

**ERACISM! (#2) – Report**  
**Prepared by Claire Cottone, Multicultural Development Officer**  
**for the Youth Affairs Network QLD**

On International Human Rights Day (10 December) 2004 the Youth Affairs Network QLD (YANQ) hosted its second ERACISM! forum at the Princess Theatre in Woolloongabba, Brisbane. This was a half-day forum to bring together people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant backgrounds (that means everyone!) to share their experiences of racism and to unite to develop strategies to erase racism in Queensland.

**Background:**

YANQ hosted its first ERACISM! forum in April 2004. Due to the positive response from the Murri and broader community, coupled with the continuing evidence of overt and systemic racism in Queensland, YANQ decided to host a second forum in December 2004.

With regards to its Indigenous peoples, Queensland has a long and notorious history of stolen generations, stolen wages and stolen land, none of which have yet attracted sufficient compensation or even apology. Racism in Queensland is not a thing of the past. Overt acts of racism happen every day in Queensland to young people with dark skin, or wearing veils or turbans. But the insidious side of racism is the systemic racism which characterises State and Federal government policies and legislation and sees, for example, Aboriginal people dying 20 years earlier than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and refugees on temporary protection visas being disallowed to attend universities, and working night shifts for \$7 per hour.

ERACISM! (#2) took place against the tragic background of the suspicious death in police custody of 36-year old Aboriginal man on Palm Island. Meanwhile, further South, on November 30, in the Queensland town of Goondiwindi, a 16-year old Aboriginal man from the Toomelah community was dragged for 40 minutes with a noose around his neck by two white men.

Not to forget the November 2004 front page photograph of white Australian soldiers dressed as Ku Klux Klan members standing menacingly behind black recruits at the Townsville Lavarack Barracks (taken in 2000 before sailing to East Timor). A federal parliamentary inquiry into military justice has heard several instances of racism in the army, including an Aboriginal soldier who hanged himself at Lavarack Barracks a year before the KKK picture was taken.

Months before, not far from Townsville, YANQ staff were shown a “license to shoot Aborigines” sold over the counter in the town’s main pub. Around about the same time, on 26 March, an 11-year old Aboriginal boy was put in a cage in the back of a four wheel drive for five-hour long journey from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Mount Isa Police Station.

A 12 month trial commenced in July 2004 whereby police in five locations across the State are given extra powers to deal with young people suspected of chroming in public spaces. These laws potentially affect predominantly Aboriginal young people who have a high incidence of homelessness and chroming. YANQ has lobbied for more time, clearer guidelines and regulations to make sure this legislation is not just used by police to “clean up the streets” and dislocate Aboriginal and other young people from their hang out points.

Between March and July 2004, YANQ conducted a survey of young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds attending Queensland schools<sup>1</sup>. Of 144 school students surveyed across Queensland, almost half (61) reported experiencing racism at school. Here's what some of them said:

*Sometimes I too scared to walk through the gate because people wait for me so they can bash me up and tease me for be a different colour... sometimes I feel like killing myself.*

- Maori student, 13, Brisbane

*Some student racism me like tell me you horrible people. It make me don't want to come to school.*

- Thai student, 14 Cairns

Much has been written on the incidents and nature of racism in Queensland and other states of Australia,<sup>2</sup> and indeed the reporting and documentation of these incidences is extremely important. The points above are merely a few examples of racism in this State and some of the motivation behind YANQ's ERACISM! work and our commitment to exposing, talking about and uniting people from all cultures against racism in Queensland.

### Aims:

The aims of ERACISM! (#2) were slightly different to the aims of the first ERACISM! forum which was held in April 2004. That forum was a primary consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders (as well as broader community) regarding institutional and overt racism in Queensland. Whilst acknowledging that the experience of racism is not limited to people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, YANQ demonstrated at the first ERACISM! forum that issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a priority for YANQ.

By all measures Aboriginal young people are more disadvantaged than their migrant counterparts (though probably not recently arrived refugees). They have also been the ones most blamed for their condition. Despite representing less than 3% of the population of Queensland, they are the single largest group in youth detention or adult prisons. Their literacy levels are incredibly low even if they have gone through high school. More and more Aboriginal young people are becoming victims of overt acts of racism.

ERACISM! (#2) expanded upon the first forum to invite and include young people and elders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant backgrounds to share their experiences of racism and to unite to develop strategies for erasing racism in Queensland.

The process was also a feeler to find out if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were keen to join with other culturally oppressed groups in Queensland to talk about and action against racism. At the moment Aboriginal people in Queensland are excluded from multicultural policy and YANQ is keen to progress this situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Cultural Chasm: the changing cultural and linguistic demographic in Queensland schools and the need for reform* at [www.yanq.org.au](http://www.yanq.org.au) or email [admin@yanq.org.au](mailto:admin@yanq.org.au) to order a copy.

<sup>2</sup> See, for starters, Hage, Ghassan, 1998, *White Nation*. Sydney, Pluto Press; Hollinsworth, David, 1998, *Race and Racism in Australia. Second Edition*, Katoomba, Social Science Press; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 2004, *Isma-Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*, Sydney, HREOC (available at <http://www.hreoc.gov.au>)

**YANQ believes that for Queensland's multicultural policy to move forward, it needs to acknowledge Aboriginal cultures as the primary cultures of Australia, and that multiculturalism stems from there.**

A youth panel was included in the program to give young people from diverse cultural backgrounds an opportunity to speak out and advocate for themselves.

**Process:**

Aboriginal community leader and activist, and lecturer at the University of Queensland, Sam Watson was a close consultant in the project to ensure processes were culturally appropriate. Jackie Huggins of the University of Queensland and co-chair of The Australian Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was also approached to be part of a reference group but was too busy with overseas and interstate travel. She did however condone the project from afar.

Apart from this, YANQ took a very participatory approach to the designing of the forum. Callouts for speakers and otherwise interested participants were put out through YANQ's email bulletin, YANQ's multicultural networks, Brisbane high schools and Universities. Everyone involved was consulted as to whether they thought the forum was useful, and were encouraged to share their ideas to make the forum relevant for its target audience.

The response to the initiative from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant community members, non-government organisations and government representatives was overwhelmingly positive. The planning of the forum was an awesome experience in itself and an opportunity to have deep conversations with many young people and older adults from a diversity of experience around issues of racism, community and culture. This will certainly inform our work in the future.

We also debriefed with all participants after the event and continue to be in contact.

**Program:**

Facilitator / MC: Bevan Canning (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service)

- 9 am Indigenous Opening – Maroochy Barambah
- 9.10 Indigenous Intrudaz - Murri hip hop
- 9:45 Keynote speaker – Zohl de Ishtar
- 10:15 Keynote speaker – Lilla Watson
- 10:35 Youth panel: 6 young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, migrant and refugee backgrounds talk about their experience of and views on racism
- 11.10 Open discussion
- 11.30 Wrap up and where to from here
- 12:00 Close

**Biographies of participants:**

*Maroochy Barambah*

Maroochy Barambah is the Song-woman and Law-woman for the Turtbal People. The Turtbal People are the original inhabitants of the Brisbane area. Maroochy is currently reviving the language of the Turtbal.

*Dr Zohl de Ishtar*

Irish-Australian lesbian, Dr Zohl de Ishtar has been working in collaboration with Indigenous Australian and Pacific women since 1983. The author of *Daughters of the Pacific* (1994, Spinifex Press) and editor of *Pacific Women Speak Out* for Independence and

Denuclearisation (1998, Raven Press), Zohl has conducted speaking tours of 27 countries. The founding-coordinator of the Kapulungu Women's Law and Culture Centre, she has lived and worked intensively with women elders in the Great Sandy Desert. This experience forms the basis of her workshops in Whiteness Awareness, offered by Pacific Connections. PO Box 172, Annandale, NSW 2038. [deishitar@bigpond.com](mailto:deishitar@bigpond.com)

*Lilla Watson*

Lilla Watson has been an active community member over many decades. Her mother is from Gangulu country (Dawson River) and her father is from Wiri country (Mackay). Lilla is a recognised artist and one-time lecturer at the University of Queensland where she developed courses on Aboriginal perspectives.

*Indigenous Intrudaz*

This emerging young hip-hop act is fast gaining recognition across Queensland as a voice for Indigenous youth. They are Damien Bani (Amon), Douglas Patrick (DCP) and Zenith Bonner (Zenay) and recent addition to their lineup DJ Keni. The Indigenous Intrudaz come from the densely populated multi-cultural suburb of Inala, situated on the south-western outskirts of the Brisbane metropolis. These talented young men rhyme about the history, culture and current issues faced by Indigenous youth in their communities, as outlined in recent songs 'Represent' and 'When Man First Got Here'. They have performed at venues and festivals in Queensland, including the Prime Festival at the Queensland Art Gallery, Stylin' Up and at various Indigenous events and gatherings.

**Youth panel:**

The youth panel included the following individuals:

*Avelina Tarrago*

Spanish / Aboriginal young woman and third-year law student at QUT.

*Abraham Akiot*

President of Sudanese Youth Association, Community Services graduate and Criminology student at Griffith University.

*Yvette Holt*

Yvette Holt is a proud member of the Bidjara and Wakaman nations of central and Far North Queensland. A student at the Faculty of Business University of Technology Sydney, in 2004 completed her B.A. in Adult Education and Community Management and 2005 will begin her Master's of Business Management.

In September 2003 Yvette was awarded the UTS Equity & Diversity Award in the category of Reconciliation, for her 'Outstanding contribution to Reconciliation and to the Advancement of Social Justice and Human Rights for Indigenous Australians'.

Poet Yvette writes on Indigenous Women's Issues, Racism, Homophobia, Womanhood and Human Rights, Yvette has performed across Eastern Australia including the Australian Poetry Festival (Balmain) in September 2004.

*Marie Michele Nisingizwe (Michele)*

Rwandan refugee who came to Australia in August 2003. Student of International Business.

*Gillian Marshall*

Gillian has been an environmental (anti-capitalist), feminist and human rights activist for almost 10 years. A driving member of the Refugee Action Collective QLD, Gillian currently

works full-time at Women's House, which is a local feminist domestic violence refuge for women and children.

*Ranbir Sarai*

Young man from a Sikh family background. Science student at UQ and member of breaks/production crew Prussia

*Walker Tabua*

PNG/TSI young man born in Port Moresby and moved to Australia in 1979. Indigenous Student Representative for 2005 at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) where he studies Human Movements and Education.

### **On the day:**

Approximately 80 people attended the forum, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant young people and elders, community and government workers (including the Parliamentary Secretary assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs, Karen Struthers), media and other individuals from the broader community. This number did not reflect the huge response via RSVP prior to the event. This discrepancy was doubtless due to the mega rain storm which pelted Brisbane that morning.

Bevan Canning was unable to MC as he had to fly to Palm Island for Sorry Business, so the forum was jointly facilitated by Siyavash and Claire from YANQ. Walker and Avelina were also unable to participate at the last minute.

The forum was an awesome example of cross-cultural dialogue, openings and new understandings and this is reflected by the feedback we've received on the day and post-forum – see feedback below.

### **Feedback:**

“Congratulations on a great ERACISM forum on Friday, my co-worker and I thoroughly enjoyed the day, we learnt so much.”

“Thanks for inviting me to the ERACISM forum, I had a great time, and learnt a lot. Some of the ideas really challenged my thinking, and I feel a lot healthier because of that. I couldn't stay long into the open discussion as I got called back to the office for work, but when I returned to work I told people about the forum, and we ended up having a great open discussion of our own. Great work – when's the next one?”

“Thank you for inviting us to the ERACISM Forum. It was very informative and interesting to hear the young community on these issues.”

“A fantastic initiative and program. To see an organisation developing such a workshop is just inspiring.”

“I learnt a lot about the Indigenous experience and it's given me a lot to digest.”

“I think it's so important to open up dialogue like this and encourage people from different cultural groups to talk and listen to each other. People got a lot to learn. Great initiative.”

### **Media coverage:**

The ERACISM! (#2) forum was promoted on air by Radio 4ZZZfm and 4AAA Murri Country.

There was an article in the Courier Mail the day before the forum, and a major article with photograph in the Saturday Courier Mail the day after the forum (see attached).

### **Outcomes:**

YANQ had the go-ahead from many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue its ERACISM work on their country. Maroochy Barambah on behalf of the Turtbal nation had the opportunity to welcome people from many nations to her country and to tell some of her people's cultural history to Australia's old and new migrants and refugees, as did Lilla Watson. On the other hand, old and new migrants and refugees were able to take in this knowledge and better understand their place in Australia's multicultural (in the widest sense) society. All-in-all the forum was an awesome achievement in cross-cultural communication and a rare sharing of stories between young and old people from many different cultures and experiences.

Through the development of the forum, YANQ made new links and strengthened existing ones with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other individuals and groups and increased its profile in the community. During its consultations, YANQ also greatly contributed to and expanded the current dialogue around racism, multiculturalism, cross-cultural work and the Australian situation regarding its treatment of Indigenous people and refugees.

YANQ gave nine young people from diverse cultural backgrounds (including the Indigenous Intudaz, via their rhymes) the opportunity to express their views and experiences of racism in a public forum to an audience of community and government members from many diverse backgrounds. This kind of experience gave these young people the opportunity to reflect on their place in this society and their right and their power to influence government and society to respond to their diverse needs.

The media coverage in the Courier Mail was quite astounding – it is notoriously difficult to have Queensland's cultural diversity reflected in the mainstream news, and further for the hard issues of racism and white supremacy to be expressly named by this mainstream paper. This coverage exposed the majority of the population of Queensland to the issue of racism which is alive and kicking in the State.

### **Key learnings:**

Discussion at the forum further evidenced that young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant backgrounds alike experience overt acts of racism in their everyday lives and this can be very debilitating. These young people also share the experience of living as members of minority groups in a society which systematically privileges a predominantly white middle-class.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee and migrant young people and elders who participated in, attended, or enquired about the forum all demonstrated a willingness to work together to erase racism and make Queensland society one which is truly inclusive of all. All found the forum a great opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue and learning.

**Where to from here?**

The response to the ERACISM! forums (#1 and #2) have been overwhelmingly positive and YANQ will continue to hold them. We are planning the next forum for mid-2005 in Townsville.

We are also compiling a contact list for individuals and organisations keen to collaborate in anti-racist work in Queensland.