

NAIDOC 2011: Waalun buwarr biiba (A personal note...)

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MARCUS WATERS

Kamilaroi

NAIDOC 2011

Waalun buwarr biiba (A personal note...)

My Aboriginality or at least a search for my Aboriginality has occupied the last twenty-seven years of my life since first becoming reunited with my Aboriginal family as a fifteen-year-old... and not for the first time as I walk through a mass of people gathered to celebrate the National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration (NAIDOC) at Musgrave Park in Brisbane I once again find myself reflecting deeply on the foundations of my very identity as ideas continue to change from within, around and underneath me.

It's NAIDOC Day, Black Friday 1st July 2011 and I am sitting in a tent with my sista... there are over 35,000 people, mainly of Aboriginal descent who surround us... throughout the years my sista and I haven't spent nearly as much time together as we should have... both having made dramatic changes in their life decisions and in representing our own individual ideas of what it means to be Aboriginal - and yet in looking back I am able to reflect that it was my sista more than anyone else who introduced me to what it meant to be "Black"...

I need to explain - this is not my sista through having the same parents... I started to date her older sista years earlier and her sista and I had a child together... this is what makes her my sista, more than just a sister-in-law she become my true blood sista, a beautiful little black sista who I have known for twenty-five years who would follow me around and jump in between her sista and I as we would fall asleep and ruining our nights when she would occasionally wet the bed, it was these lived experiences over time which made her my sista as part of a once unified "Black" Aboriginal culture long before words such as "Indigeneity" or "ontology" became part of my understanding or vocabulary...

So here I am with my sista, who I haven't really spent any time with, other than polite hellos over the last nine years (though my wife has ensured that all family ties have remained strong... as Black woman do...) and we are sitting in seclusion in a tent that is hidden away behind a collection of Aboriginal Elders for those who are tired and need of rest, mothers, or daddies who have to change babies or those who just need to take a break from the mass of people outside... from the sun or to drink some water and recharge before going back outside into the hording crowds.

She is showing me photos of her dhiiaan (family) downloading ever so slowly from her face book page and a cheap \$50 phone... and for the first time in a long time I am being forced to slow down, wait and be patient in a world that speeds around us... it was here that I realised that for us both, time had now stopped... we were blessed and truly fortunate to be allowed time out and a moment of reflection – and with every photo slowly downloading I was once again being allowed to return home... most of the photos were of her first grandson, born on the exact date that his great-grandfather was born.

I had only just met my little nephew for the first time some twenty minutes earlier – he doesn't live with my sista's daughter, his mother... as she had lost him into foster care... he is such a pretty little boy that upon seeing him for the first time I thought he was a little girl – 18 months old... black... with big dark never-ending brown eyes and a beautiful smile of pure joy.

You see my sista's Aboriginal identity had, like mine years earlier... been formed in the Aboriginal housing commission stomping ground and built around an urban chaos of drugs violence and sexual abuse, a system that through a university education I had been given the opportunely to escape. Her daughters are now repeating this same cycle with my nephew's mother having fallen pregnant at fourteen...

When leaving Musgrave Park much later I saw two people I knew who like me had been provided a university education and in discussing my time spent with my sista they expressed that it was a shame that she didn't enjoy the same opportunities I had...

No, I said... not shame – just different... different circumstances... different life choices... different consequences, it is just the way it is...

and what is... is what it is... the last thing my sista wants or needs from others is their sympathy or pity... she deserves more... some people live and die by their decisions, they are true and sincere people who away from an institutional environment can teach us honestly about life... we take so much from them in quest of our own identities but we can never take away their ownership to their own decision making – as we do not share their lives and we are unwilling to live with them and share their consequences twenty-four hours a day...

It is so easy for others to recite the anguish and frustration of the oppressed, the riots and injustice of Palm Island, the welfare dependency and substance abuse suffered in communities like Redfern and Inala but to live with them and share these experiences for some of us becomes too much... even for me – and that is why I left...

My sista has a strength of character to endure that I can only admire from a distance... she is a grown woman and a grandmother and though at times she feels regret and pain from her decisions who of us do not? And unlike many of her people, that like me... are still finding our way and grappling with our Indigenous identity my sista knows who she is and accepts her fate with a strong dignity and sense of humour that in another world would give her a completely different life.

And all that separates her and I are minute variation of degrees of chance and opportunity... how easily that I could have stayed in her world – there was and always will be a part of me that enjoyed the hectic mess of drugs and violence, the sex and chaos that once surrounded my life – the adrenaline of being part of the oppressed and having a reason to hate is somewhat appealing for those of us who have been there... and it is for this reason that the hour I spent with my sista secluded and hidden in our tent away from the celebration of others was as beautiful as it was privileged.

Such moments remain timeless, they last forever, and though her children do not spend time with my children it doesn't matter... they know each other and respect each other... and more importantly understand why my children could never sleep at their auntie's knowing what they would be exposed to... there is no judgement or feeling of superiority over the other just a feeling of informed separa-

tion and an unconditional love that though we live in completely separate worlds from each other we remain the same in our Aboriginality... and it is this connection, that unlike the generations before us allows us to be different, to evolve and become one.

Nganundi gii (From the heart...)

I left the tent knowing without question my place in this world as an Aboriginal man, an uncle father and husband... and yes a brutha... and yes, for all that I have learnt and grown and written and shared throughout my life - my Aboriginality remains a lived experience that becomes inherent through privileged access that can never be taught or shared outside of our own community...

For when we speak about our perseverance, survival, struggle and celebration it is worth so much more than what is written, studied or shared as an observer who sits from outside these experiences and chooses to comment without knowing what it means to be truly Aboriginal. When I sit with my sista, remember my brutha (my brutha died of a drug overdose when he was twenty-five...) I am connected to a spirit that is timeless and understands the unconditional love required to be part of an Aboriginal community.

Too truly feel Aboriginal is without description and can never be taught or learnt, it is unique to our shared lived experience and therefore to the non-Indigenous observer I say that my Aboriginality remains a birth rite and as fellow guardians to this land you must now allow our collective voice to speak and to penetrate your very consciousness with every opportunity that arises, otherwise you will carry on living in transition... from one generation to the other and never settle roots... as you instead continue to live like a bird of prey that prioritises the accumulation of material wealth over lineage. Without the connection and timelessness as shared by Aboriginal people you can only ever become a bird of passage and you will never look for the good in any of the lands that you or your great-grandchildren choose to stay...

Warran-gurraay (Final word...)

As with many things it begins in prayer... my Uncle Reg Knox is the last fluent Kamilaroi language speaker my own family had... I say had as Uncle Reg, though still alive has been diagnosed with a form of Dementia and remains in and out of clarity when seeing him.

It takes a while but thankfully we are still able to reconnect once he goes through my grandfathers father and remembers me through my mother... there are many of us Kamilaroi alive today who though speak our language have had to learn it... while Uncle Reg was the last that I know of within my own family who had to learn English having come into this world speaking Kamilaroi...

It was Uncle Reg who taught me a prayer during times of doubt and self reflection that would take me away from what I already knew - that what I am and always will be is Kamilaroi... the way I see the world is Kamilaroi and my very DNA is Kamilaroi...

Let me then leave you in prayer... my thoughts and best wishes to you all...

*Ngiyani ngiima yilaadbu yalaguirray ngiyani
gimiyandi gaalanha yilaalu-gi gi*

We are here today as we were
yesterday and will be forever...

Kamilaroi prayer: Knox 2011