

# **Koori Engagement with Television**

by Gary Foley ©

In 1973 when television in Australia was still broadcast in black and white, the opening line of the first ever all-Aboriginal TV show was, "*Welcome to colour television.*" Thus began the first attempt by indigenous Australians to come to terms with the advent of television into their world. For the Kooris television was always going to be far more problematic than for the white, Anglo-Celtic majority in Australia who already had been conditioned by the affluence and consumerist ideology and conceptual preparation transmitted to society through radio in the post-war era. In this essay I will explore indigenous community engagement with, and response to, the advent of television and subsequent attempts to both control and/or subvert the intent of television manufacturers and programmers. I will examine whether or not Aboriginal 'communities' in south-east Australia have succeeded in their efforts to limit what they perceive to be the culturally destructive effects of television in their respective communities.

In Australia television was introduced around the country throughout the 1950s and 60s. The nation had been thoroughly prepared for the advent of television by massive publicity campaigns in the press and on the radio. Furthermore, radio had conditioned "white" Australia to naturalise concepts of modernity, domestic space and mass consumption, and thus prepared them for television's introduction. The fact that television programming (by virtue of its then predominantly American origin) communicated to the then patriarchal, white, nuclear family made it even easier for the dominant ideology in Australia to adjust. John Ellis referred to this and 'the perpetual construction of standard families: wage-earning husband, housekeeping wife, two children.' (Ellis:1992) However, in indigenous Australia it was a different situation.

In the 1950s, Koori communities in south-eastern Australia were involved in an intense struggle against legislated oppression in the form of "Aboriginal Protection Acts" and the policy of "assimilation" which were used to forcibly confine Aborigines to government "reserves" and to remove large numbers of children from their families. This meant that Koori peoples were fighting a battle for cultural survival and as part of that battle was the quest to maintain a Koori identity and "values" that were in direct contradiction of the prevailing modernist notions of individuality, industrial capitalism and mass consumerism. The economic situation of Koori communities precluded any aspirations to the latter, and cultural factors inhibited the appeal of many aspects of television's discourse on cultural homogeneity. Poverty also meant that television entered the Koori sphere much later than the rest of Australia, and that when it finally did come it was more likely to be consumed in a public space (community hall etc) than in the private domestic space of the "white" world.

Also, reserve life and imposed notions of western domestic space had become sites of resistance for many Koori peoples, as Barry Morris noted,

*The wooden houses and their internal ordering of space represent the 'correct' or 'civilised' way to live in terms of the dominant society. What emerged though was that the wooden houses were simply co-opted to fit Dhan-gadi patterns of social relations. The use of space within such houses remained largely undifferentiated. It continued to be related to storage and shelter. Similarly, the domestic sphere remained firmly located around the campfire outside, and cooking and eating retained their collective and public forms. It can be assumed that the Dhan-gadi were aware of the 'correct', 'civilised', way to live through their interactions with local Europeans and the presence of missionaries, but that they chose, both individually and collectively, to perpetuate their own cultural practices. (Morris 1989: 81)*

Whereas in the dominant Anglo-Celtic community notions of consumerism and individuality were regarded as 'normal', and in the suburbia where the majority resided, the domestic space of home was

in many ways perfect to adapt to television. This is not to say that the domestic sphere of 'white Australia' was not disrupted by the arrival of the television set, as Tom O'Regan has clearly shown, but compared to the disrupted, dysfunctional situation of Kooris resisting government attempts to destroy their extended family system, the 'whites' were in a much more receptive mode.(O'Regan 1992)

Furthermore, because of both the regimented nature of government reserves and the cultural nature of Koori society, most functions of the Koori family were performed in the public spaces of the community. This meant that in the rare instance in the late 1950s and early 1960s when a television set might appear in a community, then it would be consumed in a community hall rather than in an individual family's domestic space.

All of this meant that in the early days of television in Australia, very few indigenous families had access to the medium, but after 1967 when the reserve system closed down in NSW and most of the reserve dwellers moved to Sydney (taking the Koori population of Redfern from 1000 in 1967 to 35,000 by 1969) the situation changed dramatically.

By the end of the 1960s, with the greater part of the NSW Koori populace now living in the midst of the non-Aboriginal community, it was becoming apparent to Koori community leaders that television per se did, at first glance, appear to be a threat to their people's cultural values. One concern related to the direct address of television, which spoke to the white, middle-class, patriarchal nuclear family and thereby excluded those that this audience saw as the 'other'. This was apparent at that time in the invisibility of indigenous people on the television screen. Virtually all domestically produced TV shows in the 1960s excluded indigenous performers or actors, and when Kooris were referred to it invariably involved variations of the racist construction of Aboriginality (lazy blacks, drunken blacks etc). As Marcia Langton

observed of television

*There is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people...The easiest and most 'natural' form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible (Langton, 1993, 24)*

Indeed it seemed the only time one ever saw Kooris on television was on Four Corners or some other news or current affairs program, where they were invariably presented as 'victims', or people with problems. It was this projection of Koori people as victims in the television campaign for the 1967 Referendum that had resulted in that historic vote, but despite the apparent victory for the Koori community, it left a lingering negative perception of Kooris.

Eventually, by the early 1970s Australian TV drama shows had begun to include token Aboriginal actors such as Steve Dodd, Bob Maza and others in bit parts in shows such as Division 4 and Homicide, but still cast as 'baddies'. Until 1972 the only Australian television show that had an Aboriginal person as one of the main, regular characters was Woobinda, Animal Doctor. But there was still the problem of the portrayal of indigenous people and culture. Steve Dodd used to joke that he was sick of roles where his total dialogue was, "he went that way, Boss!" and Justine Saunders frequently complained that in virtually every role she had in those days the script called for her to be raped. This problem existed because the scriptwriters of Australian television were invariably WASP males who projected their own construction of Aboriginality on the characters they created. For Kooris this was part of the deeper problem that was defined by Cornel West as the

*condition of relative lack of Black power to present themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies' (West: 1990)*

The response by the Koori community was to use humour to subvert the

arrogance of the dominant ideology with the creation by the Redfern-based National Black Theatre (NBT) of a stage show called Basically Black. This highly political review was such a success on stage at Sydney's Nimrod Theatre that ABC-TV approached NBT to create a 30-minute television version of the show. But when the Koori writers and actors of NBT presented their first version of the TV show, they were quickly made aware that the more contentious skits of the stage show (including very confrontational material attacking racism in society) were 'not suitable' for a television audience. Amidst much anguish, the NBT writers produced another version which even some of them regarded as too much of a compromise because many of the most effective satirical barbs had been removed and thus it was a far less powerful political statement than the original.

Nevertheless, when the show finally aired it was the first all-Aboriginal television show and its use of humour, satire and ridicule has never been matched by the regular indigenous shows that emerged on public TV in the past decade. The fact that it was another 15 years before another all Koori show appeared, and also that to this day no regular Koori show has ever appeared on commercial television, speaks volumes about the extent to which the Koori community remain isolated, marginalised and all but invisible on Australian television today.

Yet, almost paradoxically, back in 1972 Koori political activists demonstrated that they had mastered one of the possibilities that television offered when they extremely successfully manipulated national and international TV news crews, and projected their 'Aboriginal Embassy' protest action to a vast international audience. The television coverage of the Embassy demonstrations put the indigenous Land Rights struggle on the international political agenda, and the symbol specifically created to show up dramatically on a television screen, the red, black and yellow Aboriginal flag, has since become the most recognised image of Aboriginal people today. Such was the power

of television tapped by those Koori political activists of that era, and the result was the globalisation of the Australian Koori struggle.

Unfortunately, since that time the Koori community has been relegated to watching as its culture is trawled by television, appropriating our symbols (Uluru, indigenous art, didgeridoo music) and reconstructing them as part of the national symbols, culture and commerce (eg. The Qantas commercial for the "Dreamtime seat"), whilst at the same time denying Kooris a voice or a presence on television. Our only hope for the future is that Tom O'Regan is correct when he says,

*National culture is in a constant process of identity formation, continually being adjusted depending upon the materials brought to bear upon it. It is a self-conscious program of construction and creation. Tradition is capable of being created anew.*(O'Regan: 1993, 93).

But given that even today Kooris are effectively excluded from all aspects of television production (as performers, technicians, camerapeople, advertising, and executives), and further given that 'at any one time the overall configuration of the service is the outcome of the struggle between, the adjustments made to, and the relative complementarity of, the different parts of the service' (O'Regan:1993, 84) then I can only remain pessimistic about the future.

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