

# **Assimilating the Natives in the U.S. and Australia**

*'Europeans needed to justify their conquest...Most of all, they had to absolve themselves of guilt for the almost total extermination of the previous inhabitants of these huge areas'....Sven Lindquist[1]*

## **Introduction**

In a recent lecture by Kat Ellinghouse, it was suggested that the concept of Assimilation meant different things to the Australian and US Governments in the second half of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th century. Consequently the resultant policies, as they applied to the respective indigenous populations, were very different in intent. In America, Ellinghouse observed, the idea of Assimilation (both in concept and intent) was to 'absorb' the natives into the greater American society's notions and values, but not necessarily to biologically eliminate them as a 'race'. Whereas in Australia it might seem that this latter motive was operative, with the ultimate aim to genetically eliminate the native populace by absorption into the white 'race' by breeding out the negative 'native traits' through long term intermarriage of the races.

In this essay I shall interrogate these observations of Ellinghouse from an indigenous perspective and consider what impact this had on the native peoples of both the United States and Australia. To do so it is necessary to firstly examine the respective colonial origins, as well as notions of race and white supremacist mythology that helped shape early constructions of nationhood in each country. I will then look at how each of these concepts found expression in the treatment of indigenous peoples. Finally, I shall draw conclusions on not only whether there is substance to claims of a difference in the intent of the respective country's policies of assimilation, but also extrapolate on some possible long term implications that might linger in the situation today.

## **Different but Similar Colonial Imperatives and Racial Imaginings**

The origins of the American and Australian colonies have a common European heritage of imperialism and racial ideologies. In 18th Century Europe the Enlightenment had shaped notions of difference and 'race'. As Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze noted,

*...the Enlightenment's declaration of itself as 'the Age of Reason' was predicated upon precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe, while the inhabitants of areas outside Europe, who were considered to be of non-European racial and cultural origins, were consistently described and theorized as rationally inferior and savage.[2]*

Whilst ideas of 'difference' can be found long before the Enlightenment, in Greek philosophy and Medieval art and literature, Goldberg argues that these early beliefs and images 'furnished models that modern racism would assume and transform according to its own lights'. [3] From the Enlightenment project emerged a theory of knowledge called empiricism and the 'scientific paradigm of positivism', which involves ideas on how humans can examine and understand the natural world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith says that this 'understanding' was viewed as being akin to measuring,[4] thus institutionalizing an

obsession with measurement, classification, and 'knowing'. As Smith points out, the theories and ideas of the West are,

*human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race.[5]...underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about*

Thus those who set out from a range European nation-states to 'discover' and explore the new worlds of the Americas and the Pacific not only harbored similar notions of race, but they also created in their respective new colonies societies that bore other similarities. According to Jon Stratten and Ien Ang,

*Australia and the United States have two things in common. First they are both products of British colonialism. Second, they are both settler societies; that is, they are to a very large extent populated by people whose ancestors traveled to these countries from elsewhere during and after the colonial period.[6]*

The first incursion into the domain of the native peoples of North America came in 1497 when John Cabot landed at Newfoundland and claimed all of North America for England. Later, the Spanish arrive in Florida in 1527, at a moment when their Conquistadors had sated their brutality on the Aztecs and Incas and others in the Caribbean and central Americas. Motivated by greed for treasure and a religious zeal to convert the heathens, these early invaders were more interested in assimilation into Christianity than anything else. Nevertheless, by the 1620s when English Puritans first settled in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay the Spanish-speaking presence in the south east was still less than a thousand (mostly native converts and servants).[7] After the 1660 Pueblo revolt the Spanish altered their ambitions from full-scale colonisation to a more mutually co-operative climate,

*The Pueblos were tacitly permitted to practice their own faith alongside Catholicism...Colonists and colonized intermarried. The boundaries between the Indian and Spanish worlds began to blur. [8]*

In California it was a different story. This had been the most densely populated part of North America and home to more than 300,000 native peoples speaking eight different languages before European arrival. Fearing incursions from Russian and British traders, the Spanish in 1769 set up a string of missions and garrisons along 500 miles of California coast and began rounding up the native peoples and forcing them into missions where sexually segregated barracks and slave labour were the order of the day. Whilst 54,000 indigenous people were baptized in California the native populations decreased by up to three-quarters.

Meanwhile on the East Coast, the English at Jamestown in 1607, the French at Quebec in 1608, and the Dutch at Manhattan and Long Island established early settlements. These Dutch settlements were later swallowed up as English settlement evolved into 12 colonies in which 400,000 whites and 40,000 black slaves were living by 1732. To the north a mere 15,000 French colonists occupied the vast tracts of today's Canada, and to the south were the Spanish.

Back in Georgian England, in the first part of the 18th Century, the population had been

constant at about 6 million people, but between 1750 and 1770 the population doubled. Industrialization had seen the growth of cities and towns with an attendant soaring crime rate and widespread public drunkenness as the country took to the new 'national stupefacient' made from juniper berries and called 'gin'.<sup>[9]</sup> In response to a belief that crime was out of control, British legislators had begun as early as 1611 to transport convicts to the American colonies. Robert Hughes notes that 'After 1717 transportation was stepped up...(and) provided that minor offenders could be transported for seven years to America'.<sup>[10]</sup>

But after 1776 when the American colonies fought their war of independence they halted the transportation of British convicts although, as Hughes observed, the American economy was heavily dependant on the labour of the 50,000 African slaves still being imported annually. Consequently the British looked to the recently 'discovered' possession of Australia to empty the now overflowing prisons back home. Thus the original purpose of the settlement of Australia was to be as a penal colony.

In 1788 the imposition of British sovereignty on Australia was justified by the notion of terra nullius, which was a convenient means to avoid the problem of just reparations for the indigenous inhabitants who, in the process of being dispossessed, were thereby deemed sub-human. Ironically, at the same time these sub-humans were instantly transformed into 'British subjects' who were now 'protected' by, and expected to conform to, British law. Thus the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia were denied the opportunity to establish treaties and have some measure of control over both their land and future destinies. As C.D. Rowley observed,

*The progress of the Aboriginal from tribesman to inmate has been a special feature of colonial administration and of white settlement in Australia. Some of the reasons have been humane, but institutions have also been a method of settling or deferring political and moral issues such as those related to rights arising from prior occupation of the land.*<sup>[11]</sup>

So, despite an early fear that the French might contest the annexation of Australia, the continent was colonized by a single European power, rather than the situation that developed in America. Further, a significant aspect of the early British attitude to the indigenous inhabitants of Australia was the firm belief that Aboriginal society was in a state of decay and would inevitably 'die out'. Therein lay the first rationalization of a developing concept of assimilation that would differ from the American version.

Within the emerging American colonies, de-facto recognition of indigenous sovereignty had been bestowed in the formation of treaties with many Native-American groups. As Prucha points out,

*The cession of Indian lands, a prominent feature of Indian treaties, was an indication of Indian sovereignty over those lands, and the recognition by the United States of Indian ownership to the lands remaining strengthened the concept.*<sup>[12]</sup>

The indigenous people of North America were consequently accorded at least 'human' status, albeit at a level of mental retards and children who might be able to be taught the white man's ways. Much later however, when on May 28, 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act which empowered him to make treaties with all

tribes east of the Mississippi to cede their lands in exchange for lands in the west,[13] it was clear that Indian interests were subsumed to the land-hungry settlers. According to Sven Lindquist, the 'outrageously cruel fashion' of this forced removal and resettlement of the eastern state Native Americans created a need for a 'scientific theory' to justify these measures.[14]

About the same time the American Anti-Slavery Society was being formed to fight against United States based slavery, and its slave owners 'needed a scientific theory that would make slavery appear natural and justified'.[15]

### **The Complication of Slavery**

The significant difference in the early racial make-up of both countries had been the existence of slavery in the American colonies. The slave trade existed as part of the Americas since the beginning of European intrusion, and was comprised mostly of African slaves. African slaves were transported to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central & South America, starting very early in the 16th Century. The spread of tobacco farming in the 1670's, and the diminishing number of people willing to sign-on as indentured servants in the 1680's, increased the numbers of slaves were brought in from Africa. Eventually 600 to 650 thousand slaves arrived in America against their will.[16]

The presence of African slaves and their descendents in North America had a profound effect on the white populace's attitudes about race. There was less inclination to encourage racial integration with Africans, although this did not stop some of America's founding fathers (including Thomas Jefferson who remained opposed to emancipation) from also fathering illegitimate children to some of the slaves they owned.[17]

In England in the mid 18th century a mass movement to abolish slavery started at a time when British ships controlled much of the slave trade and ships from Bristol and Liverpool transported tens of thousands of Africans annually to the Americas. Yet, within a few years "the world's biggest slave trading nation was to become the prime mover behind the ultimately successful suppression of the trade." [18] In 1811 a bill in the English parliament made slave trading punishable by death or exile and British involvement largely ended.

The American response came firstly when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st 1863. Unfortunately, the Proclamation did not free a single slave. Two years later the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States ended slavery in that country. Nevertheless, as Edward Herman notes,

*Built on black slavery, with segregation and poverty helping reinforce stereotypes after 1865, racism has deep and persistent roots in this country.*[19]

This American racism grew out of a fear, both political and sexual, of the African presence in their midst. With the overt chains of slavery removed, white America felt compelled to construct a system of racial, social and economic apartheid that persists to this day. The sexual component of this white fear removed any notions of assimilation that might involve a genetic 'absorption' of black people into mainstream American

society. Instead, African-Americans were encouraged to 'assimilate' by the adoption of white values and standards. As Bell Hooks puts it,

*Assimilation... is a strategy deeply rooted in the ideology of white supremacy and it advocates urge black people to negate blackness, to imitate white people so as to better absorb their values, their way of life.*[20]

The white American fear of biological assimilation with the African American appears to have affected the nature of developing notions of assimilation that were then applied to the Native-Americans. Consequently one can see in the philosophy and regime of the Indian Boarding school system a concerted attempt to indoctrinate generations of Native American children into the 'white man's ways', rather than a quest for homogeneity in the broader society.[21]

### **Assimilation and Racial Ideology in America and Australia**

In the initial British invasion of Australia indigenous peoples were slaughtered on a grand scale. In Tasmania between 1804 and 1834, the Aboriginal population was reduced from an estimated 5000 people to just 200. This represented a 90% reduction in just 30 years. In Victoria it has been estimated that the Koori population declined by about 60% in just 15 years between 1835 and 1850 [22] as more than 68 individual 'massacres' were perpetrated in that period. Indeed, according to representative of the North West Clans of Victoria, Mr. Gary Murray, of the 38 clans that lived in Victoria B.C. (Before Cook) only 24 today have living descendants.[23] So comprehensive was the 'ethnic cleansing' of Australia that out of an estimated 500 language groups on mainland Australia when the British arrived, barely half that number of languages were to survive.

By the middle of the 19th Century the situation for Aborigines in most parts of Australia looked very grim. Morris has described it thus, 'The colonial process had reduced the Aborigines to a residual minority, but they had not been eliminated. The problem was expected to resolve itself.'[24] Meanwhile, when Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species* in 1859, the author's worst fears came true, as Lindquist observed,

*Darwin himself had avoided applying his theory to humankind. But his readers did so immediately. His theory was soon misused to legitimize inhuman competition, racism, and the extermination of other races.* [25]

As Karl Schleunes noted, 'The publication of Darwin's theory of biological evolution in 1859 had an immediate impact'.[26] When Professor Ernst Haeckel developed these theories to incorporate a general theory of human and social development, the notion was used by racists to justify their, 'conceptions of superior and inferior peoples and nations.'

About the same time, particularly during the gold rush in Victoria, race became a major issue on another front. Paranoia about the numbers Chinese miners on the goldfields created numerous clashes[27] and ultimately led to the development of the 'White Australia' immigration policy and also played a key role in the Federation of Australia in 1901. During the early part of this century, a viciously racist press campaign against 'the yellow peril' saw Australian cartoonists distinguish themselves by producing ugly caricatures of evil-looking, opium-smoking, white-woman-corrupting, yellow hordes to the north, poised to pounce on white populace of Australia.[28]

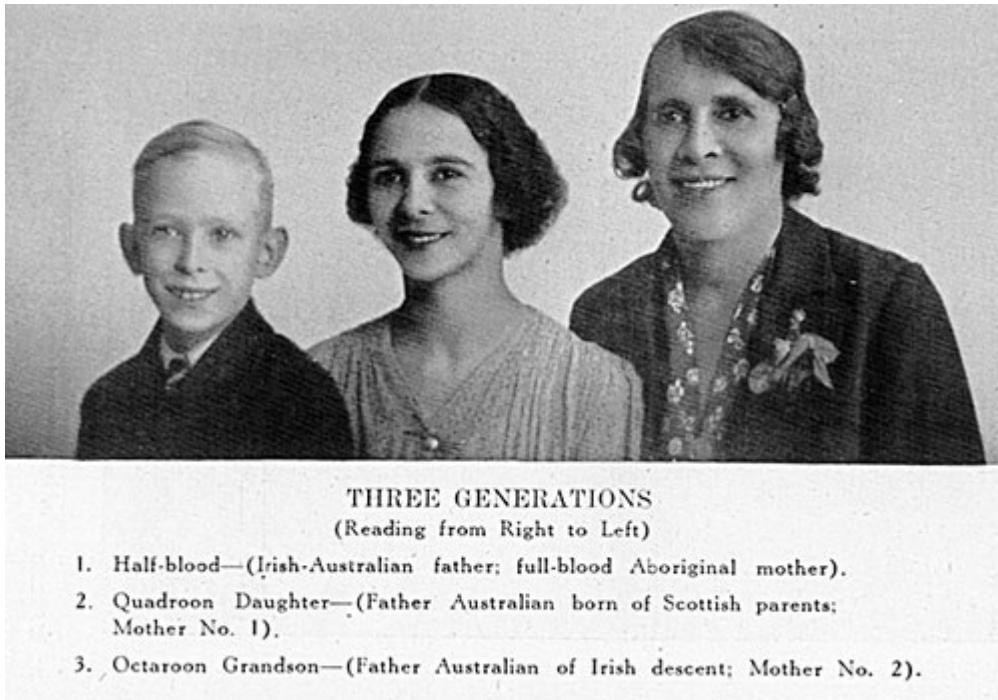
Social Darwinism became very popular in Australia, especially among the scientific community. Andrew Markus pointed out that for scientists, administrators and politicians, *...racial categories provided the organizing concepts of the three groups; that racial assumptions dominated the work of academics and administrators; that while administrators took an interest in academic research, that nearly all politicians derived their racial categories from practical experience...*[29]

Markus further asserts, 'one doesn't have to read extensively to discern that a central concern of anatomists was to establish whether Aborigines were closer to the animal than human'.[30] The Elder Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide in 1926 said that Aborigines were, 'too low in the scale of humanity' to benefit from 'the civilizing influence of Anglo Saxon rule'.[31] In the 1920's and 30's Australia's Aborigines were a treasure trove of curiosity for scientists and academics who believed that here was the 'missing link' species that would advance the cause of Social Darwinism. Indigenous people in communities all over Australia were subject to inspection by 'scientists' interested in such things as similarities between Aborigines and Chimpanzees, brain capacity and cranium size. One study in 1920 concluded that, 'the average brain capacity of Aborigines was between the normal medium intelligence of twelve or thirteen year old children'[32]

Thus a new policy emerged dubbed, 'Smooth the Dying Pillow', it was based on the assumption that what was left of the Aboriginal populace would now die out. This led to the Aborigines Protection Act 1909, which established the first Australian 'concentration camps' to provide a place for the doomed race to die off.[33] A general plan evolved which developed into an Australian version of "assimilation", whereby the theory was that mixed-race people should be absorbed into the general white community over a period of time. At the same time the "full-bloods" would die off, thus maintaining the desired racial homogeneity of Australian society. This plan found expression when, on 21st April 1937, the first ever conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities as its major resolution, under the general heading, 'Destiny of the Race', declared,

*That this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.*[34]

Writing a decade after this conference, the former Western Australian Protector of Aborigines, Mr. A. O. Neville, revealed himself as an advocate of miscegenation as a means of eradicating a potential future race problem. As an influential former administrator in Aboriginal affairs he contended that to encourage so-called 'half-bloods' to intermarry with either white men or other 'mixed-bloods' ('octoroons', 'quadroons', etc.) would produce children with increasingly less 'Aboriginal blood' through several generations. Thus any future 'racial problem' could be avoided.[35]



The above illustration from Neville's 1947 book, *Australia's Coloured Minority* shows how he believed the 'Aboriginal blood' could be bred out through miscegenation.[36]

Professor A. P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at University of Sydney, and regarded by some as one of the most 'enlightened' anthropologists in Australian history, but in fact one of the more conservative members of his profession, and a prime architect of the 'assimilation' policies, in 1929 wrote,

*...some races possess certain powers in greater degree...than do others. Thus, the Australian Aborigines and the African negroes are human and have their powers, but they are not necessarily equal to the white or yellow races'.[37]*

As Cowlshaw has observed, in 1928 when Anthropology was established at Sydney University it was almost immediately was co-opted into involvement in the training of colonial 'patrol officers' for Papua New Guinea and the Northern Territory. Anthropologists became both the architects, builders and long-term maintainers of the policy of assimilation, and yet, as Cowlshaw states,

*Neither the relationship between anthropological scholarship and the state nor the colonizing process was problematised. Applying the science of anthropology apparently did not require any intellectual scrutiny.[38]*

This apparent obsession with race stemmed from the fact that Australia developed as an overwhelmingly "British" society with a national mania regarding white racial purity and homogeneity.

This was not necessarily the case in the United States where, '...the complexities around the American settler experience and their struggle for independence had a fundamental effect on the way the emerging national community was to be imagined. It led to a shift away from a concern with 'natural' (British) national culture as a site for identification,

and towards a messianic espousal of ideology as the basis for forging an identity for the new nation.'[39]

This did not mean that America was not infected with widespread notions of white supremacy. As I have already pointed out, by the 1830s a need had arisen to justify both slavery and the brutal treatment of the relocated eastern Indians and subsequently the 'science' of phrenology became popular. In Philadelphia an Irish-Quaker doctor called Samuel Morton assembled the largest collection of human skulls in the world. From his measurements he concluded that white people's skulls were largest which bestowed them with 'decided and unquestionable superiority over all nations on earth'.[40] Whilst these theories were challenged by some, especially German surgeon Freidrich Tiedemann[41] whose counter arguments gained wide currency in Europe, it was Morton's ideas that prevailed in the United States.

But the rapid American economic and territorial expansion at this time meant that in the Southern states, where a huge increase in the demand for cotton by 1860 led to vast new estates and a dramatic rise in the number of slaves. That year there were said to be four million slaves in the south, and the institution of slavery had become 'the foundation of the economic system'.[42] The civil war put an end to overt slavery of African-Americans, but it was the beginning of a long period of racial bigotry, segregation, exclusion and economic deprivation as white attitudes, steeped in notions of Social Darwinism, hardened. Yet, despite the subsequent racism shown in the regime of terrorism and brutality waged against the former slaves and the cultural rewriting of Native American history by Hollywood, there was never an overt United States government policy of racial elimination of the indigenous populace.

Consequently we are able to see that the two countries developed fundamentally different notions about assimilation, as it would apply to their respective indigenous populations.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that despite the common origin of the imposed settler-societies of Australia and North America, different ideas emerged from each nation about how to absorb the native populations. Whilst the different histories of occupation and the difference in early treatment of the indigenes contributed to the way in which each country tried to assimilate the indigenes, the major factor that made the difference would appear to have been the United States' experience of slavery.

The fact that eminent Australians today such as the Prime Minister have such difficulty in accepting a more truthful version of Australian history might have more than a little to do with the unpalatable reality that the Australian version of assimilation was used as a form of genocide. Thus in Australia today we have our own version of 'holocaust denial' being propagated from the highest office in the land, whilst in America no such phenomenon is apparent from the oval office of the White House. In my mind this situation has developed in part because one country attempted merely cultural assimilation whilst the other, Australia, actually tried to exterminate its indigenous populace with a deliberate policy of miscegenation.



Until Australian governments and people are able to accept this reality of history, and properly compensate all the victims of these policies, there can never be genuine reconciliation or justice for the indigenous peoples of Australia.

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### Notes

- [1] Sven Lindquist, *The Skull Measurer's Mistake*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 5.
- [2] Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, (ed.) *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, p. 4.
- [3] Daniel Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture, Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, p.23.
- [4] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999, p. 42.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- [6] John Stratton and Ien Ang, "Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA" in Tom O'Regan (ed), *Critical Multiculturalism*, Vol. 8, no.2, 1994, p. 127.
- [7] Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West: An Illustrated History*, London: Orion Publishing, 1996, p. 25.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- [9] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London: Pan, 1987, pp. 23-25.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p.41.
- [11] C.D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Canberra: ANU Press, 1970, p. 2.
- [12] Francis Paul Prucha, "The Anomaly of Indian Treaties", in *American Indian Treaties: The History of a Political Anomaly*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, p. 4.
- [13] Geoffrey C. Ward, "The Most Avid Nation", in *The West: An Illustrated History*, London: Orion Publishing, 1996, p. 82.
- [14] Sven Lindquist, *The Skull Measurer's Mistake*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 42. *Ibid.*, p.42.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p.42.
- [16] *Slavery in the United States*, Encarta Concise Encyclopedia  
: <http://encarta.msn.com/encartahome.asp>
- [17] Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson on Slavery," from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, at:
- [18] Duncan Clarke, *History of American slavery*, PRC Publishing, 1998
- [19] Edward Herman, "The New Racist Onslaught", quoted in bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, London: Penguin, 1996, p.117.
- [20] Bell Hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, London: Penguin, 1996, p.186.
- [21] For details on the assimilationist Indian Boarding School system see, David Wallace Adams, "Institutions", in *Educating for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience*,
- [22] Fergus Robinson and Barry York, *The Black Resistance*, (Melbourne :Widescope, 1977), p.90.

- [23] Gary Murray, personal interview with author, 4th September 1997.
- [24] Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: the Dhan-Gadi Aborigines and the Australian State*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989, p. 98.
- [25] Lindquist, 1997, p. 77.
- [26] Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi policy toward German Jews 1933 -1939*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 30.
- [27] Indeed, one of the major grievances at the Eureka Stockade had to do with discontent about Chinese miners.
- [28] see, Jonathon King, *The Other Side of the Coin: A Cartoon History of Australia*, Sydney: Cassell Australia, 1976, p.69.
- [29] Andrew Markus, "After the Outward Appearance: Scientists, administrators and politicians", *all that dirt: An Australian 1938 Monograph*, ed. Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus, Canberra: History Project Incorporated, 1982, p.87.
- [30] Ibid. p.86.
- [31] Markus, 1982, p.86.
- [32] Markus, 1982, p. 90.
- [33] For description of history of NSW 'reserve' system see, Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1996.
- [34] Commonwealth of Australia, Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, *Aboriginal Welfare*, Canberra, April 1937.
- [35] See, A. O. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1947.
- [36] Ibid., p. 73.
- [37] A.P. Elkin, "The practical Value of Anthropology III", *Morpeth Review*, 9, (1929), p. 34.
- [38] Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Studying Aborigines', in Bain Attwood and John Arnold, eds, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1992), 22.
- [39] Stratton and Ang, 1994, p. 134.
- [40] Samuel G. Morton, *Crania Americana, or Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America, to which is prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species*, Philadelphia & London, 1839., quoted in Sven Lindquist, *The Skull Measurer's Mistake*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p.43.
- [41] Sven Lindquist, *The Skull Measurer's Mistake*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p.47.
- [42] J.M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of the World*, London: Penguin, 1995, pp. 774-776.

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