UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

NEW: Emerging Scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies

Reimagining the inheritance of loss of country: Stan Grant's *Talking to my country*

Ruchira Talukdar

Reading Walkley award winning journalist and Wiradjuri man Stan Grant's latest book *Talking to my country* (Grant 2016a) can be a sharply contradictory experience. On the one hand, the book's short, brisk sentences and emphatic, conversational style (you can almost hear him talking) might tempt you to read it in a single sitting. And on the other, it is advisable to digest its searing contents – phrases, images, metaphors, bleak statistics delivered wrapped in masterfully told stories – at a measured pace. The most poignant aspect of this riveting personal account of growing up Aboriginal in Australia is that it comes from a highly credible professional known for his "inclination to look for common ground, to be diplomatic" (Grant 2015). This is why Stan Grant's part-memoir, part-polemic achieves the effect it sets out to create – for people to listen.

"In the winter of 2015 we turned to face ourselves. It happened in that place most sacred to us; the sporting field", he says in the opening pages of the book, referring to the shameful and episodic booing of Adam Goodes (Holmes 2015) which finally forced the legendary footballer to withdraw from the sport. At that morally low point for Australia, Stan Grant sent out a personal message to all Australians. "I can tell you what Adam must be feeling, because I've felt it…" (Grant 2015). He went on to outline the shame, fear and anger which were his own constant companions growing up, as his family moved from one country town to another. The message went viral through Internet channels, as did his impassioned speech at the IQ2 Debate (Grant 2016b), which was described as Australia's Martin Luther King Moment (Muller 2016). *Talking to my Country*, released in February 2016, expands and completes this personal confession of growing up on the other side of the experiential "chasm" that he admits he is not yet "ready to cross".

"The Australian dream left us to rot" is one of the many powerful statements, experienced with the full weight of "a history still unwritten", that Stan Grant makes with disarming frankness. Several others, like "I was born into what anthropologist W.E.H Stanner (1969) called the 'great Australian silence'", "'Australians all let us rejoice' had a always rung hollow to me", "we occupy the same lands, but we tell ourselves very different stories", "Journalism has been my salvation", and the words spoken to his wife over the phone during his nervous breakdown on assignment with CNN in Mongolia, "Why had they done this to us…we did not deserve this", act as powerful cues to guide

the imagination into myriad stories – from his childhood, of broken friends and relatives who never escaped the vicious cycle, from the deep past and the ways of the Wiradjuri people, from the bloody and unspoken times of early settlement – which all finally meet in the present moment of grimness (as life expectancy, health and several other statistics indicate) for all of his people. "My people inherit the loss of their country. It can be as lethal as any cancer", he reflects.

Moving accounts of his father's lifelong struggles to keep the family fed and taken care of, and accounts from his adolescent years in small country towns, such as when at the age of fifteen his school principal told him and other black boys they should consider giving up studying, reveal a deep vulnerability and fragility surrounding the lives of his people. The facts and history he admits to might not be new to those who care about indigenous challenges, but his unsparing style amplifies the sense of grief, shame, anger, depression and daily lack of self esteem, all of which he battled before being able to build a successful career in political journalism with some of the best global networks such as CNN and Sky News. His stories remind just how easy it is for black people to feel "crushed by the weight of history" at the slightest provocation from society. They invite the reader to compassionately understand the situation of his people.

Being an avid reader, he drew inspiration from the black American Civil Rights Movement, from Martin Luther King's oratory and Malcolm X's fire, from writers like Te-Nehisi Coates whose depiction of the American dream being comprised of wine-tasting and ice-cream socials (Coates 2015) influenced Grant's realization that the equivalent Australian dream, which lived in its "beaches and the outback, in tourist brochures", excluded his people. If as a book-loving boy he drew succor and found his moral outrage from the books of James Baldwin, as an adult he found his salvation by becoming a journalist. *Talking to my Country* poignantly lays out the path to Grant's realization of how disenfranchised Aboriginal people's lives are, compared to several of those he encountered in conflict zones around the world: "These people still had their country, they fought under a flag of their choosing, and they sang their anthems…we were overrun, and our fate decided by others".

The term 'post-colonial' is used generally to describe all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, p. 2). It has been argued that the term is meaningless when it comes to describing the status of Aboriginal people in Australia, "when land rights, social justice, respect and equal opportunity for most does not exist because of the internalised racism of many Australian" (Trees & Nyoongah 1993, p 264). Stan Grant's cathartic outburst in *Talking to my Country*, delivered in a timely fashion at a moment when blatant racism in sports has dipped Australia's moral compass south, amply supports this argument. The book does not offer any simple answers out of this problem. But it asks us to earnestly and compassionately understand how we got here in the first place. An award-winning journalist's personal meditation on racism and despair of black people in one of the most prosperous countries is relevant far beyond its shores. It tells the story of people and communities anywhere who must live with the inheritance of loss of culture and country.

References

Ashcroft, W. D. Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen. (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, Routledge, London, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426081.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. (2015). *Between the World and Me* (First edition). New York, Spiegel and Garu.

Grant, Stan. (2015). 'I can tell you how Adam Goodes feels. Every indigenous person has felt it', *The Guardian,* 30 July, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/30/i-can-tell-you-how-adam-goodes-feels-every-indigenous-person-has-felt-it *(*accessed 14 May 2016).

Grant, Stan. (2016b). *IQ2 Racism Debate, available at* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEOssW1rw0I. 19 January (accessed on 14 May 2016). The Ethics Centre, Sydney.

Grant, Stan. (2016a). *Talking to my country*. Sydney, NSW, HarperCollins Publishers Australia.

Holmes, Tracy. (2015). 'Australia laid bare in Adam Goodes booing saga*', Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, available at: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-30/holmes-australia-laid-bare-in-adam-goodes-booing-saga/6660634 (accessed 14 May 2016).

Muller, Sara. (2016). 'Stan Grant's speech on racism: Is this Australia's Martin Luther King Moment?' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January, available at: http://www.smh.com.au/national/stan-grants-speech-on-racism-is-this-australias-martin-luther-king-moment-20160123-gmcrgt.html (accessed 14 May 2016).

Stanner, W.E.H. (1969). 'After the dreaming: black and white Australians-an anthropologist's view', *Australian Broadcasting Commission*.

Trees, Kathryn and Nyoongah, Mudrooroo. (1993), 'Postcolonialism: Yet Another Colonial Strategy?', in Drouart, Michelle (ed), *Span,* Vol. 1, no. 36, pp.264- 265, Murdoch University.