

Fair Game? The audacity of Héritier Lumumba

Written by Chelsea Bond, Senior Lecturer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit (ATSIS Unit), The University of Queensland



Héritier Lumumba describes his experience of racism at Collingwood Football Club in Fair Game.SBS

In what's been labelled a “ [controversial new documentary](#) ”, SBS's forthcoming series Fair Game provides a firsthand account of former AFL player Héritier Lumumba's search for identity as a Black man, and how he confronted racism and prejudice at the Collingwood Football Club.

Lumumba, along with his family, former teammates and sports journalists, sheds new light on his personal and professional journey, including the reason behind his name change from Harry O'Brien to Héritier Lumumba. We learn that his name Héritier, given to him by his Black father at birth, means “the prince who is gifted”. It's in stark contrast to the dehumanising nickname of “Chimp” assigned to him by his teammates.

I've never really understood the game of AFL. Before watching Fair Game, I didn't know all that much about Héritier Lumumba. But Lumumba's story of how race plays out in predominantly White male workplaces was all too familiar to me as the daughter of a Black truck driver and the wife of a Black police officer.

My dad worked many jobs, from the meatworks in Bowen, to killing water buffalo in the Territory, to digging ditches for the local council. On settling down to family life in the outer suburbs of Brisbane, he worked in the foundry across the road from where we lived. Not content with digging ditches or working on the foundry floor, Dad taught himself to drive a backhoe in his lunch breaks and worked his way up to crane operator.

I was a small child when he achieved his dream of being an owner-driver truck driver. It was the mid-'80s, times were tough financially and the job itself was physically challenging. But dad put on his boots each day and went to work.

He would sit down at the wharf waiting for his truck to be loaded, only for it to be left until last, only to be called a stupid, silly, or lazy “Black bastard”. It was all in good fun, just a joke, the other truck drivers would say.

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I remember when he got a second truck and other truckies would joke about his “ATSIC-funded” (the now-defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) truck and the special benefits he got being Black; because of course that second truck wasn’t a result of hard work, but a product of imagined White charity.

Being Black is special alright. I still remember as a child being able to discern from the revs of the truck coming down the road whether or not dad got special treatment on that day.

Special treatment

A few decades later, as the wife of a Black man who worked in the Queensland Police Service, I would see my husband off to work, only to experience that same apprehension upon his return about what kind of day he had - what kind of special treatment he received from his work “mates”, what kind of demeaning banter he had to tolerate in order to put food on our kitchen table.

My husband’s experience of racism in the police service and the effect upon his mental health have been documented on [ABC’s Foreign Correspondent](#) . In the final moments of the interview, he was asked about the aspirations he had for our children.

He replied:

My hope for my children is that they just grow up to be good people, to have an understanding of people with different cultures and to be treated just like another human being.

Being treated like a human being remains an aspirational goal for Black men in Australia. In the opening scene of Fair Game, Lumumba explains why he didn’t challenge team mates who nicknamed him “Chimp”.

He says:

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You want to feel the sense of inclusion, so you will do anything really to show that you're not an alien, that you are normal, that you are a human being.

The appeal from Black men here is not an appeal for special treatment, just an appeal to be treated as human. But racist banter, taunts and slurs are so much a part of White Australian male culture that Black men are required to testify to their humanness as a daily work practice. Let's not forget our very own attorney-general, George Brandis, insisted from the floor of federal parliament that [bigotry was a fundamental right of Australians](#) .

The audacity of Lumumba

In my father, in my husband and in Lumumba I witnessed a preparedness to try to withstand racism at work, to rise above, and to overcome. Even as they were in the process of being dehumanised, I witnessed Black men trying to be superhuman.

And, of course, why wouldn't they? Black people from birth are conditioned to be better than and work harder than White people, in order to be seen to be just as good as them. This irreconcilable requirement takes its toll eventually. My husband medically retired as a police officer aged 36, my father died of cancer aged 62, and Lumumba was literally knocked out of the game aged 30.

In acknowledging this damage to Black bodies, I don't want to sustain White mythologies about Black incapability, but I do want to acknowledge that Black men too are only human after all.

We are frequently subjected to narratives of Black male violence and abuse, where the only role for our men is one of perpetrator. Yet there is a steadfast refusal to acknowledge how violence and abuse at the hands of White men are killing Black men's souls, minds and bodies every day in Australia.

And when Black men speak about it, no matter how considered and articulate, they are swiftly silenced by White men, demeaned as either [hyper-sensitive](#) or [hyper-aggressive](#) . Black men's behaviours are never reasonable or rational, we are told, and Black men's testimonies are [simply not reliable](#)

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Fair Game tells us not about the capabilities of Lumumba or even Black men in Australian sport or society. Instead it tells us about the toxicity of White masculinity, and the pervasiveness and acceptability of racism in Australian life, including within the workplace.

While the program is yet to air, it has been White Australian men who have been quick to dismiss the treatment dished out to Lumumba. Fellow players [questioned whether he was really hurt by being called a chimp](#), others insisted [they didn't hear it](#), while the club insinuates that he [brought the name upon himself](#).

In the documentary, sports commentator Mark Robinson outlines some of the offences that Lumumba committed:

When Harry starting tweeting about you know, Socrates and the refugees and the Dalai Lama I thought well, "good on him, good on him", but after a while I thought, "Come on, Harry, ease up, righto, we know you think yourself you're the chosen one." I think people just don't like being lectured all the time.

Whether it is owning two trucks, or citing Greek philosophers, Black men in Australia must be careful not to get too ahead of themselves. Should they let the world know that they even think for a moment that they are not inferior, they will be roundly put in their place.

Lumumba's offence was not arrogance, it was his audacity. He had the audacity not to know his place, and the audacity not just to remember, but to reclaim both his name and its meaning. He had the audacity as a Black man to insist upon his own humanity and the humanity of others, regardless of the personal cost.

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Sadly, there don't appear to be too many White men in the game who have that same audacity. If only *they* were stronger, then perhaps Black men, women and children wouldn't have to be.

Fair Game will premiere at 9.45pm on Sunday, September 3, on SBS and will be available on SBS On Demand from Sunday 27 August.

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