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Australia Through American Eyes

A New York Times correspondent who covers race in the United States encounters a young indigenous population defying stereotypes.

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WHEN Bobby Salee looked for work in the Australian town of Cairns, his job prospects would end as quickly as potential employers would ask: Have you ever been to prison?

When an Aboriginal teenager from the remote Kimberley region would climb aboard the school bus, she said, her white classmates would tease her: “Go back to where you came from.”

“I couldn’t even stand being in school for eight hours a day,” said the teenager, Zeritta Jessell. “I’d get followed around the school from a big group of people.”

It has been 50 years since Australia’s indigenous people won the right to be counted in the national census and to be covered by federal laws, 25 years since the High Court provided a way for them to reclaim land that colonizers took.

But many of Australia’s First Peoples continue to encounter both discrimination and despair. Indigenous Australians are imprisoned at roughly 13 times the rate of nonindigenous Australians. They are just 3 percent of the country’s population, with dozens of peoples or nations on the mainland and in the islands of the Torres Strait, but indigenous suicides increased to 50 percent of all suicides in Australia in 2010, up from 5 percent in 1991.

Indigenous Australians also suffer disproportionate levels of poverty, addiction and unemployment in what they say is a racist society that dismisses them as second-class citizens.

I’ve spent the past several years covering race in the United States. But as part of The New York Times’s expansion into Australia, I traveled through the country’s indigenous communities to look at how they are confronting these challenges and the painful legacy of colonization. Working with filmmakers from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Foreign Correspondent” on a 60-minute documentary, which will air on Tuesday in Australia and online, I heard stories from dozens of indigenous Australians who shared the details of their lives with a mix of outrage, resignation and courage.

Many indigenous people are now calling for a treaty with Australia that would end the country’s ominous distinction as the only Commonwealth nation without such a contract governing negotiations over issues like land use, education and compensation. It was the topic of a closely watched conference of indigenous leaders

last month, which also resulted in a proposed framework for granting First Australians a clearer role in government and greater control over their lives.

But the Australian government has yet to embrace these demands.

Young indigenous Australians in particular, from various regions and backgrounds, described their country as a place where even when they have rights on paper, they do not always have them in practice. Having covered protests against the police in Ferguson, Mo., Minneapolis and other American cities, I am familiar with this complaint — and with the stories that racial minorities in Australia told me about how they feel that they face inherited disadvantages in their efforts to build successful lives. “I think some of the kids who live in particularly difficult situations, often in remote areas, are extraordinarily strong and resilient people to survive as long as they do,” said Geoffrey Winters, a Aboriginal man who works as a lawyer in Sydney. “The argument should be, Why are our common peers allowed to fall to that position and isn’t it a national responsibility to solve the problem?”

In three very different parts of Australia — the mining areas of the west; Murray Island in the north; and Sydney, a city of five million in the east — I met many indigenous millennials who exemplify the challenges and promise that Australia has yet to fully embrace. Here are three of their stories.



Ms. Jessell, who had been teased on the bus to school, was so close with one of her cousins that they called each other sisters. They took a job training program together where they learned to prepare résumés and cover letters. They went camping. One thing they did not do together was drink. Ms. Jessell, 19, said she usually avoided the drinking scene in their remote hometown, Kununurra.

So when her cousin went out one evening last September after a camping trip, Ms. Jessell recalled, “I told her I’d be waiting for her.”

But Ms. Jessell would never hear from her again.

Instead, she said, at about 3 o’clock the next morning, she awoke to someone banging on her door.

It was a family member with grim news: Her cousin had attempted suicide. Ms. Jessell rushed to the scene, but an ambulance already had taken her cousin to the hospital. About an hour later, Ms. Jessell said, she got the news that her cousin had died.

Ms. Jessell found herself squarely in the middle of one of the most depressing realities for Aboriginal people in her corner of Australia and beyond: suicide.

A report published last year in the *Medical Journal of Australia* found that in the Kimberley region, where Ms. Jessell lives, suicide had become normalized among the region’s indigenous population. Nationally, from 2011 to 2015, suicide was the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 15 to 34 years of age, according to federal figures.

Why, Ms. Jessell was left to wonder, did her cousin — who exhibited no real signs of stress in her life — suddenly decide to end it?

Ms. Jessell said she would later learn that her cousin had gotten into an argument with some relatives shortly before she killed herself. A lot of young people also feel shunned by families, who are sometimes too poor to provide properly for them, she said.

Many young people think suicide is the answer.

“Now you have people over the age of 10 hanging themselves, wanting to commit suicide because of petty little things like alcohol, drugs,” Ms. Jessell said.

Her boyfriend, Mikey Cox, who turns 18 this week, said there was also often a lack of emotional support in indigenous families, as they are loath to talk about their problems with each other.

“Lots of people have suicidal thoughts because they feel unwanted,” he said.

Ms. Jessell said she too had considered suicide after her cousin died. “That’s the only person I talked to,” she said. “That’s the only person I run to for help. She meant everything to me.”

Instead of suicide, she is trying to pull things back together.

Ms. Jessell graduated from high school but never went to college because, she said, she feared more racist taunting like what she had experienced at school.

The number of indigenous university students has increased in recent years, to 1.1 percent of all higher education students, but while they are underrepresented there, they are overrepresented behind bars: Indigenous Australians are 15 times more likely

to be incarcerated than nonindigenous Australians, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

“Getting the same racism,” Ms. Jessell said. “That’s not the life I want to live.” For now, Ms. Jessell has returned to a job training program she had quit after her cousin’s death. She is hoping to work in the hospitality industry.

‘I Want to Do More’



Mr. Salee dreaded the question about prison because he knew the answer was not what anyone wanted to hear. By the time he was 21, he already had been locked up twice.

That’s when his mother felt it was time to make a change.

When Mr. Salee was released from jail in 2009 in Cairns — this time he had been charged with hitting a police officer with a stereo — she sent him 500 miles north to his ancestral homeland, Murray Island.

The remote outpost has about 300 residents, most of whom are related to each other, and sits in the Torres Strait. It is one in a chain of more than 250 islands that belong to Australia and stretch to Papua New Guinea.

Most of the people on these islands, like Mr. Salee, are black. It reminded me a bit of the Caribbean, where I was born, in Trinidad and Tobago, and often feel most at home. Torres Strait Islanders, who are native to the island chain, fiercely embrace their autonomy, emphasizing that although they are native to the land they occupy, they are different from mainland Australia’s Aboriginal people.

The Torres Strait Islands are sometimes held up as a model for indigenous independence because traditional owners have a degree of control of the local

government — around some fishing licenses, for example — and have tried to form their own state. But they are also a place where the rules and restrictions can look very similar to Indigenous communities on the mainland.

At Murray Island's lone bar, an airy place with a pool table surrounded by tall wooden tables, patrons are allowed to purchase beer to take home, but only one six-pack per day. To get that privilege, they must pay 5 Australian dollars (or \$4 U.S.) annually for a pub membership. That gets them a card that is swiped with each purchase — whether it is to take home or drink at the pub — essentially tracking people's alcohol consumption.

High rates of alcoholism and related problems, such as domestic violence, have led to restrictive rules around drinking for some indigenous Australians across the country. But this was just another sign of Australian paternalism, said Jim Bero, one of the pub's seven board members. "They try to treat you like kids."

When Mr. Salee was sent to Murray about eight years ago he was essentially left to chart his own course. The police would not be watching closely as they did in Cairns — just two police officers patrol the island, which has a single main road. There were very few jobs — the economy consists mostly of a small grocery store, a government office and infrastructure jobs that seem to go mostly to white outsiders.

Giving someone who has regularly gotten in trouble with the law the freedom to roam might seem like a dangerous proposition. But for Mr. Salee, it turned out to be empowering.

Mr. Salee said that in such a small, insular community, the pressure of not disappointing his elders kept him from acting up.

On Murray, there are no restaurants, so if you want to eat you have to earn it. Mr. Salee learned to fish and dive for sea slugs. He is one of many young men who risk their lives plunging off white dinghies into turquoise, shark-infested waters to get their catch, which they sell for \$10 to \$20 per kilogram (or 13 to 26 Australian dollars).

After years of receiving welfare payments, last September, Mr. Salee, 30, finally found stable work, snagging one of two coveted positions at the grocery store on Murray after two longtime employees left. He is earning about \$830 every two weeks (1,100 Australian dollars) and envisioning a promising future.

"I would like to make my own small business. I want to do more," he said. "If I was still in Cairns, I would be in and out of jail."

Mr. Salee said the way the government ran the welfare system, which he had relied on in Cairns and on Murray Island, only fostered dependency. The program required him to search for at least eight jobs every two weeks, he said. But he said the government office that was supposed to facilitate the jobs would never follow up, instead sending him back out to search again and again.

One Sunday, Mr. Salee and some friends shaved coconuts and cooked up a turtle stew. An elder had died, and it was tradition to have a big community feast in the days after the death.

Back in Cairns, those gatherings usually would draw the ire of neighbors, who get upset at all the cars parked in the streets and call the police. In Murray, this is a tradition that people hold dearly. It is what helps stabilize people like Mr. Salee.

“It’s their own place, it’s their own land,” said Jessie Ghee, Mr. Salee’s mother, who still lives in Cairns. “They don’t have to be afraid of anything they do here. His life changed since he’s been here on Murray.”

‘Aboriginality Is Always Going to Be a Huge Part of My Identity’



Australian writer and actress Nakkiah Lui. Credit Brook Mitchell for The New York Times

The poster-size head shot in the lobby of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s headquarters in Sydney features a woman with long, dark hair, rosy cheeks and a wide smile.

This is the Nakkiah Lui most Australians know: a star.

She has written for the screen and the stage; is an actress whose starring roles have included an Aboriginal sketch comedy, “Black Comedy”; and is an activist who gamely spars with conservative commentators.

But Ms. Lui said that these accomplishments — and the pressure to serve as a model of Aboriginal success — weigh on her like an anvil.

“Being a very public Aboriginal person and having my identity being so a part of my work, why that’s so important is it comes down to equality,” Ms. Lui told me. “Until we reach that equality, I think Aboriginality is always going to be a huge part of my identity and a huge part of Australian culture.”

Her public success belies her less-than-glamorous upbringing in Mount Druitt, a western Sydney suburb with a large indigenous community.

Almost every man in her family has spent time in jail, Ms. Lui, 28, said. Her grandmother died by falling through a rotted-out wood floor in her public housing unit. And she said she wanted to quit school because of racist taunting, but had to stick it out because of her mother’s insistence.

Ms. Lui eventually got a scholarship to attend boarding school in Canada. It was the first time she started feeling proud of her heritage, she said. She wrote a one-woman show, “Proud,” and was suddenly on a journey to success that eludes many indigenous Australians.

It was not always smooth. About a decade ago, she got into an argument with a man she was dating at the time. He beat her bloody, she said, yet somehow she was the one who felt ashamed when the police showed up at her door.

She was at once a burgeoning professional and a woman dealing with domestic violence and relatives’ suicide, two of the scourges plaguing her community.

“I was at university, I was at law school,” she said. “It just felt like: ‘I am a failure for this. I have let my community down, that I have allowed myself to be a victim.’”

But she got strong support from her family. That, and immersing herself in storytelling, helped her to climb out of a rut, she said.

Now Ms. Lui is boldly expressing her heritage and challenging racism through her art. Her new play, “Black Is the New White,” which opened in Sydney in May, is about an affluent indigenous family dealing with urban life, young love and white supremacy.

Ms. Lui also stars in and wrote a coming television series, “Kiki & Kitty,” which is about an indigenous woman’s vagina coming to life.

When I joined her on the set of “Kiki & Kitty” one day, she had a crew of about a dozen people catering to her needs. They brushed her hair and did her makeup. They slipped her into a red dress with white polka dots. And they adjusted the lights to make sure she looked just right for her close-up.

“I wanted to put black women in roles that they don’t usually play,” she said. She added that she wanted to show “black women who were living a modern life.” In other words, women just like her.