

We learnt early that white ghosts can lie. Australians are ready for truth and reckoning

*In this Griffith Review extract **Thomas Mayor** writes about how his people have a different history of Captain Cook's 'discovery' of the Torres Strait. Now is the time for truths to collide and come together*



In the Griffith Review essay, Thomas Mayor writes about the differences in attitudes to land ownership and management between First Nations people and those inherited from British colonialism.

Thomas Mayor
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Ngai gar kulai upasian, ngai kuiku mabaigal matha muiya muingu, nga ka thanumun ya i kulai mulie kie. Ngai gar lak upasian kowa kuiku mabiag einabie lugngu thana ka ngulpun wakai waiyak. Ngai mina kaima eso, Awa Waubin.

(Before I speak, I pay my respects in silence, speaking with my ancestors, acknowledging them. I pay my respects to the Rightful Owners of this land who will give us guidance. I express gratitude to Uncle Waubin for teaching me.)

I am sitting forward, in nautical terms, looking astern at my awa, who is guiding us through reefs and straits on a moonless night. Above him are stars like phosphorescence in the squid-ink sky. Around his silhouette I see phosphorescence like stars in our small dinghy's wake. I'm a young man excited to be going night-spearing for *kaiyar*, the painted crayfish.

The 14-foot aluminium dinghy is tiller-steer. No frills: no centre consoles, steering wheels or rod-holding rigs. No fancy depth sounder or GPS. Like most small boats in the Torres Strait Islands, my *awa's* boat is set up for hunting, fishing and transport.

My *awa*, my uncle, is a quiet man. When he speaks, you must listen. Concentrate. Not only because the effort will yield lustrous pearls of wisdom but also because of the way he speaks – quiet, humble, without sparkle but valuable nonetheless. In my culture, the uncle-nephew relationship is vital to the boy becoming a good and capable man. An uncle is obliged to teach the nephew the ways of the world and is respected for this like a father.

I understand that he is teaching me, checking that I have noticed a waypoint he spoke of

Before we launched the boat at Bach Beach on Waiben, Awa explained the journey ahead. We discussed the tides and the moon phase, and he described the path through the channel between Ngarupai and Muralag. We would be navigating through Karaureg lands and waters, where we can trace our ancestry back well before English names – Thursday Island, Horn Island, Prince of Wales Island – were imposed over our Country.

After travelling for almost an hour, the roar of the two-stroke motor hushes to a drone and the wind falls away from my back. An orange glow outlines Awa's silhouette as he draws on a cigarette. He waves with his free arm towards the outline of nearby islands, blacker than the night. I understand that he is teaching me, checking that I have noticed a waypoint he spoke of, marked by the shape of the land beneath the Southern Cross. The waypoint indicates that we are nearing the passage to our destination. A place only recently named Possession Island.

This island is not Possession Island

Possession Island, the place I went hunting for *kaiyar* as a young man 20 years ago, was named by the then Lieutenant James Cook in August 1770. The act of naming the island "Possession" demonstrates the attitude Australia's white forefathers had towards land ownership, devoid of connection to the life force of Country – the generations of people, plants and animals; their spirits and stories sustained from that. It is an attitude that continues in modern Australia and contributes to widening inequality and the worsening global climate crisis.

For my people, ownership of the land is as much about the land's ownership of us. The land and sea are not possessions to be used, unsustainably. The land and sea are for us to care for, collectively, for the generations of our children to come. For without our lands and seas – without the *waru* (turtles) and *dhangal* (dugong) eating the sea-grass and in turn feeding us; without the *baizam* (sharks) patrolling the reefs and maintaining balance; without the *rugeobaw* (sweet potato) planted as the winds and stars guide; without honouring our totems and heeding their lessons about the circle of life – we know, from more than 60 millennia of experience, that we would be doomed.

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For the Gudang Yadhaykenu Aboriginal First Nation on the mainland closest to the Torres Strait Islands, this island is not Possession Island: it is Thunada. For my people of the Kaurareg Nation, the same island is named Bedanug during the north-west winds we call *kuki*, and Thuined during *sager*, the south-east trade winds. The multiple names and the multiple peoples associated with the island are the opposite of the western concept of possession. They reflect a sharing and generous culture. They reflect collective custodianship and sustainability versus singular exploitation.

Cook's ship, HMS Endeavour, and his crew were observed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they sailed up the east coast of Australia. Both the peoples of the mainland and the islands believed the white sailors were the spirits of the dead returned; they were *markai* in Kalaw Lagaw Ya, the language of the Kaurareg. First Nations warned each other about these strange ghosts blown in on low-flying clouds. We used message sticks and smoke signals, as effective as Royal Mail. Cook and his crew were largely ignored in the earliest interactions: we had no interest in trade or diplomacy with the intruders. We had everything we needed – we had and we maintained an abundance of life. Aboriginal people went about peaceful lives as we had for millennia, as the British explorer went about his business, foolishly believing he was discovering our lands, as though we were not there.

Cook's version – and ours

According to official Australian history, on 22 August 1770, one of Cook's final acts before sailing away from our great continent through Kaurareg lands was to hold a brief ceremony on Thuined to proclaim possession of the entire east coast for Britain. Well, at least this is Cook's account, written in his journal and reported to his masters back in England.

We learned early that white ghosts can lie.

Like any sovereign peoples, the visitation of such strangers – ghosts, intruders or otherwise – was recorded and maintained as a significant event in our historical archives. No other culture on Earth has recorded significant geological events from ice ages ago and carried them accurately from generation to generation to this very day. Similarly, First Nations peoples passed on historical events and lessons orally through songs and stories, and through art. Our historical archives, written or not, should be respected and valued. My ancestors met their obligations to teach my Elders, who are meeting their obligation to teach the following generation as my *awa* met his obligation to teach me. And we have a different story to Cook's.

From the words of our Elders, as told by the Kaurareg warriors who witnessed the *markai* – Cook, briefly floating offshore, never planting British flag on Thuiden because our warriors may well have killed him – the foundations of Australia remain contested.

This Kaurareg understanding of Australia's shaky foundations is just one of many stories known to First Nations that differ from the British version. After all, we know

that Cook had secret orders from the King to gain our consent before claiming possession, but he declared our land for the King without negotiation. We are a nation that continues to be without a Treaty, and in the late 19th century First Nations representatives weren't included in the constitutional conventions that founded the Australian federation. We are yet to be constitutionally recognised and empowered as distinct peoples – as distinct as and certainly more legitimate than the colonies that became the Australian states. These are just a few examples that challenge Australia's foundations. Worse are the crimes against our humanity – the genocide and slavery committed by Australia's governments right up to the latter half of the 20th century and to this day through mass incarceration, harmful policies and prejudice.

A willingness for a reckoning

The truths that challenge the foundations of this nation do not make me deny Australians their identity because, in part, I would be denying my own. I am as Australian as I am Kaurareg, Kalkalgal and Erubumle. Nor do I deny that the sovereignty of the crown, the authority of the Australian government, is real. The point that I am bringing us to is where truths collide and where truths can possibly come together. As Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer and writer Teela Reid wrote in 2020 for Griffith Review: it is time to show up for the reckoning.

In many ways, Australian people have been demonstrating a willingness to show up for the reckoning. As I carried the sacred Uluru Statement from the Heart canvas across the nation soon after its creation in May 2017, mobilising the people's movement in support of its proposal for a Voice to Parliament, I saw the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags flying alongside the Australian flag in schools, offices and government buildings – as can be expected today – but also in the most unlikely of places, including in the front yards of homes in small rural towns where I rarely saw another Blackfulla. It's no myth that most Australians accept that each of these flags tells a story of our collective identity.

Each of these flags represents our country. Each represents perspectives that, when brought together, can strengthen our identity and our ability to deal with the global challenges before us. Though most Australians accept the importance of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, only one flag, the flag with the British union jack on it, is truly represented in parliament. Changing this structural inequity so that First Nations sovereignty is recognised and truly heard is where I believe the reckoning begins.

Cook failed to reckon with the reality of First Nations sovereignty. The governors of the former colonies and their masters in their British homelands failed too. The forefathers of the federation of Australia had the opportunity to right these wrongs, but they chose to “smooth the dying pillow” of a “dying race”, as they described us, going further by enacting the White Australia policy in one of the first acts of the Australian parliament. Yet as each subsequent Australian government tried to kill us off, either blatantly or through gross negligence, we recovered and modernised First Nations identities. And here we are, flying our colours, still calling for dignity, respect and recognition.



'Most Australians accept that each of these flags tells a story of our collective identity.'

The Uluru Statement provides a roadmap to the reckoning. It is a referendum to enshrine our Voice – our flags, our identities, our rightful place – in the centre of all levels of decision-making, and I strongly believe we can succeed.

While the sentiment of the Australian people is with us, governments have obfuscated

Numerous polls and reports to government indicate the willingness of the Australian people to show up for a reckoning of our past at a Voice referendum.

While the sentiment of the Australian people is with us, governments have obfuscated. The federal government has reports from the Referendum Council from 2017, the 2018 joint select committee on constitutional recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the 2021 Indigenous Voice Co-design Final Report, and they all recommend constitutional enshrinement of a First Nations Voice.

One does not need to look far to see that in the real world, outside the Canberra bubble, the truths of the foundations of Australia have already collided, and the truth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' place in this country – both symbolically and constitutionally – is bursting through as the strongest and most desired reform to the Australian identity.

Where once there was only one flag flying, we now see three.

The challenges ahead of us – climate change, an ongoing pandemic, growing inequality and the failure of neoliberal economics – are like a storm on the horizon. We must pull our ship together, prepare the vessel and the crew, and look to

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders to guide us to peaceful waters. Australia can gain much from the wisdom and accountability we will bring to parliament.

I asked Kaurareg Elder Awa Waubin to provide the final words for this essay. I asked if he would share some of the political wisdom that ensured a thriving Kaurareg Nation on small rocky islands in the brilliantly turquoise strait between two giant lands. His words demonstrate the distance we must close – the difference in ideals about the possession of land and respect for all living things, including Country, that must face reckoning.

Awa Waubin said, ‘My *bala*, it is always important for us to remember that what matters in cultural diplomacy is not the borderlines that colonisation imposed on us. What matters is the respect for our bloodlines and connections to Country.’

- *This is an edited extract from [Griffith Review 76: Acts of Reckoning](#).*