

# The New York Times

## *Fitzroy Fights Australia Day and Demands Respect for Indigenous History*

By Jacqueline Williams

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Locals gathered at the Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation Center on Gertrude Street in Fitzroy.

FITZROY, Australia — Uncle Jack Charles, a well-known Australian Aboriginal actor, was born in 1943 under Australia’s assimilation policy, which he said absorbed Aboriginal people into white society by removing children from their families.

He grew up in a series of group homes without anyone ever telling him the truth — until he was introduced to long-lost relatives here in a Melbourne suburb that’s long been a gathering place for the people of Australia’s First Nations.

“This is where I found myself,” Mr. Charles said last week in Fitzroy. “Found family, kinship, community ties.”

For generations, reconnection with history has defined the area in and around Fitzroy. Now, perhaps inevitably, it is quickly becoming famous in Australia for provoking debate about how to best confront the country’s colonial past.



*Jason Tamiru holding a pair of Aboriginal “clapsticks” in the Carlton Gardens.*

Last month the local Yarra City Council became the first local council in the country to unanimously vote against recognizing Jan. 26 as Australia Day, rejecting the national holiday marking the arrival of the first British settlers in 1788 and opting instead for an event on another date that acknowledges “the loss of Indigenous culture.”

The move spurred outrage from Australia’s prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, who accused the council of “using a day that should unite Australians to divide Australians.” And on Tuesday, public backlash over the decision intensified, as far-right protesters stormed a Yarra City Council meeting yelling through megaphones “shame on you” and “you’re a disgrace.”

But residents and officials here say the decision to stop commemorating Australia Day reflects a desire for the country to recognize that a celebrated part of its history is also a source of great pain for many its citizens.

At a time when the push to reconsider history is sweeping across the United States and Canada, with statues of historical figures being torn down and university buildings being renamed, residents and officials in Yarra say they are simply doing what they have always done: connecting with their people and seeking the truth.

“There have been various popular and political forces at work to discourage a real understanding,” said Amanda Stone, the mayor of Yarra. “There’s still a strong belief that Aboriginal people have done well out of colonial settlement.”

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Yarra, a council region that includes one of Melbourne’s earliest suburbs, covers about 7.5 square miles, and is culturally and socially diverse, with about 30 percent of its residents born outside of Australia.

The area, and greater Melbourne, has been the heartland of the country’s left and union movement, as well as progressive Aboriginal politics going back to the start of the 20th century.

For many Indigenous Australians, Fitzroy in particular carries a special significance: it is the birthplace of many modern Aboriginal organizations.

Jason Tamiru, grandson of the Sir Doug Nicholls, former governor of South Australia and the first Aboriginal Australian to have held a vice-regal post in the country, said that from the 1920s to 1940s, a local fig tree was one of the most important Aboriginal meeting places, where “pioneers” including his grandfather addressed gatherings and “rallied the troops.”

The tree, known as the Moreton Bay Fig Tree, is still alive today.

“Under this tree,” Mr. Tamiru said, standing beneath its wide green leaves, “our great people formed a community, had a vision and a dream. My grandfather taught me and my people to fight for our human rights.”



*The Westgarth Fountain in front of the Royal Exhibition building in Melbourne. The fountain statue was a gift from one of the earliest colonists, William Westgarth.*

Up the road, on Gertrude Street, known as the heart of Fitzroy, was the Koori Club, where in the 1960s, young Aboriginal social and political activists met and challenged

conservative thinking. Experts said the club symbolized the Aboriginal rejection of assimilation and the start of an Aboriginal renaissance still unfolding today.

“The area was attractive for our people because it was a really tough area, where the fringe dwellers would live and hang out,” Mr. Tamiru said.

Fitzroy, which is among the best-known gathering place for Aboriginal people in Australia, is home to the first Aboriginal housing association, legal and health service in the country.

When Muhammad Ali visited Australia in 1979, he specifically went to Gertrude Street in Fitzroy, where the first Indigenous man to win a world boxing title, Lionel Rose, helped set up a gym for young Indigenous people.

All of these places were where many Aboriginal Australians came to receive support, help, and services, and in the process, many of them discovered their family roots.

Uncle Jack, part of the “stolen generation,” found out the truth about his roots in his late teens after being ushered into the Builders Arms Hotel, a landmark Fitzroy pub. Back then, in the late 1950s, it was known among Indigenous Australians as “the black senate.”

For Uncle Jack and many others, these kinds of connections spreading over generations have created a sense of empowerment — and a comfort with questioning authority that often goes beyond what takes place in other areas of Australia. Gradually, despite a period of gentrification that pushed out some people, it’s been passed down to the next generation.

“Young people have grown up to be ashamed of where we’re from, not wanting to celebrate Indigenous culture and heritage,” said Robert Young, 28, an Indigenous artist.

“But now people from around the world are wanting to celebrate and acknowledge our culture and our identity,” Mr. Young said. “There’s a greater awareness of celebrating people’s uniqueness and paying tribute and respect where it’s due.”

Many Aboriginal people say Jan. 26 — when many Australians drink, watch fireworks and party, not unlike July 4 in the United States — marks a legacy of dispossession and a destruction of their culture. Indigenous communities sometimes refer to the date as “Survival Day” or “Invasion Day,” and in recent years, protests have marked the day in major cities like Melbourne and Sydney.



*Robert Young, an Aboriginal artist, in front of a mural he painted on the wall of a lane off Gertrude Street. The mural pays homage to the importance of Gertrude Street to Aboriginal people. “Young people have grown up to be ashamed of where we’re from, not wanting to celebrate Indigenous culture and heritage,” he said.*

The Indigenous community in Yarra wanted something more lasting to be done. They spoke with the council about moving Australia Day celebrations to a different date.

Shortly after the council’s decision, a statue of the Captain James Cook, the explorer, was defaced in Sydney, with “change the date” and “no pride in genocide” painted all over it, which Mr. Turnbull declared was part of a “totalitarian campaign” to obliterate the country’s history.

The statue’s inscription asserting that Cook discovered Australia ignited criticism that it ignored tens of thousands of years of Indigenous history. Politicians said the vandalism spurred a growing debate and a push for Australia to celebrate the country’s national day on another day, one that meant something to everyone.

Mr. Young, the artist, said Aboriginal Australians in Fitzroy just wanted to again find a way to lead the conversation — to challenge Australia’s white establishment to formally recognize its complicated past and the fact that the country is now a mix of many different cultures and backgrounds.

“To have a strong future is reconnecting with our past,” he said.

He was standing just in front of a mural he painted on the side of Charcoal Lane, a social enterprise restaurant, which he said paid tribute to Fitzroy’s enduring Aboriginal identity.

It showed a mix of prominent Aboriginal heroes and a flag with the word “sovereignty.”