

Fifty Shades of Brown

Alison Page's speech to the ANU Reconciliation Lecture

Monday, November 26, 2012

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land that we meet on tonight and to acknowledge Elders past and present.

Butter, Peanut Butter and Vegemite. That is how the kids on my school bus in Coffs Harbour described me and my sisters Tina and Billie Jean. I am not peanut butter. I am Alison Page, I am a proud Aboriginal woman and this is my story.

I am a descendent of the Walbanga and Wadi Wadi people of the Yuin nation. My Aboriginal family on my Dad's side hail from La Perouse in Sydney's south and my mum, from Southend-on-Sea in Essex, England.

As young immigrants to Australia, my mother and her brother shackled up with an Aboriginal brother and sister from La Perouse and with their children, became a part of Aboriginal life in south Sydney.

Coming from a family that embraced diversity, it shocked them to realise not only was racism rampant in their new country but their children would struggle for a sense of belonging, place and identity both within their own Aboriginal communities as well as the community at large.

Tonight I would like to share with you, through my story, the progress we have made in this country in building the relationship between black and white, in growing the pride of Aboriginal people, in understanding more about Aboriginal culture and identity and the possibilities for our future.

It was made clear to me by the kids at school that I am a half-caste because I wasn't black enough to be Aboriginal and too brown to be white. For others, that term put me neatly into a category, when to me, it caused confusion and alienated me from either world. Within our house though, I felt no different to my older, white sisters or my younger, dark skinned sister Billie Jean. With the same mother, we were all raised with the same values. We had the same sense of belief in our abilities, the same lust for life and the same positive attitude that was instilled by my outgoing mum.

But the names on the bus reminded me that my sister Billie Jean and I would be treated differently by the world. When my parents split and we moved to Coffs Harbour on the NSW Mid North Coast, our feelings of isolation grew worse.

In the eighties, Coffs Harbour wasn't exactly a diverse community. I am sure that my family, who consisted of every shade of brown, just confused people. As a third grader at school, I had to play with my kindergarten sister because no-one would play with her because she is black. We soon realised that Aboriginal people in this part of the world were disrespected and that indifference was being passed on to the young people we would grow up with.

But luckily I wasn't black, I was brown. So I could put up with being called a wog but at least I wouldn't be called a boong. As long as people didn't guess I was Aboriginal, then I would be ok. It wasn't shame. It was self-preservation.

I cringe when I think of this now. When I meet people now, I can't wait for the opportunity to tell them that I am Aboriginal and I feel a little taller when I do. If only I was a bit darker so that people would instantly recognise me as Aboriginal. Now, I am jealous of my sister Billie Jean.

What a change in thirty years. Most of that change has happened within me and my own journey but a big part of that change can be attributed to the growing appreciation of Aboriginal culture within our broader community.

But the change happened within me first.

Without Dad and our koori family at La Perouse, Billie Jean and I had little opportunity to connect with the Aboriginal community in Coffs Harbour, which I think would have made a big difference to our feelings of pride about our Aboriginal heritage. Privately, we felt pride for our culture. We knew that at the heart of our culture there was something beautiful that would bring meaning to our lives. We just didn't know how to find it.

Billie Jean and I did wonder how to express our Aboriginality.

When we were little we would sit down by the river in Coramba and paint our faces with ochre and wonder what it would have been like to be 'traditional' Aboriginal people. With no-one to teach us about our family and stories, we had to seek out our identities and piece together our cultural heritage ourselves. We often wondered, that maybe what people said about the 'real Aborigines' living in the Northern Territory was true.

I think it would have been easier for us if we were in an Aboriginal dance troupe or we even the football team. We would have felt more part of the mob.

I am Aboriginal but I wasn't born 'disadvantaged'. My dad was and still is (at the age of 70) a really hard worker who provided well for my family. I was nine when my parents split and we headed up north and that's when we became well and truly disadvantaged. A single mum, raising six kids on her own often had to get food parcels from St Vinnies to survive. As a result my sisters and I became really resourceful cooks. I can still make a great dinner with a packet of lentils and a tin of tomatoes.

We had a really old house that the local newspaper once described as 'derelict'. I would never let any of my friends from school come over because I was ashamed of my house. I would spend hours rearranging the furniture and trying to make it look pretty, which is probably what sparked my interest in interior design.

But we were only disadvantaged on paper. I had a fun and happy childhood. Although we were physically poor, because my mother was such a powerhouse of positivity, in actual fact, we were very wealthy. Even though she could not afford to invest in school excursions or Saturday morning classes; every day, she would remind us that we could do anything in the world. All we needed was guts and determination.

Subsequently, my sister Tina and I were the first in our family to go to university and earn a degree. My sister studied ceramics in Melbourne and I studied a Bachelor of Design at the University of Technology Sydney. It is almost cliché, but education really has broken a cycle of poverty and disadvantage within my family.

University for me was the time in my life where my sense of pride for my Aboriginal heritage really took flight. There I met many other young Aboriginal people of mixed heritage that never questioned their cultural identity and their place both within their own communities and wider society. They too, helped me piece together my own identity. A concrete koori; confident in my spiritual and cultural values and expressing them in *my* way. And that has been, ever since, using the language of design in all its many forms.

In my final year of University, I heard for the first time about Aboriginal architecture. I met Dillon Kombumerri and Kevin O'Brien, who are Australia's first Indigenous architects and together we worked with rural and urban communities in designing buildings as part of Merrima Design Group.

Because we were working in a new medium, together with the communities we worked with, we used architecture and design as a new language for us to be able to tell our stories and to communicate our cultural values to the world.

This is design from an Aboriginal perspective. If you look at our traditional objects, like a boomerang or a wumura, they are objects of sophisticated function, of great beauty, are inherently sustainable and also contain a spiritual layer, which is usually carved or painted

onto it. This is what informs our practice today. To match the intent and the talent of our ancestral designers is what we strive for.

The story of our designs and how they are created is also important. How our designs and buildings come into being are just as important as the physical objects themselves. If every tree, rock and river has a story about its creation, then our design and building creation stories must be worthy of telling. So, over 15 years of practice, we have many stories of the communities we have collaborated with and the creative process of Aboriginal architecture and design.

Through my work with Merrima, I have come to understand that contemporary Aboriginal culture is world leading in merging traditional and contemporary definitions of identity as 'old stories are told in new ways'. New languages, such as design, architecture, hip-hop and new media art are communicating cultural values that have been transferred from generation to generation for thousands of years. The values are the constant but the stories and how they are told continually evolve. Aboriginal Australia embraces this 'living' definition of culture.

This has made me dig deeper and want to understand more about the values at the heart of Aboriginal culture so we can find ways to express this in our designs. We talk about Aboriginal cultural values, but what are they really?

What does it really mean to feel a 'Connection to Country'? I have learned over the years that it doesn't just refer to the land we stand on; it refers to the human connection to all living things and our connectedness over thousands of years, to the stars.

The Aboriginal Connection to Country means to love the river as you would your own mother and not use her for what we can get out of her in our own lifetime. We nurture and care for her to ensure that she is here for future generations. It is about understanding that our time on the planet is a tiny speck in the continuum of life.

The Aboriginal connection to country is about respect. It guides the way we look after, travel through, understand and use the land. As Traditional Owners we accept the responsibility to protect and sustain country, including sites of spiritual significance and family heritage. By acknowledging Traditional Owners, we pay respect to the important role they play as keepers of the land.

We come to know our home and our connection to country through our family and as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we define family as our extended network of relatives that make up our mob. It is not the nuclear family of just mum, dad and the kids. In many communities, kinship is a complex system that structures people's relationships and is tied to strict protocols, which ultimately is about ensuring that our children and our elderly will be cared for.

Our cultural values are taught through our Lore and through storytelling. Whether through architecture, dance, music, a painting or the written word, stories reveal the values at the heart of our culture and these are the stories the world now needs to hear.

Through my practice, I have reached a level of understanding about what it means to be Aboriginal and my confidence and pride in my cultural identity is strong and continues to grow.

Now, I get offended when I hear the phrase 'half-caste' and I can truly understand and explain why it is offensive to Aboriginal people and is considered a racial slur.

If I am a half-caste, does that mean that I only half connect to country? Does half of me believe in the nuclear family and the other embrace the importance of the extended family? Does my left hand feel a deep spiritual connection and care for the land and the right hand feel differently?

The notion of half-castes is ridiculous simply because the idea of half-beliefs is ridiculous. It is like being half pregnant. It is impossible. You either are Aboriginal or you aren't. You either align with your Aboriginal cultural values, or you don't.

This does not mean that I 'deny' my mixed heritage. That I don't embrace, appreciate and recognise the influence that my Anglo heritage brings to me in my life. I have just returned home from visiting my mother's relatives for the first time in England. It is safe to say that I am not an Aboriginal woman living a purely traditional way of life, but because I look for ways to express my Aboriginality in this modern world that I am truly a product of both cultures.

By virtue of the modern Australia we live in, I think the recognition and acknowledgement of Anglo culture is evident. It is the understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture that needs more focus and attention to give it equal standing. It is fair to say that Aboriginal culture has learnt a lot from Anglo culture, yet white Australia has still a lot to learn from koori culture. And I think that people *do* want to learn about Aboriginal culture and its values more now than at any other point in our nation's history. And that feeling is growing.

Coffs Harbour, thankfully is a different place today.

On the Mid North Coast of NSW, I now work with ten Aboriginal communities who 3 years ago came together to host a Festival on Australia Day to celebrate Aboriginal culture as a part of the national identity. The Saltwater Freshwater Festival attracts 10,000 people, which is truly remarkable in a region that recorded some of highest no votes in the 1967 Referendum to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as citizens.

The Alliance decided to host the Festival on Australia Day to counter a growing and concerning trend of anti-social behaviour on Australia Day that resulted in riots up and down the coast. Although Aboriginal people have issues with the 26th January, we are united in the concern not to relinquish the day to racism and misplaced nationalism. So this event has struck a chord with people who want to have a positive, family-friendly celebration on Australia Day and are delighted that Aboriginal culture has taken its rightful place and is central to this.

A nomadic event that moves from year to year to the ten communities that are part of the Alliance, the Festival changes the towns that it visits. When we took the Festival to Port Macquarie, the local police were worried that an Aboriginal event would attract trouble and that we had to put up fences to 'contain' people. The day after, we had the Area Commander from Taree putting in a pitch to host the Festival there, because in his words 'this town needs this'. And I am pleased to invite you all to Taree on the 26th January 2013 to see not only this town shine, but to see a positive vision of who we are as a modern Australia.

I feel positive about the growing Reconciliation movement because it is remarkable to contemplate the rate of change that has occurred since 1967. That referendum changed my father's life and it changed mine too – even though I wasn't even born. It was a turning point in this nation's history.

Now 45 years later we have another opportunity to take another leap forward. We have the chance to give positive recognition to the contribution of the world's oldest living cultures to our national identity.

More than 108,000 Australians have already become supporters of constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This grassroots people's movement is growing steadily. At a political level, there is multi-party support for some form of constitutional recognition, but in what form and to what effect?

I believe there is a very strong connection between recognition and practical and sustainable change on the ground. If we are to end the shocking disparity in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians we need to take a creative approach that flips the argument from the negative to the positive.

This means changing the perceptions of young Aboriginal people growing up in Australia right now, who believe being born Aboriginal has no benefits at all. Who can blame them for thinking this way when 'Indigenous disadvantage' is one of the most commonly used phrases in the debate on Aboriginal issues, particularly in the media.

It is no wonder many Aboriginal people grow up thinking their identity is something to deny; that their heritage is a ball and chain and is something to overcome. This has to change if these young people are to have a positive future.

I know this from my own experience.

This is why constitutional recognition is so important. It will give young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people new pride in their heritage so they can grow up understanding their culture is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

I spent the first part of my life being ashamed of my Aboriginality. But I have grown up to be someone who now shouts pride for my heritage from the rooftops.

Butter, peanut butter and vegemite. Yes we are all different shades but we are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we are the first people, we are Australian, and we are proud.

Thank you.