




Indigenous communities

Florence Reeves-White looks at the cultures that progressivism forgot

Never has the issue of Indigenous voices falling on deaf ears been so consequential. The prescient warnings that have for centuries been ignored by perpetrators of colonialism – the notion that fruitful land is being invaded, disrupted and ultimately destroyed for the selfish greed of humanity – has never been more pertinent.

The environmental Aesop's Fable which has for so long been ignored exists in the mistreatment of Indigenous lands, but such warnings now apply to the entire planet that we, too, call our home. We haven't learnt; we're in a state of climate crisis due to the same reckless behaviours that have for centuries made Indigenous communities homeless, helpless and, quite rightly, furious.

Now that such environmental issues are melting into the mainstream of almost every political conversation, it's difficult to ignore the niggling, maternal-toned 'I told you so' that's echoing in the depths of our social conscience. So, I began to wonder, if Indigenous communities have been silenced, ignored and defied on such a topic for so long, how else is society doing them a disservice, and what else can we learn from native people?



Having moved to Australia on a Working Holiday Visa (original, I know) I was keen to immerse myself in the cultural landscape of Melbourne life as much as possible. I was hyper-aware of friends teaching children Spanish in Colombia, or diving with Humpback whales in French Polynesia; I wanted to take in as much as I could of the nuances between the small British town I grew up in and the hot, lively atmosphere that awaited me in Australia, mainly because I knew there were comparatively few of them.

Besides the abundance of cafés (with coffee menus lengthier than my dissertation), Australia offered me high wages, fruitful job opportunities and the warm hug of immediate employment. It also gave me Melbourne Museum – it was here that I was first encouraged to expand my knowledge of Australia's rich history of Aboriginal settlement.

After my somewhat streamlined job application process, and a wander around the streets of our potential new home in the supposedly gentrified Northern Suburbs, I began to question my ability to step off a plane and into the job market, when hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People were evidently homeless on their own land. Scanning the suburban streets, I began to notice the absence of white faces in the huddles of people hiding under blankets each night.

It transpired that these shallow initial observations bore extreme weight when delving a little deeper into relevant statistics.

I'm keen to convey my position as a passionate and intrigued observer of this systemic treatment and subjugation, I'm in no way an expert on the topic of Anglo-Indigenous relations, nor do I claim to have more of an insight on the topic than any Australian citizen, I'm merely fascinated by the evident societal imbalances, and feel impassioned to at least attempt to open up more discussion around a topic so seemingly taboo. >

Indigenous Australians – much like Native Americans and even Inuits of the Arctic – have been forced to adapt the way of life they had for centuries become accustomed to, in order to play by a rule book drawn up in the overbearing and autocratic voice of the western world. To put it into perspective, it's said that Indigenous Australians have occupied native lands for 45,000 years. In the 231 years that western settlers have been here, we've turned Australia from the natural, pristine landscape it once was, to one of the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases in the world.

For 60 years (between 1910 and 1970) it became legal for a government-appointed 'Chief Protector' to forcibly remove children from their native homes and attempt to introduce them into urban society. This attempt to strip Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander people of their culture – aptly named 'the stolen generation' – is one of the most shocking tales of 'white saviour' behaviour to exist; yet the process was continuing when the Jackson 5 released *Blame it on the Boogie*, and second wave feminism was garnering widespread traction. Of course, there is still a long way to go in the quest for equality for minority groups universally, but why does it seem that native people are the cultures that progressivism forgot?

Navigating the reasons behind such stretched and historically hostile relationships is a societal Rubik's cube – we can't pin point which exact move made the puzzle look so daunting, but we should all have the urge to align the squares into an intuitive formation, allowing each colour equal representation and visibility.

As far as I'm aware, due to a generational shift, numerous governmental initiatives and an ongoing international debate about readdressing white privilege, the current of change has been gradually galvanised in Australia. From the passing of a law which enables Aboriginal Australians to possess a passport and birth certificate in 1905, to the Constitution (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Act 2004, attempts are being made to engender a more level playing field for native communities. The term 'First Nations People' is now becoming a more favoured and less offensive way of referring to these communities, recognising them as sovereign people of the land, whereas the phrase 'Aborigine' is regarded as outdated and inappropriate. Additionally, in 2008, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised on behalf of all Australians to the Stolen Generations – "[...] for the indignity and degradation inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry [...]" we today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians."

However, what strikes me about these efforts is that they seem to be shockingly overdue. It was only in October 2019 that a ban was put into place preventing tourists from climbing Uluru – a sacred world heritage-listed site that has great spiritual significance

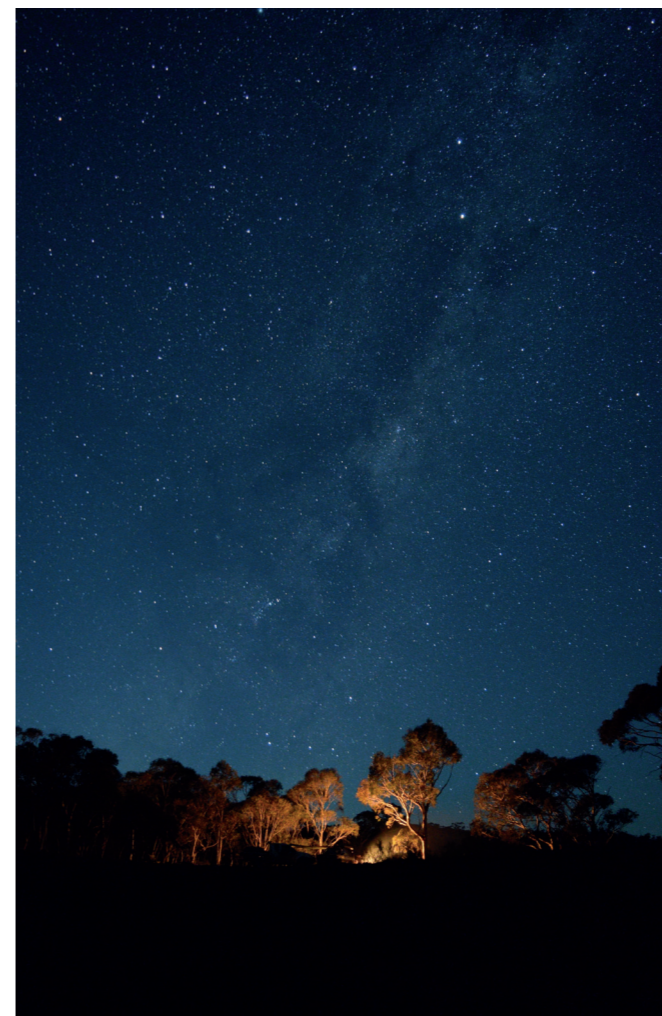
to the people of Anangu. While this is one small victory, many would agree it was a long time coming, as back in 1983 former Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, promised to hand back the land title to the Anangu community, which included forbidding the climbing of Uluru after it became popular with tourists since around 1936. However, there is still a long way to go.

One of the most pressing issues facing Australian societies is the horrific (though unsurprising) imbalance in homelessness rates. First Nations People are populating the streets, with the ripple effect of the theft of their lands still drowning their prospects of owning property today. Displacement is rife, not only as a cultural inheritance for Indigenous communities, but in a literal sense – in 2016 there were still more than 23,000 (one in every 28 Indigenous Australians) homeless, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Such figures are said to be decreasing, but the effects of this unjust scenario having played out over so many years has left pejorative terminology and sentiment towards Indigenous communities still somewhat thwarted from change.

According to a study from *The Lancet*, general health imbalance between native and settler communities is also a universal issue, with 123 countries and 154 million Indigenous people globally being more at risk to instances of ill health than their colonial counterparts.

While learning of such disparities, I wondered how such a unique, yet ingrained, model of racism was manifesting itself all around me. While glancing over *The Australian* newspaper one winter morning, a characteristically small section of the page was



beckoning my gaze. It drew my attention to yet another disparity between the lived experience of Indigenous Australian minorities and their white counterparts – one which could be telling of feelings of subjugation and inadequacy – suicide rates.

Mental health support for Indigenous communities seems to be especially lacking. Although several amazing non-profits in Australia are battling to provide such services for First Nations People, the war in the name of protecting them from mental health issues is seemingly being lost.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are, according to the *Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Causes of Death 2018*, four times more likely to commit suicide than their settler counterparts between the ages of 15-24 years old. This harrowing statistic puts into perspective how far such societies still have to go in their mission to treat native cultures with the respect and recognition they so rightly deserve.

Such shocking levels of health disparity are just the tip of the inequality iceberg when it comes to comparisons between such cultures.

It's difficult to unpack exactly why such prejudices have had such a lasting effect on Australian society. They provide a stark contrast to the (albeit not perfect) far more respectful and courteous historical relationship between New Zealanders and the native Māori community. When attempting to understand why this might be, it could largely be explained by the absence of a Treaty in the colonisation of Australia. In New Zealand the Māori were bound to their Crown through the Treaty of Waitangi, but such a unifying document was nowhere to be seen in Australia.

This treaty provided a sort of societal safety net for Māori people, as it served to engender a sense of legal accountability for settler communities and their actions towards Indigenous people. Although there are myriad explanations for the meandering and forking of each country's native-settler relations, the fact still stands that fair reparations have not been paid in Australia and many countries across the globe.

I don't claim to be an expert on native communities, but something struck me about the portrayal and perceptions of First Nations People that may not be unique to Australia, but is certainly part of a wider dynamic between native peoples and their colonisers, who haven't yet shown enough sign of repentance and retribution. A main priority for Indigenous Australians today is constitutional recognition (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not mentioned in such). The government have said they will put the proposal to a referendum in the next three years.

I can only divulge my own observations and research, but the overarching notion I've drawn from such observations is how vital it is to attempt to unlearn the behaviours and prejudices that generations of family, politicians and influential figures may have trickled through society.

We have a lot to learn from Indigenous ways of thinking – the powerful message of protecting the natural state of the Earth, nurturing complementary relationships with wildlife and listening to the whispers of Mother Nature's teachings. In an age of climate emergency and perpetual social injustice, it's more crucial than ever to acknowledge the teachings of native communities, to amplify their voices and unlearn racist sentiment that has for centuries presided over their interactions with descendants of white settlers. Education is of paramount importance if we wish to see change in Australia. It could be said that Australians have been socialised to merely accept what has happened in their history and to not try and rectify it, yet the discourse around the Indigenous needs to change. If we all work together to complete that Rubik's cube, the solution to the puzzle seems far more tangible. ■

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