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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Destroyed by Default

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A Question needs to be asked: Do non-Indigenous Australians have culture at all? When I think of Australian culture, there's not much unique to the people here that can be used to identify the nation, which has wrapped itself over Aboriginal land, that has not been appropriated or colonised from elsewhere. Football was apparently derived from an Aboriginal sport, cricket is British, the meat pie is a traditional food to London etc. etc. We are right to wonder what this thing called "Australian culture" is.



Australia is, in fact, so determined to pretend to be British that we still have a Brit as our head of state.

Are we supposed to be surprised that a society with so little culture of its own is disrespectful towards the material culture of others? Should we be surprised that Australia, the nation that has imposed itself upon unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land, has no respect for the cultural heritage of the people who belong to the land they have built a nation on?

The removal of the Djap Wurrung tree that is known as the "Directions Tree", which is significant to the Djap Wurrung women, is a perfect example of Australia's disregard for Aboriginal cultural heritage. The tree was removed to re-route a highway, a re-routing that was almost certainly unnecessary. The busy road could have been widened to make it safer without changing the route. The stated reason for a change of route was in order to strip a few minutes off a long road journey between Melbourne and Adelaide.

It is not unreasonable, considering this, to imagine, as some have, that the point of moving the road was to remove visible Aboriginal cultural presence; to remove the cultural heritage itself; to erase Aboriginality from the land.

We need to question why Aboriginal heritage is so easily discarded: why modified trees, scar trees, archaeological sites and rock art sites that establish more than 60,000 years of continuous Aboriginal occupation of the continent, are so easily destroyed. The destruction of the mind-



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bogglingly important Juukan Gorge site in Western Australia (which contained archaeology from 40,000+ years of occupation, even if the cultural importance is disregarded) and the commentary after it suggest strongly that in the case of Aboriginal heritage the default is destruction. The assumption is that it is acceptable to destroy Aboriginal heritage, and the traditional owners must push rocks uphill to prove that the site should be protected.

Not only were the traditional owners horrified and heartbroken by the dynamiting of such an important site, but archaeologists were disgusted that a site with so much to teach of the origins of human culture was so carelessly erased from the landscape.

Juukan Gorge is one of the clearest examples of culturally, historically and archaeologically significant sites being destroyed, because of the archaeological importance, but the Djap Wurrung trees are no less important even though they are not as old. Regardless of whether a site is 46,000 years old or 800 years old, it is still ancient. If a culturally significant building in the United Kingdom (from whence Australia's white culture arose) from the 13th century was slated for destruction to move a highway, the outcry would be deafening.

In Melbourne, a few years ago, there was a huge outcry when a decision was made to remove some postcolonial non-native trees.

In fact, many of us can remember that people were desperate to save those trees, to give them heritage protection, even though they were non-natives planted by the colonisers and doubtlessly far younger and less culturally and historically significant than the pre-colonial landscape that would have been destroyed to plant them.

I would love to see Aboriginal sites given at least the same protection as National Heritage sites, and frankly, destruction should no longer be the default position.

For me, it cannot be questioned that non-Indigenous Australians consider colonial history more important than pre-colonial history. Australia's desire to be part of Europe is so intense and overwhelming that Aboriginal culture is to be destroyed and removed so that the myth of Australia being a white country can be maintained.

It is time to accept that Australia, the nation, has an adversarial attitude towards Aboriginal cultural heritage, and the physical evidence of it. The colonial practice of erasure, removal of sites, genocide and destruction of culture has not really ended. If Australia, and Victoria, was serious about correcting the history of the destruction of Aboriginal heritage, the



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simplest way to begin would be to just stop doing it. You can't correct a history of bad behaviour if that behaviour continues.

As your mum taught you, sorry means you stop doing it.

Claire is a Noongar woman whose family have belonged to the south coast of Western Australia since long before history started being recorded. Born in Perth, Claire has lived most of her life in Victoria, and most of that in and around Melbourne. Claire writes fiction, essays and poetry. Claire has won a Black&Write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship for her novel Terra Nullius.