

## PANEL: REWRITING THE MAINSTREAM

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### REWRITING THE MAINSTREAM

*Rosemary Van den Berg*

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I am taking this opportunity to thank ASAL for inviting me to come to Adelaide to give a reading and a talk about *Rewriting the Mainstream*.

I was sorry to see that there were no Aborigines from South Australia present at this conference. It is a pity because I would have liked to thank them for allowing me to visit their land. In Aboriginal culture, besides being a common courtesy, it is a necessity. In pre-colonial days, you could have been speared for neglecting this acknowledgement of going on others' lands. I thought there were academic and literary-minded Aborigines in South Australia. I must have been mistaken.

However, before I read my paper, I would like to make several comments regarding the representation of Aboriginal subjectivity in some papers which have been presented at this conference. And this is a concrete reason why the *Mainstream* should be rewritten.

The first comment I'd like to make concerns Susan Martin's discussions on the Nyoongah people of the South-West of Western Australia, of which I am a member. In fact, I am considered an elder and as such, I must impart my knowledge of our culture to the younger people. But, getting back to Susan's paper—regarding Georgiana Molloy and her relationship with the Nyoongahs of Augusta. Georgiana Molloy was one of many settlers who established a good relationship with the Nyoongahs, and they did help her with her botanical interests. They would have told her that none of the wildflowers in the area were considered 'death' flowers, like the lily equivalent in the English flowers. It was a settler, William Lines, who imparted this knowledge, not an Aborigine.

Ms Martin should have stated, as well, that the Aborigines had no 'death' wildflowers, unless one ate a poisonous wildflower. Ms Martin could have obtained correct information from the Aborigines had she wished or wanted to. And should not Ms Martin have also quoted from an Aboriginal source whose knowledge of Western Australia's wildflowers was more accurate?

My second comment concerns Lyn McCredden's paper. Lyn mentioned the Hindmarsh Bridge fiasco—I ask why there are no Aboriginal women present from that area to either refute or acknowledge these concerns. Smugness or cynicism should have no place in academic papers. Her tone of voice and her words implied that all Aboriginal sacred sites should be dismissed as only hearsay or hoo-ha. And on Ms McCredden's reference to Mudrooroo and his Doctor Worreddy—most of Mudrooroo's books are fiction, figments of his imagination and,

as such, should not be considered as the reality of Aboriginal culture, especially the spiritual and religious aspects of Aboriginal culture.

The third comment I'd like to make is about the very serious point made by Debjani Ganguly concerning comparing the Aboriginal people to the Dalits of India. If Ms Ganguly really studied Aboriginal people and their culture, she would know that they are neither 'untouchables', nor 'cleaners', nor 'feet' people. It is absurd for Ms Ganguly to make such a statement. Aborigines were not servants, slaves or any other lowly status being, not to other Aborigines. They were all equal, even the Council of Elders and the clever men, the Shamans. Whites made Aborigines servants, but even then, the Aborigines went walkabout whenever they felt like it.

Aborigines are a spiritual people. They had their land, their people and their Dreamtime tenets. They had no need for material gain. Everything they needed was on their land. Why build houses and dig up the earth? There was no need for it.

Getting back to Ms Ganguly; she should not leave herself open to criticism. Aborigines have nothing in common with the Dalits of India. Also, transnational comparisons reveal more differences than similarities.

The final comment I'd like to make is that most representations of Aboriginal people come, not from Aborigines themselves, but from white people writing them. In fiction, biography and anthropology, most are representations of white perceptions of Aboriginal people and their culture. Many become distorted and are not real. Academics who work in the field of literature should consult Aboriginal sources and read Aboriginal texts; and listen to the people.

Rewriting the Mainstream is essential.

#### Excerpt from *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience*

In *No Options No Choice!: The Moore River Experience* (1994), I wrote about the early years of my father's life from 1910-1944. This book tells of his being born to his full-blood Aboriginal mother (and white father) in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, and his being taken away from her and his extended family by the Aboriginal Protection Board when he was six years old. He was fostered out to a Swiss couple in South Perth who introduced him to European culture. When he was ten, the Swiss couple returned to Europe and because they had nowhere else to leave him, they gave him back to the Aboriginal Protection Board. This establishment, in turn, placed him at the Moore River Native Settlement where he learned the art of self-preservation as a half-caste Aborigine. *No Options No Choice!* tells of his relationship with this institution which treated Aboriginal people so appallingly. My father cut all ties with the Moore River Native Settlement in 1944, the year he took his wife and six children to Pinjarra to live.

This book, *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience* is a follow-on to *No Options No Choice!* It is the continuation of my father's biography and will tell of an Aboriginal family's life in a country town where, since the earliest years of colonisation by the British, Aborigines were subjected to violence, racism, prejudice, ostracism, patronisation and condescension. On the other hand, this book will also tell about the white people who helped this man and his family, and other Aborigines, survive in a social environment which was harsh and degrading to all Aboriginal people. It will tell of the good and bad times and of the happiness and sorrow Aborigines experienced, simply by living in a small country town in Western Australia.

In *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience*, I want to write about a period of Western Australia's history when the lifestyles of the indigenous people were slowly changing under white influences. The years 1944-1975 saw many changes occur in the south-west Aborigines' cultural evolution. It was a time when the Nyoongah people of Pinjarra realised that to survive meant they had to adjust to and accept white encroachment on their lands and their lives, for the ancestors of some had lived in and around the Murray River district long before the settlers ever set foot on these shores.

Nevertheless, *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience* will provide an insight into living in Pinjarra from an Aboriginal point of view. It will show the transformation of Aboriginal lives, from living under the Native Welfare system, to finally being classed as citizens in their own country with the right to vote; a far cry from being tagged as native wildlife under the Aborigines and Fisheries Act of 1909 (AAPA 1992: 2).

In *The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience* will show the reader the social change which was occurring within the government system, especially the changing attitudes to Aborigines during the years 1944-1975. It will trace the social history of the town of Pinjarra from an Aboriginal point of view and will touch on the different governments' policies on housing, education, employment and health, to show the ongoing effects of policy changes and the Aborigines' reactions to all these new-fangled rules which governed their lives. Also, this book will attempt to depict the relationship between whites and Aborigines and how Aborigines felt towards each other. In short, this book will study the social and cultural change of the Nyoongah people of Pinjarra during the period 1944-1975. These changes are reflected in this book, the continuation of my father's story.

I found it difficult to write this story because of the moral and ethical responsibilities attached to it. From an Aboriginal perspective, I've had to ensure that I did not contravene the bounds of propriety when writing about Aboriginal material. There were some things I couldn't mention or divulge to the reader, but I have tried to give as true an account as possible of my father's life and times as he saw them. There were times when some of the research materials differ, depending on who is relating stories. I have had to draw a fine line between others' concepts, what my father wrote and my own understanding of the times. With these matters in mind, I have tried to write a story which would meet the ethical criteria of those who contributed to my research—most of all, I had to stay true to my father's recollections.

At first, my father was dubious about my writing his story. He was worried that the government may have reason to castigate him for some of the events he related. My siblings and I had to reassure him that this wasn't the case and he was free to criticise government institutions without having the authorities retaliating. In allowing me to write his story, my father wanted people to understand what it was like being Aboriginal and living through the times mentioned. He hoped it would bring a better understanding of Aboriginal culture to white Australians. He always claimed that whites and Aborigines could live together in this country without one being subservient to the other. He had such a love of this country, especially Western Australia, and he maintained that everyone should have equality regardless of their race. 'Be tolerant of each other' were the words my father used to describe relations between black and white, 'we all have to live in this country'. My father lived with these sentiments all his life, yet nothing has been written about the average Aborigine who lived quietly and tried to conform to European ways while retaining their Aboriginality. This is the very reason why I am rewriting the mainstream from an Aboriginal point of view.