

**SPAN:**  
**Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies**  
**Number 33 (1992)**

**Neo-colonialism**

**Edited by Kathryn Trees**

## **'An apologetics of outrage'**

**Alan Mansfield & Kathryn Trees**

---

Prime Minister Paul Keating has called on Australians to eliminate racism from the nation. He condemned the actions of the police who were shown in an amateur video on the ABC news last night, mocking the deaths of Aboriginals in custody. The story he said should become a turning point in Australian attitudes to Aborigines.

These remarks began the ABC news on Friday, 13 March 1992. Paul Keating was commenting on an amateur video taken at a charitable function in the NSW town of Burke and screened on the ABC. In the video two blackened police officers were shown with nooses round their necks, one saying 'I'm Lloyd Boney', the other saying 'I'm David Gundy'. There were other police officers, including senior officers, at the party. One of the consequences of the screening of this video was that the two officers were put on restricted duties while the matter is being investigated.

The reactions, responses, and productions of media events resulting from this 'display of bad taste' tell us a great deal about attitudes to racism and identity in contemporary Australia. If one event can be produced out of a culture of racism and be made newsworthy we can assume we are seeing some racist incidents and not others. Events constituted as media events must therefore stand in for what we are not seeing. There are many interesting questions to be asked about how this particular 'display of bad taste' was made into a media event and why this incident rather than possible others was given such attention (albeit briefly). We cannot simply conclude that this incident is more shocking. We have concluded that this media production is organised around a logic of 'racial outrage' that is, a logic of moral (bourgeois) outrage AND Australian identity.

The Prime Minister's speech, we argue, is an apologetics of outrage rather than a practical strategy for the removal of 'racism from the nation.' We further argue that even in the attempt by the ABC to present a sympathetic stand on anti-racism it is unable to escape a discursive formation of Australian racism. This inability is highlighted by the graphic displayed throughout the broadcasting of this news item. The graphic consisted of the top of a police car, including blue light, with an officer's hat sitting on the roof. This image was imposed upon an Aboriginal landrights flag. The graphic works as a caption or thematic metaphor. We have a spoken text saying this 'display of bad taste' is outrageous, however this is potentially undermined by the graphic because the police car connotes criminality, especially when imposed on the Aboriginal flag. There are other graphics that could have been used. This choice is not arbitrary, naive or ahistorical. Thus this apologetics of outrage, as a subset of colonial discourse, is contradictory or ambivalent.

The media production of accredited witnesses produced responses that were depressingly predictable. Reactions from politicians demonstrate things that should be obvious. All the politicians have to be outraged, they have to do what institutional voices always do, they have to give the correct line, they have to construct 'we', the decent minded people. Premier Goss, of Queensland, said 'like most decent Australians I am appalled by this behaviour.' Premier Griener, of

NSW said 'police are in a position of trust and both in their work and private lives have a responsibility beyond the average citizen.' Western Australia's Premier Lawrance said 'It's gross. It is something every member of the community should condemn.' The NSW Police Commissioner further described the actions as 'low and disgusting.' He offered his personal apology and said that the families of Lloyd Boney and David Gundy are entitled to be outraged.' The ABC report contained a number of other comments, most from people who were equally outraged.

Tony Day, the NSW minister for police, is equally constrained by an institutional voice, but given his position in the affair cannot scapegoat the two officers as those outside the 'we' decent people outraged by acts of racism. Tony Day's 'we' is one of a community who can take a joke and those that cannot. His response to the 'display of bad taste' is to say 'it was a light-hearted parody, we all go to parties, and we go to different types of parties. You see people dressed as Ned Kelly, as JFK, as police officers wearing a bag with a dollar sign on them. You can't take offence.'

Neville Bonner, former Senator and first Aboriginal person elected to parliament, later in the programme, says bluntly, 'it is no joke to us.' Nina Gundy gets to say very little but she does say 'they treat us like shit'. Neville Bonner went on to say 'We Aboriginal and Islander people know it's (racism) there. We've experienced it, we've been hurt by it, we've been victims of it. So there's no good someone else saying "it's only a joke". It's no joke to us.'

Charles Perkins, Consultant for Aboriginal Affairs, said 'We've got a very racist community largely in Australia and we've got to wake up to that question.' A number of Aboriginal people from Burke also expressed their anger. While the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee, who had prior knowledge of the video, had it at the top of their agenda. Boney's aunt, Essie Coffey, says it invokes bitter memories. 'On the first anniversary of his death I was given a noose, a rope was sent to me.' Burke police apologised for the behaviour of their co-workers.

In the 1991 report into racist violence, highlighted on the ABC news, the Human Rights Commission concluded that: 'Aboriginal/police relations have reached a critical point due to the wide-spread involvement of police in acts of racist violence, intimidation and harassment.' Irene Moss of the Human Rights Commission said 'I believe there is actually a culture of racism amongst police officers.' In the news report this culture of racism shifts between the police, some police, some Australians and all Australians with important consequences. The oscillation between police and us serves to remove guilt rather than locate it.

The results of oscillation, that is failure to locate racism in the police force and insist upon action, comes across most clearly in the programme through the comment made by Ted Kennedy, a priest in the Redfern area for 20 years. 'Unless police are prepared to say there is something specific and something terribly sick in the institution we are just going to get a complete repeat of this thing over and over, as I've seen for 20 odd years.'

This 'display of bad taste' was not confined to one incident. A direct copy-cattling of the event occurred just after this screening. This time four cadets at Duntroon painted themselves black and wore nooses around their necks. Once again the institutional voices were horrified. Further, Essie Coffey is not the only Aboriginal person that has been confronted with a noose. In Gosnells, W.A. a council worker was confronted with a noose.

Clearly these incidents are connected with other happenings in Australian society, including the Royal Commission enquiry into Black deaths in custody and calls for higher penalties for juvenile offenders. What, for example the ABC report does not examine is the history of the Aboriginal people that were being mocked. Lloyd Boney died in a cell in the Brewarrina Police station on 6 August 1987. A few days after the death of this 28 year-old Aboriginal man, and following a long national campaign by Aboriginal people, the federal government announced the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody (RCIADC). Boney's death caused more anguish and anger among NSW Aboriginal people than any other death in state custody up to that time. As the RCIADC reported in 1991 'Police were immediately accused of killing Lloyd Boney, and that is still a very widespread view amongst Aboriginals.' The RCIADC however, found that Boney had taken his own life by hanging himself with a football sock. Police were cleared of killing Boney, but found to have lied about some of the circumstances of his detention and death, and to have contributed to the death by failing to monitor the state of their prisoner as required by police procedures. The police investigation of the death was found to have been 'very inadequate'. For the Aboriginal people who do not accept that Lloyd Boney took his own life, aspects of the death remain unexplained.

The Tactical Response Group killing of David Gundy in Sydney some 18 months later caused national outrage. The

police, hunting another man, burst into Gundy's bedroom. A shotgun fired, according to police, when Gundy tried to pull it from an officer's hands.

Irrespective of police culpability or otherwise in these deaths, they came to represent above other deaths, not only to Aboriginal people, but to many journalists, human rights organisations, politicians, social critics and the wider population, an underlying culture and structure of police violence, persecution and racism toward Aboriginal people, which appeared to continue unabated and for which governments appeared unwilling or powerless to act upon.

Thus it was not incidental that the two NSW police officers, captured on the now notorious home-video sequence, chose to mimic Boney and Gundy specifically, and only secondarily Aboriginal custodial deaths in general. This was an act of gloating defiance, carried out, not 'in private' as some have suggested, but in a public sphere, albeit a smaller social domain in which the conditions of its favourable reception were guaranteed, and which proved, far more than did the individuals who performed it, the culture of police racism and oppression.

However, ABC news reporting of the 'event' as public reaction to its earlier screening of the video tape worked to deflect what was an institutionally specific act of racist oppression onto a more nebulous and less governmentally actionable domain—that of general public racism—which the Prime Minister stated 'must be expunged' from every corner of Australia.

Keating's call on all Australians to expunge racism can be presented as a momentous breakthrough in the public acknowledgment that 'Australia is a racist country' to an ABC community of viewers constructed as 'thinking Australia'. But it is definitely a politically 'cool' response to the white hot issue at stake here—the apparent routine and systematic violence and abuse of Aboriginal people by the strong-arm of the state, that is the state governments and by association, government in general, leading to the question of the underlying class/race basis of policing as an ongoing instrument of colonial domination, and ultimately the class character of policing as a whole. Simply, Keating's call (from which ABC's reporting took its cue) was not for a fundamental restructuring of state police forces, something that is definitely the domain of governments...

At stake in what Paul Keating is saying are questions of the flag, monarchy and republicanism. The role of Aboriginal people in constituting an Australian identity cannot be denied. If there is a 'turning point' in Australian history it is to do with identity. The implication is if racism isn't dealt with we can't develop as an autonomous nation. Ross Gibson in *The Diminishing Paradise* 1 explicates this point: 'The image of the Aborigine must be regarded as integral to, at the same time as it is emblematic of, any interpretations of Australia.' Doing something about racism is therefore integral to our identity as Australians.

This is why Paul Keating can accuse the two police officers of being disloyal to the concept of Australia and explains the linguistic force of 'needing to expunge racism':

We should make this a turning point, we should decide to expunge racism from every corner of the country. And, I ask Australians how we can have pride in our values when we debase ourselves in this way? Because these people, in doing what they have done, have in fact been disloyal to the whole concept of Australia.

A closer examination of the ABC's coverage of this episode suggests that if this is indeed a 'turning point' we have not been given any directions.

---

## Notes

1 Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984), p.141.