
Alyssa L. Trometter

Our Sydney Press reported that the Wayside Chapel Official, of King’s Cross, had invited some of the Black Panthers of America to visit Australia. My wife toured America some years back and had a good insight of the mode of living and arrogance of these Negroes. Their visit to this Country, at present free of this coloured problem, which faces America, would not be in the interests of Australia. As an old Australian, I sincerely trust that this type of black is not admitted here.

—Yours Faithfully, A. W. Buckley

By the late 1960s the Black Power Movement emerged in Australia out of the Aboriginal neighborhoods in Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane. Aboriginal activists throughout Australia had recognized similarities between their situation and the African American sociopolitical position. Aborigines identified with their race more than their social class and, as a result, they saw their situation as ideologically, economically, and socially similar to that of African Americans. Historian Kathy Lothian claims that “like African Americans, [there] were issues over which Aborigines and their White supporters had been campaigning for decades. . . . Demands for equality of treatment in education, health and legal representation, the abolition of discriminatory legislation, an end to police harassment, and the simple right to live without racism had formed a long narrative of [Aboriginal] protest.”

There are two streams of thought that must be understood in examining the Aboriginal Black Power Movement: the American stream of influences and the Australian.

The small body of scholarship on the Australian Black Panthers remains largely ignored—even within broader historical discussions centered on the international significance of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Australian formation receives only minimal attention. Aboriginal historian Gary Foley contends that “there has been minimal examination of the dynamic Black Power Movement that emerged from the . . . major Australian cities in the early 1970s.” Australian academics have previously emphasized the Aboriginal Black Power Movement’s community service programs and have analyzed the movement’s

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broad impact on Aboriginal activism. Scholars have previously stressed the originality of Aboriginal Black Power, but have never addressed the relationships forged beyond Australia’s borders. Most recent examinations from the United States have dealt mainly with the movement within the U.S. borders, but fortunately, this is beginning to change with a scholarly movement towards African Diaspora Studies, Pan-Africanism, and transnational perspectives.5

In 2001 historians Michael Clemons and Charles Jones argued that scholarly literature on the Black Panthers had a narrow focus, one that limited a complete understanding of its “international stature” and “global initiatives.”6 Clemons and Jones emphasized that, in a four-year span, the Panthers went from a group based in Oakland, California, to a globally recognized organization, with an international base in Algeria. Their research reveals just how influential the American Black Panther Party was in creating a sense of global solidarity for marginalized African Americans. Clemons and Jones only briefly mention the Australian Aboriginal adaptation of the American Black Panther Party, choosing to examine other global linkages, such as Bermuda’s Black Beret Cadre, the White Panthers of the United Kingdom, and the party’s linkages to the People’s Republic of China.7

“Black Power Comes to Australia,” The Sunday Australian, 5 December 1971, 11.

Historian David Garrow suggests that Black Power studies can vastly improve if scholars direct their attention to “finely honed” portraits of Black Power both nationally and internationally.8 Even though several publications discuss the shift
in political and cultural consciousness among African-descended peoples across the globe, there is little in-depth historical research that analyzes how non-African minority groups utilized Black Power rhetoric. In December 2012 this typically one-dimensional analysis of Black Power’s global influence was further transformed with Nico Slate’s *Black Power Beyond Borders*. This collection of scholarly articles examines how Black Power ideologies were adopted and adapted outside of the United States, expanding the borders of Black Power and extending the discussion of the movement into a global arena. The volume examines the global legacy of the Black Panthers by providing an in-depth discussion of the Israeli Black Panthers, the Polynesian Panthers in New Zealand, and the Dalit Panthers in India. Despite this recent turn towards expanding the literature of the global Black Power Movement, recent inquiries have neglected American Black Power ties to the Aboriginal movement in Australia.9

However, American scholarship has looked at the Black Power Movement’s impact on local communities stateside; its ideological connections to the New Left; the movement’s reach to other ethnic minorities in the United States; and its impact on urban politics. In addition, the study of Black Power’s most iconic figure, Malcolm X, remains of particular scholarly interest.10 In 2011, historian Manning Marable’s controversial biography of Malcolm X unraveled the complex layers of this “angry black militant,” positioning Malcolm X as the “fountainhead” of the Black Power Movement.11 Malcolm X’s ideologies provided the philosophical foundations for black revolutionaries both in America and beyond.12 Malcolm’s rhetoric effectively traversed the globe and inspired young Aboriginal activists to combat government repression and emphasize their own Aboriginality and self-determination.

A study of Malcolm X’s effect on Aboriginal communities, particularly in Sydney’s Redfern district, is crucial in gaining a broader, transnational history of the rise of the Aboriginal Black Power Movement. The rhetoric of Malcolm X proved central to the development of widespread activism in the United States, and his ideological positions were adopted and adapted by Redfern activists to fit within a uniquely Australian context. This essay also focuses on the ideological impact of Malcolm X on Aboriginal activists in Sydney’s Redfern, but first, I briefly detail early European–Aboriginal relations and the emergence of Black Power in both Melbourne and Brisbane. Australian Aboriginal activism has a long and varied history; and scholars have properly examined those successful instances of frontier Aboriginal resistance and the effective formation of a multitude of Aboriginal-led organizations.13 The Australian Black Power Movement aimed to address land dispossession, exploitation, and racial discrimination, and all of these issues were raised early on in the colonial struggle for power.
The British arrived in Australia in 1788 and quickly flooded a region that Aboriginals had inhabited for over 42,000 years. British settlers steadily disrupted the livelihood of Aboriginal inhabitants through ecological change, disease, and armed violence. However, Aborigines resisted these incursions culturally and physically. In the first month of British occupation there were seventeen direct encounters reported between the indigenous people and settlers. It is important to keep in mind that early Australian society proved unique in that it was overwhelmingly a British prison. The primary purpose of the British First Fleet was not to develop profitable trade, but rather to transport roughly 750 male and female convicts from England and place them immediately into a penal settlement. Tensions spilled over from these penal settlements, directly affecting relationships with nearby Aborigines, and reports from early inspectors of the settlements documented instances of sexual abuse and kidnappings.

Early Australian society also proved unique in that colonizers offered no formal treaty to Aboriginal landowners. In the eyes of the British Crown, sovereign owners of land were only those with developed methods of farming. However, 19th- and 20th-century scholars, who have examined this time period, described the Aboriginal societies as egalitarian. Although the British offered no formal treaty to Aborigines, they were promised treatment consistent with British common law and were regarded as British subjects. But Australian colonial officials were notorious for disobeying directives coming from British officials, and Aborigines were often treated with complete contempt.

Ultimately, the history of Aboriginal resistance to white settlement was characterized by skilled guerrilla warfare, but eventually the indigenous fighters met with defeat. By 1833 the government called for a committee to assess the dire conditions of those remaining Aboriginal communities. The committee’s report acknowledged mass deaths of Aborigines in the colonies and called for a program that would assist in protecting the indigenous populations. The British government hired protectors, who learned native languages, traveled with Aboriginal tribes, and essentially guarded them from harm. However, the recession of 1842 hit hard and adequate funding for those operations was no longer made available. The designated protectors grew increasingly concerned for their own livelihood and failed to effectively perform their duties. Nevertheless, a rubric of “protection” continued to exist and by the early 20th century, Australian policymakers started to blur “protection” policies with ideas of “assimilation.” Even though there was never a comprehensive statement that detailed the Australian government’s “assimilation” practices, there was a shift towards incorporating the most “civilised” of Aborigines into colonial society.
In 1901, under the newly formed Commonwealth, the Australian colonies became formal “states” and the new constitution ensured that individual state governments directed their own indigenous affairs. There was an underlying assumption that the Commonwealth would only legislate for Aborigines when its own powers were impacted. By this time Anglo-Australians had become increasingly concerned with a perceived threat of “foreign” racial contamination.19 As a result, Australia’s Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was directed at “securing a White Australia.”20 Australian policymakers aimed to safeguard Australia from racial tensions exemplified overseas, particularly the so-called “Negro problem” that existed in the United States.21 Australia’s first Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, commented:

[The Australian Constitution] marks a distinct advance upon and difference from that of the United States. . . . We here find ourselves touching the profoundest instinct of individual or nation—the instinct of self-preservation—for it is nothing less than the national manhood, the national character and the national future that are at stake.22

By 1901 a “colour line” had been drawn and the issue of maintaining Australia’s “whiteness” was a primary concern.23

As government officials were limiting immigration, Australia’s indigenous peoples were obtaining low-wage manual labor jobs primarily in city centers within the “land of opportunity.”24 By the time of federation in 1901 the Aboriginal population of Australia was estimated at 93,000 and “death, illness, displacement and dispossession” continued to disrupt their traditional livelihoods and cultural networks.25 Sydney’s industrial waterfront was a massive point of trade for the international economy in the early 1900s. Within the municipality of Sydney there was a small population of dockworkers that included both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal men joined together in a physically draining occupation. Jack Simpson, a dockworker on the wharves of Sydney, later recalled the horrific working conditions.

A ghastly, frightening [population] of men at times fighting and tearing each other’s clothes off in sweating jungle-like scuffles, for a starting docket to earn twenty three shillings for a day’s work on the wharves. That was the bull system. Hundreds of men, lines of fear, pain and anguish in their tired faces, walking despondently and dispiritedly up the street.26

The amount of shipping in Australian ports doubled between 1899 and 1913, as wharves and shipbuilding yards increasingly dominated the Sydney harbor. By 1901 New South Wales had surpassed Victoria to become the largest point of shipping trade within Australia. Historian Winifred Mitchell found that “Sydney wharf labourers loaded wool, wheat, frozen meat and other foodstuffs, coal, timber, cement and many other valuable cargoes in ever-increasing amounts.”27
The Aboriginal waterside workers on the Sydney docks were mercilessly exploited in the first decades of the 20th century, working to unload as much as a hundred tons of lead and eighty tons of bagged sugar per hour, and 1,800 to 2,000 bales of wool every eight hours per gang. The wharf was known as the “hungry mile,” as men were driven to work under constant pains from starvation. Despite despicable working conditions, the Sydney wharf provided Aboriginal laborers direct contact with the outside world, as foreign sailors docked for extended periods and shared messages of African progress from all corners of the globe. Aboriginal dockworkers soon realized that they were not alone in their struggles for justice, as this maritime transfer of workers allowed progressive ideas to pass freely from one end of the Pacific Ocean to the other.28

An international chapter of the Colored Progressive Association was set up on the Sydney waterfront in 1903 and provided an outlet for Aboriginal members to discuss their social and political hardships with visiting African Americans from the United States and the Caribbean. On the Sydney waterfront Aborigines learned about the rhetoric of Marcus Garvey from their personal conversations with seamen.29 Known as the “father of Black Nationalism,” Garvey’s ideologies reached Australia and according to Gary Foley, Aboriginal activists “took Garvey’s ideas on black consciousness and adopted and adapted them to the New South Wales’ context and in doing so created the first modern day Aboriginal political organization.”30

The Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association was established in 1924 and was clearly inspired by intercultural connections with people from the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Along with Garvey’s rhetoric, Aboriginal leaders also obtained the works of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois from visiting seamen. Aboriginal activists soon developed a political platform that argued for Aboriginal self-determination and economic independence. The Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association created a model for future Aboriginal organizations, as it was the first body that called for the removal of white “protectors,” arguing that Aboriginals should be held responsible for their own affairs. However, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association was successfully suppressed by the white leadership on the Aboriginal Protection Board, and formally dismantled in 1927.31

The Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), a solely Aboriginal body, was formed in 1937 and sought to promote self-determination. Specifically, it demanded that Aboriginals obtain full citizenship rights and complete Aboriginal representation in Parliament. Perhaps most notably, as the majority of Australians celebrated the sesquicentenary of European settlement, the APA organized a national “Day of Mourning” protest in Sydney on 26 January 1938 that sought to
generate awareness of government injustices towards the Aborigines. APA members Jack Patten and William Ferguson explained,

This festival of 150 years of so-called “progress” in Australia commemorates also 150 years of misery and degradation imposed upon the original native inhabitants by the white invaders of this country. . . . You came here only recently, and you took our land away from us by force. You have almost exterminated our people, but there are enough of us remaining to expose the humbug of your claim, as white Australians, to be a civilised, progressive, kindly and humane nation.32

Aboriginal activists struggled to instigate change, while federal and state institutions floundered in addressing the basic needs of Aboriginal communities. The APA sought a federal takeover of Aboriginal affairs, demanding improvements in housing, education access, and working conditions. The APA attempted to continue the struggle that previous elders had pursued over a decade earlier, but the organization proved “frantic” as leaders led unsustainable efforts that produced minimal results.33

At the turn of the 20th century, the internationalization of Aboriginal affairs had begun with maritime seamen but, by the 1950s Aboriginal organizations were still slow to develop and were quickly undermined. In 1958 a meeting of Aboriginal advancement organizations discussed the creation of a federal body that would increase Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal issues and institute legislative changes for Aboriginal communities. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders demanded equal wages, proper education, land rights and improved living conditions for all Aboriginals. The organization played a key role in allowing Aboriginal activists to form a power base where they could connect and strategize with each other.34

Since the early 1900s, Aborigines had examined the possibility of using power, violence, and nonviolence to combat restrictive government policies. However, Aboriginal activists, who had experimented with grassroots and community organizations throughout the first half of the 20th century, had seemingly failed to generate any substantial change.35 In the 1950s Aboriginal resistance started to gain increased momentum and activists were inspired and supported through their participation in a global struggle. Historian Jennifer Clark contended that “the growth and development of Aboriginal activism was co-existent with wider socio-political action and intellectual shifts in Australia and overseas.”36 Whilst Aboriginal activism was entirely and uniquely Australian, the modes of resistance had elements that clearly crossed global borders. With a strengthening sense of self-determination and self-empowerment, younger Aboriginal activists questioned the racial divide. Clark noted that by the 1960s “the Australian government and Aboriginal activists were clearly aware that the international racial climate was changing and that the language of race relations was growing in international importance.”37 Aboriginal
movements successfully utilized this global racial climate when stimulating grassroots organizations and communities towards action. The protests and mobilizations of the 1960s eventually reached Australia “in various forms, through public and private discourse, in parliament, in the press, in Aboriginal communities, in organizations and in the universities.” Jennifer Clark summarized the progress in the internationalization of Aboriginal affairs by 1961:

First, Aboriginal welfare was discussed overseas as a result of open acts of publicity consciously initiated from Australia. . . . Second, discussion was generated by reports in the foreign press. . . . Third, material published for an international audience regardless of the political intent often had political ramifications.

The Australian civil rights experience was vastly different both politically and socially from other countries and must be seen as a local civil rights movement that was spurred on by an earlier transnational phenomenon. Australian indigenous activism was “strongly characterized by a changing racial discourse,” one that increasingly promoted cultural empowerment, self-determination, and self-defense.

By 1965 international ideas of African consciousness and the constructs for new racial paradigms, which had dominated the United States in the 1960s, inspired Charles Perkins, an Aboriginal student at the University of Sydney. Perkins decided to “draw more white attention to the problem [of racism] and stimulate the [A]borigines themselves into doing something about it.” The Australian Freedom Rides of 1965 was a uniquely Australian event, but it was partly inspired by the Congress of Racial Equality’s Freedom Rides that took place in 1961. Historian David Chalmers referred to the Freedom Rides as “the explosion of classic social questions into politics and into the streets.” Charlie Perkins stated that “other people [had] done it [the Freedom Rides] in a different way,” but the “timing was right” for Australian students in 1965 to “go out and challenge the extraordinary racism, the segregation, and bigotry in the rural areas of New South Wales.” The Australian Freedom Rides occurred over two weeks in February 1965, as a busload of students took direct action against racism in northern New South Wales. The students’ actions, coupled with the harsh responses they received, were all too reminiscent of the civil rights campaigns in the United States, as students “were pelted with tomatoes, punched, verbally abused, burned with cigarette butts and run off the road.”

[The] deeper objective was for Aboriginal people to realize [that] second class is not good enough, you don’t have to always be first class, but don’t always be second class. And don’t cop shit when you don’t have to and you don’t have to live on riverbanks and in shanty huts at the end of a road where there is rubbish; live in town. And you don’t have to cop these white men sneaking around pinching aboriginal women at night, you know sitting down at the front of picture theaters, not being able to sit in a restaurant . . . that’s not on.
The Freedom Riders certainly were successful in confronting racially charged communities, as they “exposed the vicious nature of Australian racism in an unprecedented way.”

By the mid-1960s it appeared that the political and social activism erupting in Australian cities and on university campuses was most reflective of the United States. White Australians were forced to acknowledge the racism that existed in their own country, as images of white students demanding liberties and full equality for Aborigines filled the Australian urban press. The Australian government faced international pressures for racial reform that weighed heavily on officials, who started to question how international organizations would view Australia’s policies toward the indigenous peoples. Substantial changes in Aboriginal policies and practices were imminent; the 1967 referendum clearly demonstrated this shift.

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders pressured the government to remove two distinct sections from the Australian Constitution that blatantly discriminated against Aborigines. These were sections 51 and 127:

51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth . . . [for] . . . The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders circulated a petition to pressure the government into holding the referendum and a campaign followed, urging Australians to vote for Aboriginal advancement. The referendum passed with a 90.77 percent “Yes” vote and Aboriginals received full legal status.

However, the majority of white Australians still held on to their racial stereotypes after the referendum, and many regions remained racially divided. According to historian Peter Read, the 1967 referendum presented a case of failed “social” assimilation, as Aborigines still could not “try on clothes, sit down for a meal, get a haircut, go to secondary school, run for office, join a club, drink in the lounge bar or work in a shop.” Aborigines were seemingly “short-changed after a period of hope” and the referendum served to ignite a younger generation of Aboriginal activists who were willing to fight in order to ensure change.

Aboriginal youth started to embrace international ideas of African American nationalism, particularly African American consciousness and cultural pride. Aboriginal self-assertion, empowerment, and cultural advancement served to unite communities. By the mid-1960s Aboriginal activists, who readily acknowledged
those important similarities that connected them to African American radicals, turned towards importing Black Power rhetoric to fit the needs of their communities.53

As news about the racial conflict in the United States arrived in Australia through the media, African American soldiers on their “rest and relaxation” leave from the Vietnam War arrived on Australian shores, and direct linkages were established yet again between African Americans and Aborigines. Aboriginal communities adapted ideologies from the U.S. Black Power Movement and even established community service programs in Melbourne and Sydney that were directly modeled after Black Panther Party initiatives. It is perhaps important to note here that the political and social climate in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s was significantly different from that of the United States. Nevertheless, this period brought extreme social change on a worldwide scale and catapulted the U.S. racial problems onto an international stage.

THE RISE OF ABORIGINAL BLACK POWER IN AUSTRALIA

This essay specifically examines the Redfern Black Power Movement and its utilization of Malcolm X’s rhetoric. But it is important to first provide an overview of the Black Power Movement in the state of Victoria and the formation of the Australian Black Panther Party in Brisbane. Similar to its American model, the Aboriginal Black Power Movement offered an urban-centered critique of racist practices in Australia and utilized city centers to combat injustices and assist oppressed communities. In 1968 Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins observed that “the depressed sociological and economic situation that created Black Power in America was rife in Australia.”54 Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal leaders adopted certain aspects of Black Power rhetoric imported from the United States, and adapted it to fit the distinct needs of their communities.

Black Power emerged first in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1967 under the leadership of Bruce McGuinness, who served as co-director of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, and promoted Aboriginal self-determination. He also argued that Aboriginal activists had to maintain cooperation with white Australians. Melbourne’s Victorian Aborigines Advancement League represented a black–white coalition that had created cultural and social welfare programs to assist Aboriginal communities. The league was certainly rooted in an older cooperative ethos in that it assisted Aborigines with “integrating” into the larger Australian society, provided a network for individuals working on behalf of Aboriginal rights, and praised full Aboriginal citizenship rights throughout the Commonwealth. The Victorian Black Power Movement gave rise to the foundation of Aboriginal-controlled organizations to provide adequate housing, legal services, and health care. McGuinness had effectively created “a space for a more
radical perspective to come across” in other Australian cities, including Sydney and Brisbane. By December 1971 the formation of the Black Panther Party would take place in the most racially divided Australian state—Queensland.

BLACK BRISBANITES AND THE RISE OF THE AUSTRALIAN BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Queensland’s capital city of Brisbane has been regarded as a “sleepy backwater,” known for its “exceptional boredom and brutality.” Aboriginals had a long history in Brisbane, with the territory once possessing an indigenous population (pre-dating European settlement in 1824) of roughly 120,000. Preceding contact with Europeans these “Brisbane Blacks” openly welcomed indigenous visitors from surrounding islands, as well as inland Aboriginal clans; and the Brisbane Valley served as a “communal area.” Aboriginal raids began in the 1840s, directed against these European intruders. These attacks proved sporadic, as clans attempted to drive the settlers out by spearing cattle or stealing sheep. These methods were mostly unsuccessful, as white settlers continued to transform the Australian landscape. Aboriginal population figures are difficult to pinpoint with any certainty, but Australian historian Anna Haebich has estimated that by 1901 the Aboriginal population had diminished to 26,670. The population’s steep decline was largely due to violent attacks directed at the Aborigines by settlers in the north who held the popular belief that any Aboriginal presence posed a threat to the existence of colonial society. This frontier violence left an indelible impression on Aboriginal memory, marked by a deep sense of fear, suspicion, and injustice. In 1895 the Queensland government commissioned a report that examined the dwindling population of Aborigines.

One long-term consequence of this report was the passing of the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act that ushered in a period of protection and segregation of Aborigines in Queensland. The Queensland government assured Aboriginal communities that reserves, constructed by colonists, were safe spaces to rid Aborigines of opium smoking habits and protect them from the violence of white settlers. Yet, in actuality, these reserves acted as a “cheap labour reservoir” where Aborigines could be located, away from colonial settlements. Once on these reserves, Aborigines were deemed wards of the state and lost all legal status under the British Crown. Under the terms of the 1897 law, unemployed Aborigines, including “half-castes” and “quarter-castes,” were forcibly removed from lands they occupied and sent to reserves. The “certificate of exemption” was also introduced under section 33 of this law, which stated: “It shall be lawful for the Minister to issue to any half-caste, who, in his opinion, ought not to be subject to the provisions of this Act, a
certificate, in writing under his hand, and that such half-caste is exempt from the provisions of this Act and the Regulations, and after the issue of such certificate, such half-caste shall be so exempt accordingly.”63 These certificates were not issued frequently, but did allow for a select number of Aborigines to move independently from the reserve—within reason. As Australian Black Panther co-founder Sam Watson recalled, Queensland’s extreme policies towards Aboriginal affairs “controlled every single aspect of Indigenous people’s lives.”64 Exemption certificates were only issued to Aborigines who were deemed “compliant” by state officials. Certificates were rarely issued, but when they were, Aborigines were supposed to sever all ties with their Aboriginal culture, or the state could revoke the certificate.65

It is estimated that by 30 June 1957, roughly 17,000 Aborigines were controlled by these laws. In 1965 the Aboriginals Protection Act was replaced by the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Affairs Act that formally implemented assimilating Aborigines into mainstream Australian society. The 1897 act had stood practically unchanged for sixty-eight years, but this shift was likely in direct response to external pressures pushing Queensland officials to curtail their blatantly racist policies. This new piece of state legislation essentially recognized that certain groups of Aborigines were viewed as acceptable within Australian society and, as a result, were required to leave the reserves and assimilate. The Queensland government staunchly supported assimilation practices across the state. This shift towards assimilation gained wide support in Queensland, as it aimed to promote national unity and the construction of a national identity.66

Ultimately, this turn towards assimilation just served to compound Brisbane’s obvious racial divide, as Aborigines faced the difficult task of relocating from a rural reserve to uninviting urban areas. Many Aborigines moved directly to Brisbane in search of employment and to connect with other separated family members. Within Brisbane’s city limits, Aborigines faced racial discrimination and targeted violence. The sudden influx of Aborigines into the city also created a reservoir of unemployed laborers. Soon there was a disproportionate number of unemployed Aborigines who had inadequate housing and little or no income. The Queensland government, alarmed by this Aboriginal migration, acted quickly by building hostels on Brisbane’s south side, effectively segregating Aborigines into what became known as an “Aboriginal Harlem.”67

Yet the power of Queensland’s Aboriginal activism would develop out of this forced segregation. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Aborigines in Brisbane gained strength from this imposed separation, and activists propelled the city onto the “front-line” of Aboriginal activism.68 Responding to Queensland’s racist legislation, there was a core group of Aboriginal activists who served as role models for those Australian Black Panther leaders, who would emerge in the early 1970s.
These individuals sought to combat Queensland’s racist policies and practices, arguing for Aboriginal self-determination over their own affairs. According to Sam Watson, this core group mainly consisted of Rev. Donald Brady, Kathleen Walker, Don Davidson, and Steve Mam. These individuals sought to expose the realities of Brisbane—a city characterized by racial bigotry and confrontation.69

According to Sam Watson, by the early 1970s there was a gradual shift in Brisbane, “where the older people who had led the struggle through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s started to withdraw from the frontline and the younger, more militant Aborigines stepped forward and took leadership roles.”70 The Australian Black Panther Party emerged in Brisbane under the leadership of Denis Walker and Sam Watson. Watson later recalled that activists in Queensland came “to grips with the Marxist ideology” put forward in Malcolm X and Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, and Bobby Seale’s *Seize the Time*.71 Throughout 1970 and into 1971, Brisbane Black Power activists “searched widely for information and publications about liberation movements elsewhere.”72 Watson noted that most of this literature was spread by visiting African American servicemen, who came to Australia for their rest and relaxation leaves during the Vietnam War. Watson recalled that these African American soldiers

always had with them these tracts, and these books and information pamphlets about African American political thought from their homeland. They brought information into the Brisbane community and other places about Marcus Garvey, his pan-African nationalist thought, information about the Panthers, the civil rights struggles in the United States around the boycotts, stories about Rosa Parks, . . . Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. All this information was coming in.”73

These new texts left such a profound impression on Watson and other Brisbane activists that they started to discuss these works in Black Panther rap sessions (also referred to as “black studies programs”). The rap sessions were only open to Panther members and were taken right “out of the Panther textbook,” giving Panthers an opportunity to discuss openly African American literature coming out of the United States and directly relate it to Aboriginal political issues. The members would often discuss the Aboriginal protectionist acts, police patrolling, Marxist ideologies, and the functioning of the capitalist economy.74 Black Panther Party co-founder Sam Watson recounted that by reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he soon came to the realization that a revolutionary group was essential in protecting and serving Aborigines in Queensland. He recognized the need for a more militant approach in combatting the Queensland government. Both Walker and Watson saw the development of the Australian Black Panther Party as part of Black Power’s natural progression. The formation of the party in 1971 “was perfect,” according to Watson.
Coming out of the 60s . . . you had great leaders in the States like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the Panthers coming through. You had the Vietnam War causing America enormous problems. You had White Australia trying to define its own place in the world. . . . It was a time we looked across the water.  

Ultimately, the Australian Panther formation in Queensland proved rather complicated, as Queensland was the most racially volatile state in Australia. The only functioning chapter of the Australian Black Panther Party operated in Brisbane. The party reached a peak of roughly fifteen to twenty members and served to educate Brisbane’s Aboriginal youth, while implementing social welfare programs that aimed to benefit their own communities.

Within the broader Australian context, the Aboriginal Black Power Movement varied distinctly throughout. This was perhaps largely because of the differing social and political environments. In short, Victorian Aboriginal activist Bruce McGuinness brought Black Power to Melbourne, stressing self-determination, black liberation, and black pride. He also believed Aboriginal Black Power needed to provide more collaborative efforts with white Australians than its American model. Activists in Melbourne and Brisbane have noted the influences of African American literature on Aboriginal activism throughout the 1960s and 1970s, particularly *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which fundamentally shaped activists in both cities. While the meaning of power, violence, and nonviolence varied for Aboriginal Black Power activists in Melbourne, Brisbane, and Sydney, these concepts were certainly rooted in similar rhetoric and had similar aims.

MALCOLM’S IMPACT ON SYDNEY’S REDFERN DISTRICT

In 1967 Sydney’s Redfern neighborhood was representative of the economic, political, and social troubles that deeply affected Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal population of Sydney was substantial. There were an estimated 120,000 Aborigines living in Australia during the late 1960s and at least 14,000 Aborigines were residents of Sydney alone. Similar to Brisbane, Redfern’s Aboriginal population exploded during the late 1960s after the 1967 referendum that resulted in the closure of Aboriginal reserves and the mass displacement of Aboriginal workers. Desperate for employment, Aborigines flocked to major cities but soon encountered exorbitant rent, few semiskilled and unskilled positions, and largely segregated neighborhoods.

The Aboriginal unemployment rate in Redfern was two to three times higher than that of white workers, forcing many new arrivals to live in impoverished circumstances. Dubbed the “Aboriginal ghetto,” Redfern is an inner-city section of Sydney just two miles away from the city center. It became the only refuge for Aboriginals fleeing the rural areas of New South Wales in the late 1960s and early
1970s. Rental unit costs in Redfern were substantially less than in other Sydney neighborhoods, which suited Aboriginal workers with limited means. Squatting in vacant lots became increasingly common in Redfern, as the discriminatory housing and rental markets proved largely unaffordable and often inaccessible. With the influx of Aboriginal residents into Redfern, it remained a largely segregated district throughout this period.

In 1967 Sydney’s Black Power Movement erupted in the Redfern neighborhood, as New South Wales activists Paul Coe, Gary Williams, and Gary Foley initially adopted Black Power rhetoric from Melbourne and constructed the Redfern Black Power Caucus. These activists were the first to experiment with the community service programs of the Black Panther Party in the United States, most distinctively their police patrolling. The Redfern police patrols centered on the collection of information by Aboriginals. Armed with pens and paper, Black Power activists recorded unjust police behavior directed towards Aborigines at popular drinking establishments. They kept notes of the incidents, the names of those police officers involved, and the police vehicle numbers. Activists would then pass this information to a group of young lawyers who would provide free legal advice and representation to those unjustly accused.

Gary Foley, an Australian Aboriginal activist and historian, was one of the founding members of the Redfern Black Power Caucus. Foley recalled that activists in Redfern were greatly inspired by Malcolm X’s autobiography and underlying racial rhetoric. He reflected on his initial reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: “As a young black Koori kid in a tough ghetto like Redfern at the time, the words of Malcolm X made a lot of sense to me. In fact, I was able to relate to almost everything he was saying.” Malcolm X’s philosophy then spread to the Australian masses with the dissemination of his autobiography in 1965. “The American black man should be focusing his every effort toward building his own businesses, and decent homes for himself,” Malcolm declared. “One thing the white man never can give the black man is self-respect!” Activists in Sydney’s Redfern district identified with Malcolm X’s discussion of the “psychological deterioration” of destitution that “hit” his “family circle” and destroyed their pride, as many Aboriginal families experienced similar circumstances after the closure of Aboriginal reserves after 1967.

The young people in Redfern grew acutely aware of the injustices faced by Aborigines, as they set out to increase their level of political awareness and knowledge of international issues. Foley contends that activists in Sydney were largely drawn to the United States because of the accessibility of African American literature. There were two primary ways that Aborigines in Redfern went about accessing the political literature coming out of the United States in the late 1960s—contact with African American servicemen in Sydney or through Bob Gould’s Third
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World Bookshop. These two avenues served to expose young Aborigines to literature on African American political and social struggles.

Beginning in September 1967 thousands of American soldiers began arriving in Sydney. By March 1968, roughly 6,800 American servicemen were spending their seven days of leave each month on Australian shores. Sydney’s Whiskey-A-Go-Go became a popular nightspot for American soldiers, particularly because the nightclub offered free drinks and food for the first two hours on special gala nights for the servicemen. It was perhaps in these Sydney nightclubs that African American soldiers spread the message of Black Power, impressing on young Aboriginals global solidarity and the importance of African American liberation. Gary Foley recalled that he first heard the term “Black Power” from African American soldiers in 1967.

Sydney was used as a safe haven for American troops [during the Vietnam War] and so Sydney was being saturated with large numbers of American soldiers and a disproportionate number, quite possibly the majority of those American troops who were landing in Sydney, were African Americans. A lot of those African Americans wanted to find a black community in Sydney and there was no black community in Sydney, in fact they were arriving in Sydney at the height of the White Australia policy and had they not been servicemen for the American Army, they would not have been allowed in. In the absence of a black community a lot of them ended up coming over and visiting us, connecting with us.

According to Foley, these soldiers were responsible for exposing Aboriginal youth to the racial struggles for social justice in the United States, instilling in these young people a sense of hope and providing them with a sense of direction. In 1967 Bob Gould’s Third World Bookshop opened in Sydney’s city center on Goulburn Street. Gould’s bookshop was seen as the ultimate “enabler” to this decade of revolt and change in Sydney in the late 1960s. Open from 8 a.m. until midnight, seven days a week, Gould’s Third World Bookshop provided Sydney’s radical youth with literature, posters, countercultural music, and New Left newspapers, largely imported from the United States. Redfern activists started to acquire a collection of books from the shop, often by theft. Eventually, Gould came to this realization and started to provide Redfern Black Power activists with access to any material in his shop, completely free of charge. The bulk of Gould’s literature was works by Malcolm X, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, George Jackson, and Huey P. Newton.

Ultimately, the words of Malcolm X were “a real trigger” for Aborigines and his rhetoric was only further exemplified by the harsh realities of everyday life in the Redfern community. Foley recalled, “[Reading Malcolm X] transformed my whole understanding of history. It seemed to me that everything Malcolm X was saying in his autobiography about life for a black man in Harlem in New York was
an accurate description of life on the streets of Redfern, Sydney for an Aboriginal youth. Only a few days after Foley had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he was involved in an altercation with several police officers.

I was involved in an incident in railway square in Sydney where I came to be apprehended by these two young police constables and taken back to a police station. At the police station I was bashed very severely by several police officers and I was made to go to court the next day, under threat of more bashing, and plead guilty to a minor offense, a misdemeanor; offensive behavior I think it was, which I hadn’t done . . . it upset me probably more than anything else because they had bashed me for something I didn’t do.

Two days after this incident, Foley joined the Redfern Black Power Caucus and became devoted to radical Aboriginal activism that aimed to empower Aborigines and their communities.

Many Aboriginal activists had witnessed the failed promises of social assimilation and readily identified with Malcolm’s view that African Americans were taught that “everything white was good, to be admired, respected and loved.” According to Foley, Malcolm’s autobiography enabled him to take “a far closer interest in what was going on” in racially divided Redfern. Malcolm X challenged Foley by noting that:

> The ignorance we of the black race here in America have, and the self-hatred we have, they are fine examples of what the white slavemaster has seen fit to teach us. . . . We are humbling ourselves, sitting-in, and begging-in, trying to unite with the slavemaster! I don’t seem able to imagine any more ridiculous sight. A thousand ways every day, the white man is telling you “You can’t live here, you can’t enter here, you can’t eat here, drink here, walk here, work here, you can’t ride here, you can’t play here, you can’t study here.” Haven’t we yet seen enough that he has no plan to unite with you?

Foley identified with Malcolm’s feelings of frustration, desperation, and oppression, but believed that his fierce idealism could benefit the Australian Black Power Movement. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* assisted in educating those Redfern youth who wished to join the Redfern Black Power Movement. Foley explained that leaders of the Black Power Caucus would encourage prospective members to read Malcolm X.

We would let them go through it and read it and get angry in the first part where he is advocating the hatred of white fellas and everything. And then we’d let them get to that point and then we’d wait to see if they would go beyond, see if they got to the next step, see if they went through the process of understanding and ceasing to be a racist, ceasing to hate white people. We regarded that as a handicap and if they couldn’t do that, we’d get rid of them. Malcolm X was a man who was regarded by most white people both in Australia and America as a black
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racist, but the real value in what Malcolm X was saying, from our perspective in Redfern, had not so much to do with black racism but more importantly the transformation that he made personally that took him beyond that. . . . So [in the case of] Malcolm X, we loved him for the things that he was, not for the things that people thought he was.96

Young Aborigines, who had experienced racial prejudices first-hand, found that Malcolm’s observations were accurate. Aboriginal youths consistently faced racist government legislation, corrupt police forces, government inaction, and destitute communities.97 Foley further explained that Aboriginal Black Power leaders also utilized the teachings of Malcolm X in raising the consciousness of new recruits.

We used the teachings of Malcolm X when young people wanted to come and join the Black Power Movement with us. . . . The white media in Australia had already painted us as black racists, we said . . . “black power means the empowerment of Aboriginal people, control of our own affairs” [but] the media persisted saying “you’re violent, you’re racist” and yet, the irony of it was that Malcolm wasn’t a racist when he died and neither were we because of Malcolm. It was because of Malcolm that we weren’t racist, that we excluded racists from our ranks.98

Aboriginal Black Power activists successfully utilized African American literature in educating their target audiences and drawing in new members.

Foley later emphasized that the direct connections he and other Aboriginal youths established with African American servicemen in Sydney proved invaluable. These African American soldiers, armed with Black Power literature and their own experiences in combating racial injustices in the United States, served to inspire Aboriginal men and women. These African American mentors instilled in Aborigines the belief that they could combat those racial prejudices that sought to define their lives. The Aboriginal Black Power Movement that erupted throughout Australia was certainly a response to ideas that came out of the United States and landed on Australian shores via the media, visiting servicemen, and radical bookstores. Aborigines demanded self-determination without white interference, utilizing The Autobiography of Malcolm X. This represented a diffusion of imported practices from the United States that helped Australian Aborigines combat racial injustices. The initial aim of the Aboriginal Black Power Movement in Redfern was to provide assistance programs that would enable individuals to challenge and endure their oppression. Through grassroots organizing, Aboriginal activists constructed service programs that were primarily modeled after the Black Panthers in the United States and provided food, medical care, and legal support to people in oppressed communities.99

CONCLUSION

On the streets of Redfern young Aborigines were confronted on a daily basis with the reality of their dire social conditions. It was perhaps only natural that
these frustrated young people gravitated towards the notions of black self-determination and emphasis on community control that was emerging from the United States. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was brought in the bags of those American servicemen visiting Australia and in boxes of imported literature found in Sydney’s Third World Bookshop. Malcolm’s discourse appealed to frustrated youths in Sydney’s most impoverished community. His rhetoric gave momentum to the Redfern Black Power Movement—as activists aimed to overcome those negative social and political forces that sought to oppress them. Malcolm X offered an uncompromising and genuine social criticism of the African American experience, which, according to Scott Robinson, proved to be “the most profound exogenous influence on Aboriginal political activism in the 1960s.”100 The global transfer of Malcolm’s ideological positions reaped rich rewards; it inspired radicalized collective action in urban areas in Australia.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* provided clarity to those stories shared by visiting African American soldiers and contextualized those sensationalized reports on the American racial struggle that appeared in mainstream newspapers in Australia throughout the 1960s. The influence of events in the United States was certainly complicated and sometimes contradictory, as activists adapted and adopted certain aspects of the African American experience to meet the specific needs of their communities. The Aboriginal Black Power Movement was entirely and uniquely Australian, but activists undoubtedly gained a critical sense of direction through analyzing African American literature, particularly *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Understandably, American scholarship surrounding the legacy of Malcolm X is largely focused on his ties to the African American experience, but his enormous influence on Aboriginal communities throughout Australia in the 1960s and 1970s cannot be denied.

In discussions with those Aboriginal Black Power activists still alive, one aspect of their political formation is a constant—they all speak of Malcolm’s enduring legacy and the impact his speeches and writings had on their own personal radicalization.101

NOTES

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6 Clemons and Jones, Global Solidarity, 177.

7 Ibid.


11 Marable, Malcolm X, 480.


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22Deakin, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (1901).


25Ibid.

26D. Davis, *In the Image of God* (New Haven, CT, 2001), 95.


32J. Horne, “Appendix” in Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom (Sydney, NSW, 1974).


34Sue Taffe, *Black and White Together FCAATSI*.


36Clark, *Aborigines and Activism*, 8–9.

37Ibid., 47.

38Ibid., 149.

39Ibid., 48–49.

40Ibid., 12.

41*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1965, 1.


43Charlie Perkins, video excerpt in Gary Foley, “Foley.”

44Clark, *Aborigines and Activism*, 150.

45Charlie Perkins, video excerpt.


49Scott Bennett, *Aborigines and Political Power in Australia* (Sydney, NSW, 1989), 53–54. The correct figure according to George Williams is 89.34 percent, which accounts for informal votes. George Williams, *Human Rights under the Constitution* (Melbourne, VIC, 1999), 252.


52Gilbert, *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It*, 102–104.


58Evans, “Racial Assaults,” 33.


65Thom Blake, *A Dumping Ground* (Brisbane, QLD, 2001), 136–137.


68Ibid., 193.

69In the early 1950s Aboriginal activism was largely geared towards passive resistance; by 1967 this had radicalized into demands for self-determination. For more information refer to Darling, *They Spoke Out Pretty Good*, 2–14.

70Sam Watson, interview with the author, 20 February 2012, Brisbane, QLD.

71Ibid.

72Ibid.

73Ibid.

74Ibid.

75Ibid.


79Ivory and Cahill, *Radical Sydney*, 329.

80Department of Youth and Community Services, *Problems and Needs for the Aboriginals of Sydney: A Report to the Minister for Youth and Community Services* (Sydney, NSW, 1973).

81Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose, eds., *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation* (London, 1993), 88.


83Gary Foley, interview with the author, 4 July 2011, Fitzroy, Victoria.


85Ibid., 93.


87Gary Foley, interview with the author, 4 July 2011.
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90Gary Foley interview.
92Gary Foley interview.
94Gary Foley interview.
96Foley, “Foley.”
98Foley, “Foley.”