

No matter your skin colour, all non-Indigenous Australians are complicit in colonialism

How could I be an oppressor when I belonged to the oppressed? Here's what I learned on a road trip around Australia

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'Ancestrally I belonged to the many waves of people who had come to these shores and undermined Indigenous sovereignty for our benefit.' Photograph: Monica Tan

A few years ago I embarked on a 30,000km solo road trip around Australia. Like many first-generation Sydneysiders, I knew next to nothing about the far-flung lands beyond my city's limits and had only a threadbare understanding of the country's diverse Indigenous cultures.

What I was aware of was the great tensions that underscored Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. But at the time I was riding a rising wave of contemporary identity politics and, as a Chinese Australian woman, I eagerly flew the flag of a minority person. How could I possibly be a colonial oppressor when I belonged to the oppressed?

What the following six months taught me was that being a card-carrying member of one club didn't give me a free pass into another.



'I know now that while we weren't the ones to invade the country, we were integral to the foundation of "Project Australia".' Photograph: Monica Tan

A month in and I had followed the mighty Murray River to its end in South Australia and made my way north up the Sturt Highway to central Australia. It was in Yuendumu, one of only a handful of tiny communities along the remote Tanami track, that I met a Warlpiri artist. I knew the word *kartiya* was used for outsiders, but, I asked him, to whom did it apply? Did it include Indigenous Australians from country beyond their borders? Non-Indigenous Australians of any skin colour? Or did the word explicitly refer to skin colour, much like the word "whitefella"?

"You like us. You *yapa* from China," he replied, using the Warlpiri word for "native person". "Chinese, Indian – you been colonised like us."

I liked that moment. I wasn't sure if I felt like a colonised person, but I took his reply as a gesture of solidarity.

Other Indigenous Australians viewed my trip with derision. *Ah yes, oh god, we've seen it all before*: nothing but the latest in a long line of narcissistic, broken, colonial Australians trying to stuff their spiritual void with the richness of ancient Aboriginal culture. They saw me as a missionary, a mercenary, a misfit.

I went into my trip excited to learn about Indigenous Australia. What I failed to predict was just how much I would learn about *multicultural* Australia.

Sometimes our cultures overlap, and sometimes our experience of stereotyping, marginalisation and racism do too

In Broome, where the pearling industry has attracted workers from across Asia for more than a century, I met a family with Malay, Yawuru and Irish heritage. In Pine Creek I met an elderly third-generation Chinese Australian who took me out bush to see a stone oven built by colonial-era Chinese miners to slow-cook a pig for new year celebrations. In central Australia I saw huge patches of buffel grass, brought over by Middle Eastern and south Asian cameleers.

In the late 19th century, Australia's Top End was just as multicultural as Sydney today.

With federation in 1901 came the enactment of the Immigration Restriction Act, and a stopper on the streams of non-British immigrants. As the story of my people, the early Chinese Australian pioneers, faded from collective memory, it had a curious effect on the waves that would come a century later. Going to school in Sydney in the 1980s and 90s, it seemed as though the Chinese goldminers I learned about in history class were a historical oddity of little consequence. I rarely met any Australian-born Chinese (ABCs, as we term them) older than me, so naturally it felt as though my friends and I were the first wave. Pioneers, you could say.

These days, Chinese Australians are rarely found in the country's highest echelons of power or visible in Australian media or popular culture. But we are quietly living in the neighbourhoods, working hard, running businesses and going to school.

I don't think we are viewed as "the man" by Indigenous Australia. We're not the politicians making decisions that hurt their communities. We're not the judges applying the white man's law and incarcerating Indigenous Australians in alarming numbers. We're not the TV personalities tarring an entire race of diverse people with a single brush by stating their "babies and five-year-olds are being raped". And we do not share the same skin colour as the colonial invaders who first arrived on boats in 1788 and never left.

My travels showed me how all non-white Australians were subject to racial stratification that always pushed us below European Australia. When I visited Broome, I saw a photo from the 1920s of a crowded cinema with forced segregated seating: a row of white men occupied the nicest seats with the best view; the Chinese and Japanese were in a section behind them, and sitting higgledy-piggledy on hard wooden benches at the back were the remaining "coloured people", including the Malays, Timorese, Filipinos and Aboriginal Australians.



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Sometimes our cultures overlap, and sometimes our experience of stereotyping, marginalisation and racism do too. But that does not mean non-white, non-Indigenous Australians are not complicit in colonialism. Day after day, generation after generation, all non-Indigenous Australians benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous Australian lands. And after seeing first-hand the Chinese contribution to colonial Australia – the roads and railways we helped build, the underground shafts we mined, photographs of market gardens we tended – I know now that while we weren't the ones to invade the country, we were integral to the foundation of "Project Australia".

Every Australian of immigrant stock would do well to remember: what we experience here has no equivalence with the Indigenous Australian experience. Whether your family has been on this continent for one, six or one thousand generations changes the depth of relationship you have to this land. And although some of us may empathise with those Indigenous Australians who had been separated from their culture and language and had little choice but to assimilate into a whitefella world, the immigrant story essentially remains one of sacrifice by one's own volition, of hard choices but choices nonetheless. Ancestrally I belonged to the many waves of people who had come to these shores and undermined Indigenous sovereignty for our benefit.

As citizens of Australia, we cannot keep living as if Indigenous Australians are the sacrificial lambs to a successful multicultural democracy. No matter your skin colour, every non-Indigenous Australian has a duty to work towards equality for First Nations peoples.

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