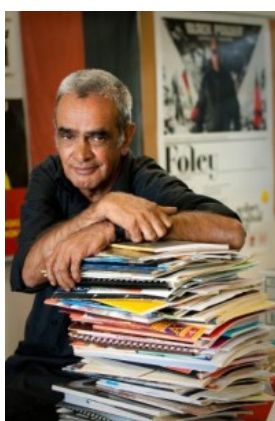


articulation.

Dr Gary Foley untangles a unique story of black education and history

October 21, 2014



‘Tangled Up in Black’ was the title of alumnus Dr Gary Foley’s public lecture delivered to a packed theatre in Old Arts on Wednesday 15 October. Presented by the Research Unit in Public Cultures, and based on his Chancellor’s Medal winning doctoral dissertation, Dr Foley’s lecture provided an extraordinary journey through black history and education, combining personal reflection with a broader history of social injustice but also remarkable individual and community achievement across five decades.

Well known as one of Australia’s most prominent activists and intellectuals, Dr Foley was involved in the foundation of Aboriginal self-help organizations such as the Aboriginal Legal Service in Redfern and the Aboriginal Health Service in Melbourne. Centrally involved also in major political activism such as the Springbok Tour protests (1971), the Tent Embassy in Canberra (1972), and the Bicentennial Celebrations (1988), he has produced work that has been the subject of an SBS TV documentary, a one-man theatre show and numerous journal and newspaper articles. Dr Foley has also been the senior curator for southeastern at Museum Victoria from 2005 to 2008, a lecturer at a number of universities and the originator of the Koori History Website. He is currently completing an autobiographical account of the Black Power Movement and the 1972 Tent Embassy, due for publication next year.



Dr Foley commenced the lecture with tales from his childhood.

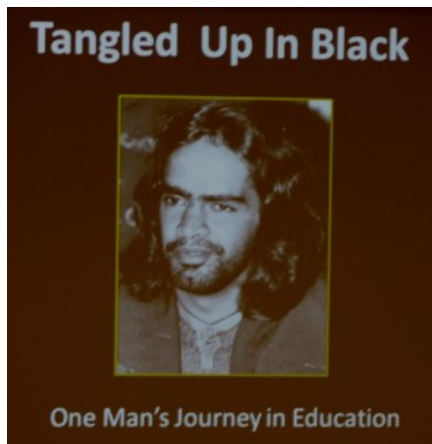
Following an introduction by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis, Dr Foley outlined the challenges facing a young Aboriginal man growing up in Nambucca Heads in 1960s Australia – the homelands of his Gumbaynggirr grandmother – particularly of a young man who aspired to a university education. Highlighting a striking history of Australian prejudice meant that many other indigenous peoples around the world would receive university degrees over a century prior to the first Aboriginal people – with Margot Weir (Diploma of Physical Education, University of Melbourne, 1959) and Charles Perkins (Bachelor of Arts, University of Sydney, 1966) the first Aboriginal people to receive university qualifications in Australia – Dr Foley traced his refusal to accept the racial slurs and insults that marked his initial schooling which resulted in his expulsion from high school in 1966 at the age of 16. It would be over 30 years before he enrolled at a university. When he did so, he received a first class honours degree in History from Melbourne and completed a PhD in History in 2012.



Dr Foley captivated the packed-out Public Lecture Theatre.

The history of what Dr Foley describes as the ‘self-determination era’, in particular, was a focus of the lecture. It is a history that he outlined as important because of the way it challenges versions of the past that ‘consign Aboriginal people to the status of powerless victims with no agency in the historical proceedings occurring around them’. Dr Foley left no doubt that Aboriginal political activists have fought to have Aboriginal issues placed at the heart of the national agenda over many decades. Challenging and delivered with his characteristic wit and humour, the lecture also contained a number of recommendations to the Vice Chancellor regarding the University’s own mixed history of dealings with Aboriginal peoples. Dr Foley’s lecture received a standing ovation.

The most striking note of the evening was the generosity of the speaker, and that of University of Melbourne academic and alumnus Dr Tony Birch, who provided a response to Dr Foley’s address. Another Aboriginal academic to win the Chancellor’s Medal for a thesis in History, Dr Birch outlined the contribution made by Dr Foley in the fight against the closure of the Northlands High School in 1992. In a moving tribute, Dr Birch emphasized the ways in which Dr Foley had stood up for those, both black and white, who were often among the most disenfranchised in Australian society – and had often done so at great personal cost. Dr Gary Foley, he emphasized, has never forgotten that ‘he is one of us’.



Copies of the lecture and response will be made available through the Faculty of Art's Research Unit in Public Cultures.

Dr Foley was interviewed on Radio National prior to his lecture.

Posted on [October 21, 2014](#)