

○ VOLUME 14 NUMBER 1, 2015

**Dgadi-Dugarang: Talk Loud, Talk Strong**  
**A Tribute to Aboriginal leader Uncle Ray Jackson,**  
**1941-2015**

**Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese**  
Curtin University and Macquarie University

*In this brief memorial essay, we pay tribute to the late Uncle Ray Jackson, President of the Indigenous Social Justice Association and tireless social justice activist. Uncle Ray Jackson's social justice work encompassed a broad spectrum of social movements. Throughout his work, he insistently brought into focus critical relations between national and transnational formations of settler-colonial power, between its racist modalities of governance and the lived violence that it produced for its targeted subjects, including Indigenous peoples, refugees and asylum seekers and other 'suspect' peoples and racial undesirables. We also mark one of Uncle Ray Jackson's most significant contributions to the ongoing assertion of unceded Aboriginal sovereignty in the context of the Australian settler-colonial state: his establishment of a number of Aboriginal Passport Ceremonies. We discuss the political significance of these ceremonies for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.*

It is fitting that this *Borderlands* special issue dedicated to the politics of human suffering include a tribute to the Wiradjuri leader, Uncle Ray Jackson. To the end of his life, Uncle Ray Jackson remained a tireless fighter for Australian and other First Nations peoples, and an uncompromising internationalist and socialist, holding up a mirror to settler-colonialist violence in all its national and global ramifications. His Indigenous Social Justice Association (ISJA) led many courageous campaigns against Aboriginal and other racialized deaths in custody, holding state institutions to account and supporting the families of the bereaved. Over four decades, through both his activism and his writing, Uncle Ray Jackson insisted on and developed the linkages between justice for Aboriginal peoples and a range of other

social movements such as Black Power and anti-apartheid, prison abolition, trade unionism and socialism. The tributes paid to him by figures such as Angela Davis and John Pilger testify to this indispensable globalist dimension that framed his life and work.

Grounded in the assertion of Aboriginal sovereignty, Uncle Ray Jackson produced a series of astute and uncompromising analyses of the instances of colonial and state violence detailed throughout this special issue—the invasion of Gaza and the ongoing dispossession and occupation of Palestinian land; the war in Sri Lanka and the continuing stream of refugees it produced; the relentless toll of the war on terror—and unfolded the geopolitical and economic order that underpins them. His analyses were accompanied by an unwavering commitment to and solidarity with those who bore the worst effects of this violence: racialized peoples incarcerated in prisons and on-shore and off-shore immigration detention; the families of those killed in sites of official state custody and in its hidden shadows and cracks; those dispossessed and disenfranchised by the forms of geopolitical and neoliberal violence he documented in meticulous detail. An open letter to the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, written in 2013, tracks the logic by which the occupation of Aboriginal land led to the xenophobic policies and practices directed towards present-day refugees and asylum seekers:

The invasion of the Aboriginal Nations that began in January, 1788 continues to this day but after time it also allowed, under statute, a xenophobic and racist Law that was used against my peoples and immigrants/refugees, especially if they were not white in a social understanding (Ray Jackson, Open letter to Kevin Rudd, MP, August 5, 2013).

Uncle Ray's life-work against settler-colonial racist violence in all its global ramifications is best exemplified by the Aboriginal Passports campaign he initiated in 2010. The first Aboriginal Passport Ceremony was organised by Uncle Ray Jackson together with a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists. Uncle Ray Jackson described the aims of the ceremony thus: 'the issuing of the Passports covers two areas of interactions between the Traditional Owners of the Lands and migrants, asylum seekers and other non-Aboriginal citizens in this country. Whilst they acknowledge our rights to all the Aboriginal Nations of Australia we reciprocate by welcoming them into our Nations' (ISJA Media Release 2012). In the course of the ceremony, non-Indigenous Australians were required to purchase an Aboriginal passport and to pledge a formal acknowledgment of unceded Aboriginal sovereignty over the various Indigenous Nations that cover the Australian continent.

The act of issuing Aboriginal passports to non-Aboriginal people signifies as a powerful act reclaiming Aboriginal sovereignty over unceded land. It is marked by the counter-discursive resignification of the very technology—the passport—deployed by the settler-colonial Australian state in order to consolidate and reproduce the ongoing

usurpation of Indigenous sovereignty. The passport ceremonies reference a history in which papers and certificates and the lack of these documents circumscribed Aboriginal peoples' citizenship and regulated their own free movement across colonial lines. Precisely by resignifying the passport as an Aboriginal technology crucial in legitimating non-Indigenous people's movement through Australia's Aboriginal Nations, the passport ceremonies at once marked Aboriginal people's unextinguished sovereignty over country *and* their right to offer welcome and hospitality within their own lands, including to those rejected and criminalised by the state, in particular those asylum seekers and refugees deemed 'illegals'.

The passport ceremony demonstrates Uncle Ray Jackson's acute awareness of the inextricable link between the issue of unextinguished Aboriginal sovereignty and the illegal occupation of the continent on the one hand and settler-colonial Australia's repressive immigration policies on the other. The White Australia Policy and its infamous practices such as the dictation test were long employed by the settler state to exclude those it regarded as threatening its sovereign authority, both its political enemies—unionists, communists—and a shifting cast of racial undesirables. These exclusionary histories are inverted in ISJA's issue of passports to those cast out by the state. The 2014 ceremonies had their antecedents in 2010 with Uncle Ray Jackson's issue of passports in absentia to a group of Sri Lankan asylum seeker being held in limbo in Indonesia aboard a boat bound for Australia. Subsequently, in a powerful ceremony held outside the walls of the Villawood detention centre in Sydney, Uncle Ray Jackson conferred Aboriginal Nations passports on two Tamil men indefinitely imprisoned on the basis of secret security findings to which they had no access (<http://aboriginalpassportceremony.org/>).

It is worth noting, specifically in the context of this special issue of *Borderlands*, that Uncle Ray Jackson was a staunch supporter of the Palestinian people in the face of the ongoing Israeli settler-colonial assaults that they continue to endure. He wrote with a sense of impassioned outrage as he witnessed on news media the unfolding of the latest catastrophic war, Operation Protective Edge, launched by the state of Israel against Palestinians in Gaza. This latest militarised assault resulted in the killing of 2,131 Palestinians, including 501 children, and the wholesale destruction of the very infrastructure—such as hospitals, water, sewerage and power plants—that renders life possible. In the face of this unbridled destruction, Uncle Ray Jackson wrote in one of his newsletters:

it is far too long that the genocidal attacks against the civilian population of gaza must stop. and stop immediately. it now appears that the netanyahu government is in an all-out war of extermination of the palestinian people ... israel must stop this overkill. that is just a fact that must be done ... what must be possible, no, certain, is that the ethnocide of the palestinians in gaza must cease once and for all. (ISJA newsletter, 31 July 2014)

As a tangible expression of his solidarity with the harrowing plight of the Palestinian people, at the first Aboriginal Passport Ceremony in Redfern Uncle Ray Jackson handed over a set of Aboriginal Passports to a Palestinian representative who conferred them, on his behalf, to a number of Palestinians in refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank. Other direct and indirect targets of the war on terror, including refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia were also recipients of Uncle Ray Jackson's Aboriginal passports; as were Australian citizens reviled and persecuted by the state, such as Mamdouh Habib, a survivor of torture and imprisonment by coalition forces, and the fugitive WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange.

In their FaceBook tribute to him, the group Writing Through Fences wrote: 'Many of the members of Writing Through Fences, those who are still imprisoned in immigration detention camps and those who are in community, were profoundly moved and affected by the invitation that ISJA sent out for them to apply for Aboriginal Passports. Receiving these means so very much'. Another member wrote, simply, 'Thank you Mr Uncle Ray Jackson, you gave a place to live and accept'. These moving words could well serve as Uncle Ray Jackson's epitaph. They succinctly articulate his philosophy of life, informed, as it was, by an expansive sense of compassion and a desire to see the most marginalised given their rightful place in the sun. This philosophy of life saw him stand side-by-side with a broad spectrum of disenfranchised communities that crossed race, gender, sexuality, class and (dis)ability lines. Uncle Ray, for example, worked tirelessly to get justice for the family of the Aboriginal transgender woman, Veronica Baxter, another death-in-custody victim. When the Inquiry into Veronica Baxter's death issued a gag motion that suppressed any information being made public about the Inquiry, he wrote in his characteristically uncompromising way:

this Inquiry was a sham. It did not resolve how she died. We saw a white-wash—on the twentieth anniversary of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in custody. After the farce of this 'inquiry' we then saw censorship of the like I have never seen before, in my twenty years of black deaths in custody campaigning. (Quoted in Community Action Against Homophobia, 8 April 2011, <http://www.caah.org.au/justice-for-veronica-baxter>)

In his pursuit of justice for Veronica Baxter, Uncle Ray Jackson continued to work with the Social Justice Association, Community Action Against Homophobia, Sex and Gender Education, Still Fierce, The Greens, Socialist Alliance, and the Queer Collaboration Conference. The heterogeneity of this list of organisations bears testimony to his expansive embrace of communities and organisations principally oriented by a social justice ethos.



*Image 1: Uncle Ray Jackson with his Prix des droits de l'homme medal (Photo by Joseph Pugliese)*

In 2013, Uncle Ray Jackson was honored with a prestigious human rights award, the *Prix des droits de l'homme*, by the government of France. He received no such official recognition from the Australian state. Regardless of this lack of acknowledgment in his country of birth, Uncle Ray Jackson, a member of the Stolen Generations, never lost sight of what mattered: the critical goal of realizing justice for the wronged, the vulnerable and the disenfranchised. One of his most memorable qualities was this expansive sense of compassion and his unfailing care for the grieving and the bereft. Even in his final months and weeks, these qualities of care, compassion and solidarity with those struggling for justice were amply manifested. On the last day of his life, Uncle Ray Jackson visited the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in his beloved Redfern, the urban Aboriginal heartland, to express support for the sovereignty protesters encamped there.

Uncle Ray Jackson's legacy includes both a continuing activist movement and a large collection of political writings, some of which are referenced above. His newsletters and other archival materials have been donated to the Australian Institute of Torres Strait and Islander Studies (AITSIS) in Canberra. Another part of Uncle Ray's ongoing international legacy is a research project funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that aims to map racialized deaths in custody in the settler states of Canada and Australia.

Over several years Uncle Ray Jackson wrote and edited the ISJA newsletters, titled *Dgadi-Dugarang Talk Loud, Talk Strong*. When they came to an official end in 2007, they were succeeded until his very last weeks by an irrepressible stream of open letters, petitions and

bulletins, constituting an invaluable archive of activism. We close this humble tribute to a teacher and leader who inspired us with his courage and dedication with the words with which he ended many of his tributes to fellow Indigenous warriors for justice in these newsletters:

*May he walk his lands in peace.*

#### Postscript

On 7 September 2015, Professor Bruce Dowton, Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, wrote to Uncle Ray Jackson to inform him that a recent meeting of the University Council had resolved to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* in recognition of his social justice 'contributions to the Indigenous community and the Australian community more broadly.' Unfortunately, Uncle Ray had already passed on, but we have no doubt he would have used this latest honour as, in his own words, yet another 'hammer with which to break down the doors of injustice'.

**Professor Joseph Pugliese is Research Director of the Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University. He is the author of *State Violence and the Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones* (Routledge).**

**Suvendrini Perera is Professor of Cultural Studies at Curtin University. She is the author/editor of seven books, including *Reaches of Empire; Australia and the Insular Imagination; Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies*; and the coedited anthology, *At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour on Terror* (with Sherene Razack) and the forthcoming monograph, *Survival Media*, on the war in Sri Lanka.**