Every culture has been accused of racism at one time or another. So how racist are we in the Sunshine State?

Story Susan Johnson  Photography David Kelly
Thirty years ago when I was young, inner-city South Brisbane was the place to see drunken Aborigines. Young girls, old men, shouting, staggering, in groups or alone, sprawled on footpaths in and around that suburb’s Musgrave Park.

“Ruddy Abos,” said my late grandfather if he ever happened to come across Aborigines, drunk or not. Originally from North Queensland, he considered all Aborigines to be no-hopers. He partly blamed “Abos” for the death of his sister, believing she worked her fingers to the bone largely because the Aborigines on her farm were either too lazy to work or else you could never find them because they’d buggered off, leaving her to do everything.

My other grandfather (from Sydney, now gone too, shared these views. He also didn’t care much for Greeks, Batts or dagoes. Once, in a huff, he got off a bus after telling the bloke sitting next to him: “You’re too much for me, mate.” The dago stank of garlic, my Pop said, a substance so exotic to all four of my grandparents it might have been frankincense or myrrh.

Nowadays, of course, garlic, Italians and people of most other races are commonplace in Australia. But other things appear stuck in a time warp – the drunken Aborigines of South Brisbane are still there, shouting and staggering. Like anyone who’s lived in Brisbane for any length of time, I’ve learnt that Aborigines first converged on Musgrave Park because it was a tribal meeting spot, long before European settlement. But I suppose I believed that, over the past three decades since I was a girl, circumstances would have altered beyond recognition for Aborigines meeting in West End. Education, alcohol awareness, better health and housing, an apology from a prime minister, all these things must surely have replaced those old South Brisbane Aborigines with a new South Brisbane Aborigine – upright and sober, for a start.

It wasn’t that I didn’t take into account the complexity of the issues facing Australia’s indigenes, the deeply entrenched social and economic problems, or alcohol addiction’s dismayingly tenacious grip. I knew, too, about the shameful mortality rates for Aboriginal babies, and the gap in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

But what I didn’t expect to see after an absence of many years was another generation of South Brisbane drunks. There they are, sometimes strewn across footpaths in the early morning, begging for money or cigarettes. Those same Aborigines might not be there any more but their children are. And their children’s children.

If the drunken Aborigines are still with us, are our views of them the same? Are the “jokey” taunts aimed at indigenous footballers by white players, for instance, bound up in the same old unexamined views? And do we still see the new wave of Muslim and African and Asian immigrants who followed the Italians, Greeks and Estonians as too much for us, mate; our dim views about dagoes and their garlic simply replaced by dim views about Muslims and their mosques and veils?

In a society that prides itself on its tolerance and egalitarian attitudes, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, felt compelled after her visit to Australia last May to say she detected a strong undercurrent of racism, particularly in regard to our treatment of, and attitudes toward, refugees and outback Aborigines. Just last month the Australian Defence Force began yet another investigation into the Facebook pages of soldiers serving in Afghanistan who referred to locals as “sand niggaz” and “dune coons”, and joked about running them over.

On April 21 a white supremacist music festival, dubbed “Hammered”, will take place in Brisbane – given the green light by the Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Police because the event does not technically contravene racial vilification laws – which caused Australian federal Race Discrimination Commissioner Dr Helen Szoke to label the idea of it as “abhorrent to our community”. And how do we frame the October 2010 attack on South Brisbane’s Punjabi Palace Indian restaurant – which saw teenagers shouting “go back to India!” – are we supposed to view that as a random, one-off event? I can’t be the only one who has noticed the increasing popularity of those “F..K OFF WE’RE FULL” stickers on the back windows of cars.

Just how racist are we?
ANY EXAMINATION OF RACISM FIRST HAS TO define racism. To the descendants of Jews who perished in the Holocaust it has one meaning, to anyone who experienced South Africa’s apartheid laws it has another. The Macquarie Dictionary defines racism as “the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior”, and “offensive or aggressive behaviour ... stemming from such a belief”. Further, any system of government and society— including policies— based on those sorts of beliefs must be considered racist.

That’s not us, right? Everyone knows that the so-called White Australia policy is over and done with, a relic of those faraway days in the 1940s when prime minister John Curtin romantically declared that “this country shall remain forever the home of the descendants of those people who came here in peace in order to establish in the South Seas an outpost of the British race”.

Most Australian schoolchildren know about the violence of Scottish, Irish and Welsh diggers against the Chinese “Coolies” on the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. Most of us are familiar, too, with the history of the “Kanakas”, people from the Pacific Islands and Melanesia, recruited to Queensland to clear land and work on cane farms, and later “repatriated” largely because Queensland feared being left out of the newly formed Federation. Fears about Kanakas and the Chinese, and foreign labour in general, resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, which placed “certain restrictions on immigration”—that is, on people who happened not to be white.

These days, almost half of Australia’s residents were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas, many of whom are not white. The most recent data from the Department of Immigration— from March 2010— shows that Australians now identify with some 250 ancestries and that we practise a range of religions. After English, the most common languages spoken are Italian, Greek, Cantonesse, Arabic and Mandarin. So what’s with the “go home to India!” stuff, when every single one of us who is not indigenous originally came from somewhere else?

LET ME TELL YOU A JOKE: THERE’S THIS English guy who is so in love with this Irish girl that he wants to marry her. He’s so desperate to marry her, in fact, that he’s even willing to live in Ireland. He finds out that if he’s going to fit in with the Irish, though, he requires an operation. He goes to see a doctor, who tells him that if he’s going to live happily in Ireland, he’ll need to have a third of his brain removed.

And so, because he is so in love with his Irish girl, he agrees to have the operation. But when he comes around from the anaesthetic, the doctor says: “Look, I’m really sorry, but there’s been a terrible mistake. Instead of removing one-third of your brain, we removed two-thirds.” And the guy looks up, grins, and says, “She’ll be right, mate. No worries!”

It’s a joke once used by Dr Raymond Evans— distinguished Queensland historian and author of A History of Queensland, now an adjunct professor in the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at Griffith University— in a Race Relations course he taught at the University of Queensland.

“Jokes are sacrosanct [in Australia],” Evans says. “You’re supposed to take it, but most jokes are not directed at white Australians. White Australians are not so happy when they hear negative jokes about themselves. Students would laugh if I told a joke about another race, but they wouldn’t really laugh if I told an anti-white Australian joke. It’s the same thing that happens when women become upset about sexist jokes. They’re disarmed when someone accuses them of having no sense of humour. But it’s more than just a sense of humour; it’s the way the joke is couched and so on. It all depends where you position yourself as to whether you find it a difficulty or not.”

According to Evans, “joking” in Australia has long been a part of what he calls “folk racism”, and those “jokey” taunts at indigenous football players form part of that. “[Joking] is a powerful tool in perpetuating stereotypes across the generations. If you’re the recipient of nasty, racist invective, it’s not a joke any more. When you’re the target, it’s different to when you are the perpetrator — when you’re the perpetrator it puts you in an advantaged position and degrades other people.”

Evans himself immigrated from Wales with his family in 1949, aged four, to Brisbane. “Immediately I started to learn about other racial groups through playground humour and doggerel and jokes... racism in the schoolyard is often perpetuated through these sorts of jokes, and that gives you a particular mindset.”

He argues that such “jokes” reflect not only racist attitudes but something deeper: “Racism isn’t simply a matter of attitudes and opinions, it’s also a matter of interests. It’s a matter of social relations and socio-economic interests in
that some groups are privileged by it and other groups are disadvantaged by it. It’s about real material conditions that advantage some people and disadvantage others.

“The fact that we exist in a society that’s been built on racist processes means that as white, Anglo-Saxon-origin people we have an advantage over other people. Now, while we may not be personally involved in perpetuating that advantage or in having made it happen, because we receive privileges – in that our group doesn’t suffer as much unemployment, we get promoted in the workplace more easily and we get better housing or better educational opportunities or whatever – we are complicit in the system.”

Evans believes that Queensland’s violent history in establishing an advantaged white society over an indigenous one has left its mark on subsequent generations. “I think there’s a lot of resistance to looking at the details of it, you know, because from a moral position the incomers are not in a strong position. In the 1820s, the Aborigines held everything and by the 1920s they held virtually nothing. Aborigines probably numbered around 200,000 to 250,000 people at the beginning, but by the 1920s their numbers were down to about 15 or 16,000 – that’s an incredible attrition rate, and not the kind of history you can take a lot of pride in.”

Moreover, the remaining Aborigines then got placed on reserves and missions, their human and civil rights removed. “They were treated as children, as wards of the state; they had no independence, no property rights, no human rights and so on,” Evans says. “They got treated in ways that no white person would countenance, and they’ve struggled out of that position only in the last 30 or 40 years. It’s only been in the very recent past in Queensland that we’ve got rid of the enforced segregation of Aboriginal people – it was still being done in the ’70s.”

Evans suggests that even after legal restraints are removed, social restraints and attitudes remain. “You’re not going to shake them off and get rid of them in a short period of time, or probably even in decades. It takes ages and a lot of re-education to shrug these things off.”

**THE TROUBLE WITH TRYING TO MEASURE RACISM**

Racism, and in particular the racists among us, is that there is no generally accepted measure of “racism” (despite the dictionary definition). Not everyone agrees on one single, objective definition, so that what is racist to me might not be racist to you. Are jokes about Aborigines funny or racist? If you start a sentence with the words, “I’m not being racist but …”, does it mean you actually are?

You only need to travel as far as the suburb of Moorooka, in Brisbane’s south-west, to understand that one person’s definition of racism is another’s definition of common sense. The changes that have been wrought in Moorooka since World War II are a microcosm of the larger changes Australia has experienced. Originally a solid, Anglo-Saxon working-class suburb with a scattering of government-built returned-servicemen housing, after the war the suburb became a settlement point for migrants from the Ukraine and later from the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia). In the past decade, Moorooka saw an influx of migrants immediately distinguishable from its earlier wave of white European migration – Africans, many of them Muslims, some wearing hijabs and others wrapped in brightly coloured, non-Western clothes.

Today, the main drag of Moorooka – once the tram terminus and home to old-style Anglo businesses such as a bakery, a butcher, a drapery and a fruit and vegie shop – resembles a street in Addis Ababa, say, or Mogadishu. There are goats’ heads in Halal butcher shops, Ethiopian berbere spice from Red Sea Grocery and plenty of that bling beloved by Africans – oversized fake gold jewellery, fake nails, wigs, swathes of shiny, rich cloth. African men at tables on the footpath drink the burnt, bitter coffee of Eritrea and Ethiopia, and everywhere there are the loud voices of African people meeting and greeting each other.

Martha Hupalo, a hairdresser and owner of the hair salon John of Hollywood, is from the first wave of migration. Like Dr Evans, she came to Australia from the Ukraine with her family as a five-year-old in 1949, but initially to the NSW countryside. She moved to Brisbane in 1965 when she married. “I had a good start in Australia,” she says. She is not sure that the changes to Moorooka since the recent wave of African migration have been as positive.

“There seems to be an overpopulation of one particular type of person and nothing else – it’s overpopulated with Africans.”

It’s not that she’s racist, she insists, or that she holds any particular animosity towards the new migrants, it’s just that the African culture is so very different to European culture. “They walk and sing and do things very different to European culture. They walk and down and down, shouting at the tops of their voices, spitting, singing out to each other. It’s just a completely different culture and it’s just taken over. It doesn’t let the white people in.”

Hupalo is cutting the hair of another longtime Moorooka business person, Ron Brennan, a retired civil engineer, who for 30 years had an
office down the road. "Moorooka has grown, but not for the better," he says. "It’s gone from being a family-oriented place, where you could have a good Australian family life, to a really pushy, uncultured area.”

Like Hupalo, Brennan does not consider his opinions racist. "Moorooka’s not a suburb any more, it’s a low-rise ghetto. There’s nowhere to park and all the old shops are gone. Now there’s no place for Australians to shop other than Woolworths."

Around the corner, in the Ranchhod Arcade, Rafael Tafeta, 25, is leaving Mu’ooz restaurant, a not-for-profit business set up by Eritrean former refugee Saba Abraham to provide work for refugee women. Tafeta, originally from Ethiopia, is doing management and accounting at QUT, although she only learnt English in 2004. She also works as a cultural support worker, helping newly arrived refugee women. Dressed casually in jeans (although she also wears Ethiopian dress for special occasions), Tafeta has many Australian friends, all of whom have been welcoming. She is grateful for the opportunity that a new life in Brisbane has given her, though she sometimes misses the closeness of Ethiopian society.

"Ethiopia is very family-orientated, very connected, and everyone has close relations with their family," she says. "But in Australia everyone lives for themselves much more, in an individual way, so for a while I kind of got lost in the middle and thought, Oh my god, what am I doing here? I couldn’t get used to this life, everyone was so busy, and when you went home no-one would be in the house.”

But gradually she adapted. Has she ever experienced racism in Queensland? "Do you want my honest opinion? I try not to think there is racism because my personality is to think positive. I mean, no-one has called me black or said anything to me on the street or anything like that, so I don’t want to be negative. It’s just sometimes you go somewhere and people look at you in a different way. No-one says anything, but you feel it somehow.”

Everyone of course has their own anecdotal evidence about racism, about whether or not it exists, and to what degree. Over in Brisbane’s southern suburb of Sunnybank there are more anecdotes, more stories. Another suburb that has also undergone huge demographic changes since World War II, Sunnybank is now home to a vast Chinese population. If Moorooka’s main street resembles Mogadishu, Sunnybank Plaza is like the back streets of Hong Kong. There’s yum cha being served, Cantonese being shouted, jade jewellery, abalone and Peking ducks strung up by their necks in windows.

Peter Tang, originally from Kowloon, has been an optical dispenser in the centre for ten years and has never once encountered anything from Australians but respect. "They are very welcoming," he says, preferring to talk instead about why Chinese from all over Brisbane come to shop at Sunnybank Plaza – his theory is that it is because, unlike the more celebrated Chinatown in Brisbane’s Fortitude Valley, there is free parking.

The immediate past president of the Queensland Chinese Forum, Dr Xiang-Yu (Janet) Hou, agrees with Tang about Queenslanders being welcoming. A medical doctor and postgraduate from Peking University, Hou was awarded an Australian scholarship to do a PhD at QUT and migrated to Brisbane in 2000. She is now a senior lecturer in epidemiology in the School of Public Health at QUT.

Are we racist, then? "No, I don’t think so, particularly in Queensland. We are a very warm and open group of people called Queenslanders.” Hou suggests that this welcoming attitude is partly because locals now recognise the importance of Chinese immigrants, as well as tourists, in contributing to the state’s economic development. She also believes that core Chinese values – such as respect and honesty – are the same values held by multicultural Queenslanders. But when I press her, suggesting that because she mixes with highly educated, middle-class professionals her experience may be different to other less skilled Chinese migrants, she concurs. “I agree that there would be a pocket or two of racism in Queensland, but that would be the case for any community in any country. Queensland is no worse than any other place I know.”

She argues that antagonism towards refugees, for example, while often seen as racism, is often something else. "I think the refugee problem is political, not a community issue. The [federal] Opposition has made a huge political gain using this issue for re-election by exaggerating the extent of the problem to scare people. I don’t ever believe the refugees are a problem for any community in Queensland or in Australia – just look at the country’s response to the live cattle export issue. Everyone should appreciate what a passionate and caring group of people we have here in Australia. People who genuinely care about live cattle care about live people as well.”
HOU IS RIGHT ABOUT QUEENSLANDERS BEING
no better or worse than the rest of Australia or
the rest of the world when it comes to racism.
The results of the largest and most extensive
study into attitudes towards race, the
Challenging Racism project, released in
February 2011, showed that overwhelmingly
Australians support cultural diversity. The study
surveyed more than 12,500 respondents in
every state over the past decade and found
that Australians are mostly tolerant of racial
and cultural difference. And Queenslanders
very much resemble the picture for the rest of
the country.

The study’s lead researcher, Kevin Dunn,
Head of School and Professor in Human
Geography and Urban Studies at the
University of Western Sydney, says that
Queensland is “about the middle of the road
in terms of attitudes, not the most tolerant
place, and not the least”. He believes that it is
not so much state comparisons that are most
interesting as the cultural diversity that exists
within specific communities. For example,
areas with a greater mix of cultures tend to
experience more racism – with older,
Australian-born men who lack a formal
education and who speak only English being
the most racist.

There are also different ways of looking at
the data: “At the moment, 87 per cent of
Australians think that cultural diversity is a great
thing for this country, but about 12 per cent
believe there are races that are superior and
others that are inferior. In other words, there
are Australians who are racial supremacists.

“Now, that’s a small figure, one in ten, and
we can take some encouragement from that,
but at the same time it’s a problem as well.
Those people can do a good deal of
community relations harm, and they do. They
do harm beyond their numbers.”

The group currently suffering the highest
levels of intolerance and what Dunn refers to as “racial incivilities” are Muslims. “Anti-
Muslim sentiments are shared by all
different cultural groups in Australia ...
other researchers, such as [Alison] Booth and
[Andrew] Leigh [from ANU], in their research
into job discrimination, found that people with
a name from a Middle Eastern background had
to submit many more job applications to get
the same rate of call-up for an interview as
non-Muslims. If we’re talking about the term
‘out groups’, there would be the strongest
levels of social distance felt towards Muslim
Australians than any other group.”

Certainly Dr Mustafa Ally, 61, a prominent
figure in Brisbane’s Muslim community, would
agree. He has personal experience of women
having to remove their hijabs in order to get
a job, of Muslims anglicising their names, and
has also witnessed members of his community
being verbally abused while walking back
from morning prayers. However, he
believes that every human group practises
discrimination of some sort, be it Indians with
their caste system or South Africans with
apartheid. “We all discriminate, for whatever
reason, it is a human failing I think,” Ally says.

The honorary assistant secretary of the
Ethnic Community Council of Queensland,
Ally is also a lecturer in Information Systems at
the University of Southern Queensland, as well
as president of the Muslim charity Crescents of
Brisbane, and editor and well-loved columnist
of Crescents’ online newspaper. He has lived
in both Britain and South Africa and is acutely
aware of racial politics and how quickly groups
can become marginalised. “Every society has
to be vigilant,” he says.

But what Ally really wants is for a Muslim-
Australian character to be depicted in television
programs such as Home and Away. “Why don’t
we ever see any black faces? I believe I have
a part to play on Home and Away!”

And what about those other black faces,
those sad, lost people still staggering about the
streets of South Brisbane? Dr Raymond Evans
has a few ideas about them, too. “The first
thing I would say is that alcoholism isn’t just
an Aboriginal problem; it’s a mainstream
Australian problem. Australians historically
have been very heavy drinkers … we’ve got an
adult alcohol problem throughout society but
a lot of it is hidden, because [those] people are
not homeless or impoverished.

“See the street alcoholics at South
Brisbane because they’re not just alcoholics,
they’re homeless people, and they’re
impoverished people. They’re also more
visible because of their ethnicity, so your eye
is drawn to them. It’s more than an alcohol
problem – it’s a thorough deprivation problem
that you can project back into history.”

So, the next time you are tempted to tell
an Aboriginal joke, you might like to ponder
the implications.
Jokes are a powerful tool in perpetuating stereotypes … If you’re the recipient of racist invective, it’s not a joke any more.
All racial groups discriminate, for whatever reason; it is a human failing, I think … Every society has to be vigilant.