

“Fenced in, Fenced Out: An Australian Exile.”

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This paper explores exile from the point of view of fences and fencing which was the key way pastoralist separated the First Peoples from the land. I use this to tell my story and how people have built fences to exile indigenous people - definitions of aboriginality; pre-eminence of country, culture and lineage by aboriginal people (the three prong official definition); colour etc. and how this has demeaned aboriginality to the lowest level.

From this I look at exile as the place from which we can transcend fences and are free to move in to new ways of being without the need of definitions, a place where we are able to simply be aboriginal without the need to prove it, act it, conform to it. A space where we can become who we already are, the sovereign people who have need to apologize for our existence or assimilate into the existence others define for us. A spiritual coming home by transcending the limitations placed upon us.

Fenced In, Fenced Out – An Australian Exile (Glenn Loughrey © 2016)

Thomas Merton, the American Catholic writer suggests that the only journey a human being takes is the inner journey, a journey paradoxically away from and into the world. It is a journey that can be found in exile, a journey into fullness of personhood and being and way from the superficiality of definitions, cultures and propaganda. It is only those who fully engage in this exile who discover themselves, discover others and discover the Other.

Our path as people is signposted by the steps we take, often timidly and

stuttering, more often accidental and coincidental, towards the fullness of being. For Merton, striving towards being a full alive person involves the struggle of being disconnected and isolated from the custom and conventions of mass existence.

For a few moments today we are going to explore exile as the means to transcendence, as the necessary school from which we have the possibility, if we are brave enough, to transcend what we have been told about ourselves and to reimagine a new and ever changing identity, personally and culturally. In particular I will suggest this is vital for those of us who identify as Aboriginal and strive to find our place in a world where our existence has been defined for us by others.

Driving through south-western Victoria recently, I became aware, in a way I had not been before, of Australia as a fenced country. Ownership of the land is defined and marked out by fences, fences of all types, stone and rock, wood and wire, roads and rivers. It occurred to me that fences are not only physical but are the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, where we came from, who shares our stories and who we will allow to do so now and in the future. Fences about where we place people in the geography of our country, the value we place upon them in our economy and the lingering presence of past definitions and practices.

Fences, in reality define who is a person, a subject in our national psyche, and who is an object, to be discarded and devalued, less than human.

Aboriginal people find themselves fenced in and fenced out by the definitions of others and, surprisingly, by using the same definitions as a means to protect and fence in their own sense of being, employing the very definitions of colour, behaviour and heritage the dominant powers have used over the last 200+ years.

I grew up in a town known for its violence against local tribes. Visiting the library, reading newspaper cuttings and letters from the mid 1880's to the early 1920's, I realised the steps taken by my family to hide my grandmothers' heritage was a strategy deemed necessary for survival.

My grandfather made my Uncle promise to keep my grandmothers indigenous heritage hidden. No one in my family speaks of it; her background is shrouded in mystery. There is only a mother who registered the birth some time later in a different town. No father is mentioned. She had the name of the family she was left with when the small aboriginal community from which Jimmy and Joey Governor, part-aboriginal men who killed 9 people during a fourteen week rampage in 1900, the year prior to federation, and who inspired the book and movie "*The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*" came, were forcibly moved out west at the request of the white community.

While it was our family secret, it wasn't a secret to the locals. I grew up known as 'Young Darkie' or 'Young Blackfella'; my friend, when angry, called me the son of a drunken bush black; another friend's father told a group of classmates they could be friends with me but to remember where I came from. Bullying at school was never-ending.

My father lived in exile, caught between a world he knew and a world he never knew, growing more bitter and angry as the years went on. He acted out his violence through alcohol, directing it at anyone nearby, particularly his family and I as his eldest son. He was never able to reconcile within himself these two worlds even when he stopped drinking. It was bigger than him and his family. It was the internalised oppression of a people and country from which he was exiled.

Exile 1

These incidents are metaphors for the destruction of the primal spiritual essence of our people and symbolise the battle for the soul of our nation. Our people are suffering from the cumulative effect of internalised oppression giving rise to the situation we see in front of us. It will take imagination, humility and a drastic rethinking of our own lives and the way we find value and meaning in and for ourselves, and others before we will be able to reach out to those we continue to oppress. They, we, are living in exile.

Perhaps exile holds the key for the future. *'Only when you are out of rhythm with the familiar do you begin to investigate and explore the possibilities. Exile is the place in which such an investigation not only can begin, but*

becomes necessary for both survival and renewal. It is the place where one is forced, as an individual and a community, to reflect on who or what is at the centre of one's being.' Both cultures are disconnected from their centre due to the violent history of our country, and in a very real sense, both black and white, are exiled from belonging. Homeless and exiled, the violence continues and can only find peace when we own such disconnection together.

My sense of exile has continued. A couple of months ago I went back to Mudgee and took the funeral of my mother's best friend.

After the service, outside, a man came up to me and asked, 'Your Blackfella's young bloke, aren't you? Your Young Blackfella!' Now this man had known me since I was born and nowhere in the conversation that followed was I referred to by name. Here I am, at 61 years of age, dressed in Anglican priests robes undertaking an English ritual, and I was still Young Blackfella with no name.

Exile II

Exile is a place of fences, definitions and cultural stereotypes yet is, I suggest, the most powerful place to be. We have been, continue to be and, indeed have appropriated these fences for our own purposes in such a way that only a radical rethinking can move us beyond the stagnation within the politics of aboriginal identity we now experience.

Bronwyn Carson in her book on the Politics of Identity outlines the processes which have lead to the three proofs of identity for anyone wishing to be understood as aboriginal: the proof of self identifying, community acceptance and a provable history. In the devolution of power to communities from Governments this bureaucratic definition now is enforced by aboriginal communities for a range of reasons. It is not simply sufficient to know whom you are, you must prove it and you must prove it according to an imposed definition, a definition I would not be able to fulfil, nor would I bother to try.

This is exile. This is the place of no belonging. This is the place many of us

find ourselves. Our choices of responses range from despair to anger to hope to transcendence. And it is our choice. We may be defined out of the existence by others, but we alone can define our existence for ourselves. Exile challenges us to rise above the fences that dot our lives and our history and to begin to live lives of transcendence.

As I have noted elsewhere: Exile can be both the end and the beginning. The end as it symbolizes the loss of what we had; the beginning because it asks of us questions we would otherwise never have confronted. What is important? Who am I? What is my identity? Where do I belong? Where am I at home? Is where I am now where I am to be forever or is this beginning of something different and new?

Exile has the power to unbalance, challenge, empower and transform...

What is it for me? When I began to identify as an aboriginal person I sought to know about my country, heritage and culture as most people in my situation seem to do. I soon discovered society, white and black, reacted with a scepticism requiring proof, a proof I could not give beyond the statement, I am aboriginal. The first time I told my story was to a group of aboriginal and islander people at an Anglican conference. Half through my talk I became very ill and spent 10 minutes throwing up in the toilet. When I came back, one of the group commented, 'You are free now.' It was defining moment for me. I no longer needed to grasp at the proofs of identity or traditional aboriginal culture. I am sufficient as I am.

Like Thomas Merton, when he came face to face with the sleeping Buddhas at Polunaruwa I was able to explain, "I have found what I was (unknowingly) looking for.' The sense of being without need to prove my existence, of belonging to the two different societies both I found myself in exile from.

Powerfully, I was in exile from my country, a place now completely dug up by three different coal mines. All but 3 sacred sites remain. The place my grandma grew up, the place my father grew up and much of the place I grew up is now displaced by black coal. I had to find a way to reclaim my country, not just for myself but for those who came before and those who

will come after me. I did it by creating an art piece from memory of my country as I knew it. It took some 120 plus hours, dot by single dot to reclaim my country and take it back for my people. Everyone who sees it is struck by its power. Out of exile has come an ownership of self, of story and of country I could not otherwise have discovered. In exile I discovered what was already there before I was born.

Exile is the place we discover we are sufficient as we are. It is here we are offered capacity and resources to speak from our centre and to imagine a new place for our people and ourselves. It is important to remember exile is not just about indigenous people being exiled from country and the dominant culture but about indigenous and non-indigenous people who are exiled from their own culture and country by their own people. It is bigger than us and needs to be understood from that point of view.

- In exile we are able to ask the questions we have no need of if we are inside.
- In exile we are able to discard the simple answers to complex problems and remain alone with the questions.
- In exile we find ourselves letting go of definitions, culture and practices that are no longer useful in a world outside or beyond the fences.
- In exile we find ourselves in relationship with others whom we would have not met or discovered on the inside, our fences would have kept us apart.
- In exile we discover how little of what we thought was important actually is and we begin to connect to what remains – the essential unity with all creation and created beings.
- In exile we do not struggle and fight for existence, we recognise our existence as a gift and celebrate it in simply being who we are; we do not need to be recognised to be real.

Exile is the separation of people from what makes them human, from what allows them to act as self-directing persons responsible for finding meaning and purpose in their way of life. Exile places people in an uneven relationship with others and with their land. They are no longer equals but are subservient, powerless and becalmed in a world that is foreign to them. This is a world in which they are told what is acceptable or unacceptable for

them by others and these others include their own people as well as those of the dominant culture.

For indigenous people this happens on two levels. Indigenous culture restrains people to live and act out of a sense of tradition while western culture coerces people to leave behind traditional culture and become white. Both approaches produce exile. One use tradition as a means of control, dictating what is acceptable for a person who identifies as indigenous, the other uses consumerism and integration as the means to make good corporate citizens of people who otherwise maybe happy sitting down on their land.

Peoples' understanding of indigenous matters are coloured (no pun intended) by the duality of who is in and who is out in society, by what is acceptable for one group of people and not for another. Our society is defined by the idea of exile, the idea that one group of people has to be disinherited of country so another can inhabit it, and in so doing the former is regarded as less than human, not a person(s) but someone who is an object to be moved, helped, guided, restrained and told where they should live, what they should do and how they should behave.

There is a third way. Allow people to be persons able to make decisions for themselves about how they live, where they live and what they do, whether they buy into the western consumer myth, retain a more traditional way of being or live somewhere in between. Being a person is not about a being an individual but about not succumbing to the stereotype of the masses. Meaning, we are not to fall into line with the mass of individuals who are all doing the same thing.

The challenge here, as for aboriginal communities and those who define aboriginality at all levels, is that today many of us are different. We live outside of community, have not been initiated in culture and have no immediate kin. We no longer fit the definitions and don't want to. We are proud of who we are, we remember our ancestors, we touch their stories, feel their presence but we no longer fit the places people want us to live in.

We have, or are in the process of, transcendence, rewriting our story in a

new language, with a different culture and a new mob, who like us simply don't fit the boxes others have made for us.

Let me finish:

Received a letter addressed to me. Signed but no return address. The writer asked why I, as a Wiradjuri man (adding if I am a Wiradjuri man) was living and working in Glen Iris and not amongst my own people in Redfern. Now I am not sure how many Wiradjuri live in Redfern, or if there are in fact any at all, and I am not sure why it is the expectation of the writer that I be there for them, but apparently living and working in a perceived wealthy white community brings my identity and my commitment to indigenous people into question.

This is not an attempt at validating my place in the world. I will work in the communities I decide to work in and I will bring my indigenous sensibilities to that place. That is the freedom all people should have. To live and work where they want to, even indigenous people.

Apparently by living and working in this place I am not being a strong leader or an example to indigenous people. I would have thought it is exactly what I am doing. Showing that it is possible to succeed in modern Australia and educating the communities in which we work and live about indigenous culture and history.

Thomas Merton reminds us that if we love (treat others as equal) only those who agree to live in the way we wish then we do not love them for being who they are but only for the reflection of ourselves we see in them. This third way requires we love others, allow them to be, authentically themselves and not how we wish them to be. This applies equally to those in their own communities as well as those in the dominant cultures who wish to set the boundaries of what is acceptable or not, of who is in and who is out.

To answer my anonymous correspondent, indigenous people are capable of deciding where they live, how they live and how to model their deep and powerful indigenous sense of self and the innate sensibilities that go with it. They can do this in remote communities, in urban housing estates, in

wealthy suburbs or in parliament house. There are no limitations if we allow each other to be true to the real self.