the traditional ones were taken from us. There were also marriage rules—on who you could marry and who you could not. There was also a permit system. You had to ask permission

to be able to leave and come back to the mission.

All these really set the scene for the dispossession of our people in terms of land rights. The psyche of racism that is so intense in this country at the moment is, I believe, rooted in the issue of land rights.

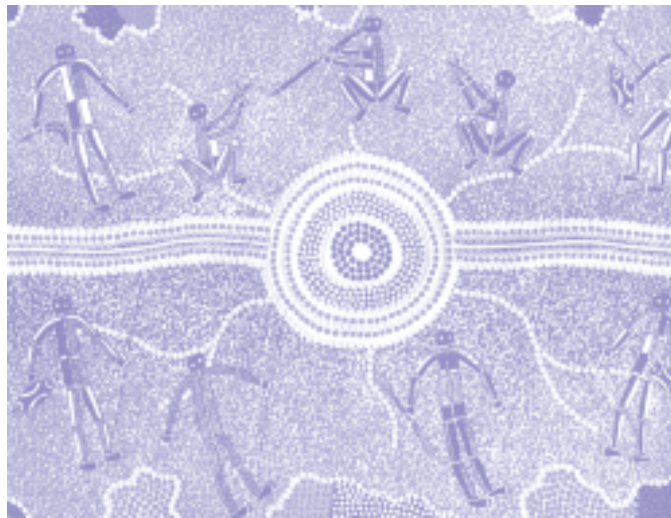
And of course we have here too the so-called stolen generation—children who

were taken from their families in the period of assimilation. I guess you could say it still exists, because people argue that under the Juvenile Justice Act, kids are still being taken away and put into institutions thousands of miles away from their families.

Q: What are the other issues confronting Australia's aboriginal people today?

A: We have massive social problems—we have the worst health conditions in the country. Infant mortality is still very high. A third of our people suffer from diabetes, respiratory problems, heart attacks. I've also learned that among the Torres Strait Islanders, our fellow indigenous peoples, women are dying much earlier than nonindigenous and nonaboriginal women.

A lot of our people are still very much living in Fourth World conditions. In remote areas there is still no access to water or to sewage. There's an enormous housing problem. We have the lowest number of people in education and



employment. We have the highest prison and incarceration rate. We make up 2 percent of the Australian population but we constitute more than 30 percent of the total prison population. More and more of our women are being jailed and more and more of our women are dying in there.

The other social problems are of racism and prejudice. There's been a lot more race bashing and people are discriminated against because they are aboriginal or look aboriginal. And as you know, cabs won't stop for you if you are black—you are the wrong color. *(This writer experienced for herself this kind of discrimination when she was in Brisbane, Australia in November 1997. She, along with three other people of color, were refused a ride by a cab driver because they were not whites.)* We're going back—I haven't seen that kind of mentality for a long time. I knew it was always there but there was a certain decency about the way in which people would respect one another and treat each other. Now it's quite open, blatant and very cruel. I think people have some sort of an open license not to be respectful to aborigines anymore.

Q: What do you think has brought about the open racism and prejudice?

A: We had to have a catalyst—and that catalyst came in the form of a member of parliament named Pauline Hanson [who came to the forefront of discrimination against aborigines and Asians]. We have a very different kind of racism in this state. It's very deep and it's always been fairly red-neck. The fact that Prime Minister John Howard didn't do anything when Pauline Hanson opened her mouth really made matters worse. He didn't sanction her nor did he say anything to counter the damage she created. He just seemed to be agreeing with her. The media too contributed in the damage. They just played her up like crazy because she was good copy, which only further encouraged her to go on and on and on because the spotlight was on her.

And with the economy and things getting really tough, politicians need scapegoats to kick

and who would they pick on except the most disempowered group in the Australian society, which is us.

Q: You've mentioned the general issues affecting aboriginal people, do you think there are distinct aboriginal women's issues as opposed to these general issues?

A: ...Our issues are very distinct and we need time and our own space to solve and talk about them a lot. [Some of the specific issues] for women are the way we care and look after our families, the way we raise our children, the way in which racism affects us aboriginal women.

I'm very proud to be an aboriginal woman who was born here, in one of the oldest cultures of the world. I think we should celebrate our womanhood and being together. I wish all women of the world, particularly those of us of colour, love and peace and happiness. I know that someday we will find true freedom and justice.

Q: In most indigenous societies, domestic and other forms of violence are almost non-existent. What brought it about in the aboriginal Australian society?

A: I think it's been the disempowerment of aboriginal men—their status taken away from them by the patriarchal powers of white supremacy and white women. White women have taken away aboriginal men's position and power as well and they marry them sometimes [laughs] to get it back. There is a very high percentage of mixed marriages in our communities. In fact, there's none of us who don't have white relations. Sometimes I worry about us getting whiter everyday. And that is a fear for me—when do you have to stop?

Going back to the root causes of domestic violence, when you're disempowered, you find another victim...what do you do? you beat up your wife and your kids. And then of course that's coupled with the substance abuse problem that we have in our communities. It's very much about men having power over women and children.

Q: Given these realities and these problems, what do you think are the most significant strategies women's groups can take to address them?

A: Women's groups and antiviolence groups have already been set up to counteract the

problem but it takes a long time I guess. The other thing that we can probably do is to conduct assertiveness training, telling women it's okay for you to report this. It's the proper thing to do. It's also important to provide safe houses and of course the whole education component. However, as an aboriginal woman, I think you have to be very very careful with what you say about domestic violence in public because what happens is it is inevitably turned around and used against you. At the moment there's not too many indigenous women working on the issue.

Q: Correct me if I'm wrong, Jackie... I have the impression that aboriginal women including their issues, are not that visible in the mainstream Australian women's movement. Do you agree?

A: Absolutely and for a number of reasons. Aboriginal women want to keep to themselves in terms of our own business. There are some issues where we can form alliances with nonindigenous women but the form of feminism that's available to us is not the model we prefer. We have of course our own brand of feminism that's all-encompassing.

We're very much pretty suspicious of and divided with white women. The reason why we don't join their movement is that they don't have any concept or understanding of our roles within our own society. How we're the nurturers and the caregivers, and the mothers of aboriginal men. We first have to struggle against racism and colonial mentality rather than sexism. There is a certain kind of working together among aboriginal women and aboriginal men to stick up and stave off the invaders still.

White women are seen very much to be those who take away our children. They occupied positions in the Welfare Department that made it easy for them to rip our babies from our arms. In many respects there were a

few who were worse than white men because of their treatment of indigenous women.

I don't know whether we will be able to get over the historical legacy that white women and black women have had in this country. There's a whole legacy of mistrust and innuendo and not being able to come together.

There's also misappropriation of our culture. They are using our stories without giving back anything. They earn their PhDs and master's degrees out of our women. Some of them are sitting in New York now and our women are still in the desert dying at a much

earlier rate than non-aboriginal women do.

I believe in feminism, I embrace its terms. I was in conversation with bell hooks [an African-American feminist writer] about this and I said maybe we should change the word feminism. [But] she was very adamant that we keep it....

Q: I understand that a number of aboriginal women activists are now looking at regional and international networking as an effective means of

ventilating your issues. What can you say about this?

A: A lot of our issues as indigenous women are global issues and there's a lot of commonalities that we all face together. We need to network a lot more widely if we can. I myself am very keen to do what I can globally because I think the more that we know about each other's problems and our fight for justice, the more other people will know about it.

I just want to say that I'm very proud to be an aboriginal woman who was born here, in one of the oldest cultures of the world. I think we should celebrate our womanhood and being together. I wish all women of the world particularly those of us of color, love and peace and happiness. I know that someday we will find true freedom and justice.☺

