

Time-traveling and recognizing Aboriginal cultures

I acknowledge with respect that First Australians from the past to the future are guardians of the Australian land.



By Yuiko Asai
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Disclaimer: This article includes some swear words in the lyrics that I quote from an Aboriginal rap artist. I decided to keep these to show respect toward the original work of the artist in protesting how Aboriginal people have been treated since the invasion by British settlers in 1788. Also, for Aboriginal people, this writing may cause you to recall traumas and other negative experiences you have gone through. I would like to forewarn you in case you decide to read the whole article.



Muttonbird Island is spiritually important for Aboriginal people, particularly the Gumbaynggirr, according to one of the boards at the Muttonbird Island Outdoor Learning Space. It represents their connections with nature (land and water), which their ancestors created for the future generations.

I needed to hear them out, understand their values

Yuiko Asai is from Tokyo, Japan, and a third-year university student at Chuo University in Tokyo. She has been researching Aboriginal issues in Australia since April 2022. Yuiko has studied different perspectives about the current situation between Aboriginal people and the majority, particularly to do with language. The majority talks of “revitalization” as its final goal, but Aboriginal peoples are concerned with “healing.” Her main questions are: *What do Aboriginal people say?* and *Where are their voices?* Her aim is to grasp the current situation from Aboriginal people’s side. Also, Yuiko has been questioning *How do Aboriginal activists act in order to be “listened to” by society (particularly the majority)?* This is why she started to look at the activist work of Aboriginal artists, and to explore Aboriginal peoples’ cultural values and philosophies. In turn, this brought her to learning about “The Dreaming” – the way in which Aboriginal people understand the world and their place in it.

On January 26 each year, the majority of the Australian population celebrates the British settlement as Australia Day, whereas Aboriginal people consider this Invasion Day¹. Aboriginal people have a different story and history from the mainstream. According to a group of UNSW researchers², Aboriginal people arrived over 50,000 years ago and have since then developed their own cultures and have their own languages. They settled in the land long before the first voyage of Captain Cook in 1770. Today, they live in Australian society with great language and cultural diversity despite all the oppression and violence they have faced since the 18th century.

In the early part of my project about language revitalization in Australia, I came across a dark period called the Stolen Generations. The Stolen Generations is when Aboriginal children were taken away from their homes by the government schemes from the mid-1800s through the

1970s³. Listening to video testimonies by survivors of the Stolen Generations⁴, I came to realize the importance of “hearing” people’s own voices. I then tried to recognize how Aboriginal people have been seeking “healing” and that their language revitalization is actually a part of their “healing.”

Then, a totally changing question came up for me: *What do Aboriginal people do to heal themselves?* That is when I started to meet their activism through hip-hop, art, and education, for instance. I began to feel strong voices that hope to be “listened to” by the public. I started to notice their strong cultural prides and learn about Aboriginal people’s various cultural values and philosophies. I also met this interesting concept – “**time-traveling**” – for the first time. This is a key to unpacking Aboriginal people’s values and understanding their cultural pride. Now, I would like you too to get to know about the time-traveling concept, and reflect on the situation for oppressed minorities around the world. Welcome to the unique, significant time-traveling of Aboriginal people. In this magazine article, I’ll guide you by looking at the past, the present, and the future as we time-travel ourselves.

¹ Korff (2023)

² Coper, Williams, & Spooner (2018)

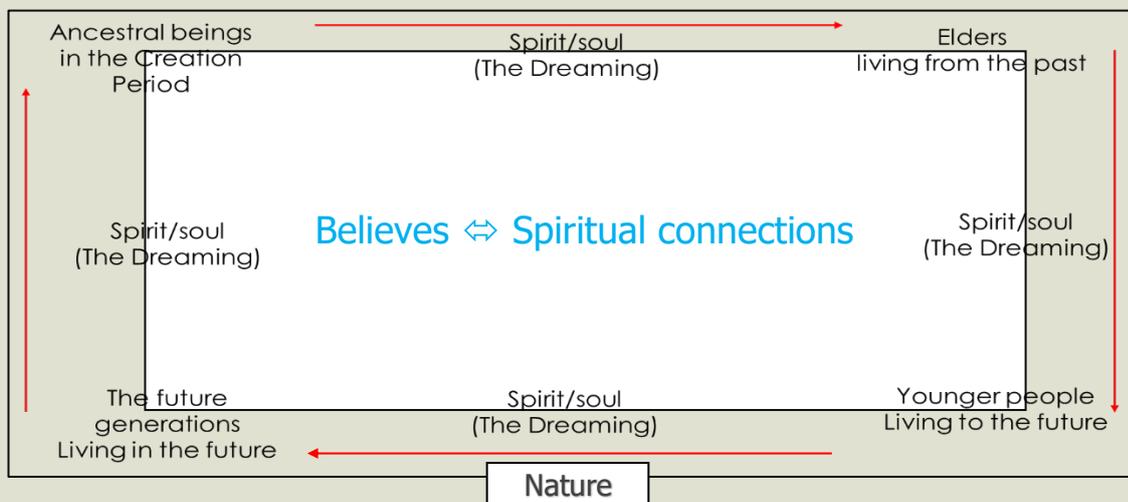
³ Healing Foundation (n.d.)

⁴ Stolen Generations' Testimonies Foundation (n.d.)

What is “time-traveling”?⁵

Okay, I get that we’ll go on some kind of a journey, but what is Aboriginal people’s “time-traveling” – it’s not the Back to the Future time traveling, eh? Of course, this isn’t the same concept as visiting the present and going back to the future, like “the idea of linear time” seen in western cultures⁶. As you can see in the image below, Aboriginal people’s time-traveling is for today’s generations to maintain and feel spiritual connections with different times now, in the past and in the future in nature. They can get to know about what ancestral beings have done in the past, appreciate them for what they have, and, most importantly, find connections to their lands which will bring them to their languages. I created this visual image of time-traveling for our better understanding about the concept and will explain more in no time!

Time-traveling image



As you can see in the image above, Aboriginal people’s time-traveling is done across every generation and every time through the Dreaming. And this is a never-ending process.

Traveling back to the past – What is the Dreaming?

Why don’t we start our journey from the past? But, first of all, let me introduce to you Aboriginal people’s core, the Dreaming. In an article of Creative Spirits whose website is run by Aboriginal people⁷, Mudrooroo (an Aboriginal writer) explains that the Dreaming is “a psychic state in which or during which contact is made with the ancestral spirits, or the Law, or that special period of the beginning.”⁸ In other words, it is when Aboriginal people are making spiritual contact with their ancestors to learn about what their ancestors created for them – from the Creation Period through the present to the future.

The Creation Period for Aboriginal people is the time when there were ancestral beings

⁵ Korff (2020)

⁶ Working with Indigenous Australians First Nations people (2020)

⁷ Korff (2021)

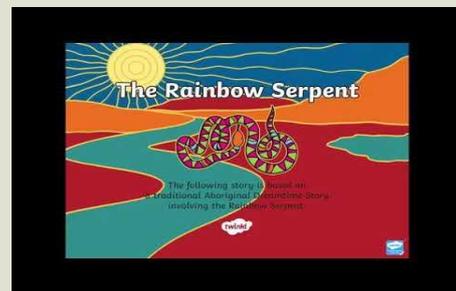
⁸ Korff (2020)

(ancestral spirits) forming and shaping the world of “Aboriginality” on their own land – knowledge, cultural values, traditions, and customary laws.

The stories of their creations are vividly alive and strongly connected to today’s society through the Dreaming. They can learn about given rules, laws, and cultural values, how the universe and everything in the lives of Aboriginal people were created, as well as knowledge about creatures and the nature. The Dreaming takes place when people get to listen to the stories through discussions, singing, plays, dances, and other cultural rituals like body painting. This lets Aboriginal people living in this modern world have connections with their ancestral beings, and with their own traditions/cultures and their own lands.

An example of the Dreaming

Let me share with you one of the most well-known Spiritual beings of the Dreaming: the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent is a life-giver in many Aboriginal cultures. In the Creation Period she shaped the earth as she was traveling across lands; for example, meandered paths became mountains, valleys, and riverbeds. She even tickled frogs’ stomachs, and the frogs gave the paths water, which turned into rivers and lakes. Since the Rainbow Serpent is a creator of the foundations of their lands, people pay respect through a ritual. When they enter rivers, lakes, or other watery sources, they declare by singing to the Rainbow Serpent that they will do no harm. If they do not show her the respect, they fear she will cause great natural disasters like storms, strong winds, or heavy rain. With Dreaming stories like the Rainbow Serpent, we can learn about the Creation Period where everything surrounding Aboriginal people started. This is how they learn about their stories and acquire their cultural pride.



[Rainbow Serpent storytelling video](#)

Coming back to the present

After we come back from time traveling through the Dreaming with new knowledge about Aboriginal people’s cultural values and philosophies, we return to the present. We’ve completed the past part of our journey, but have not learned about Aboriginal people themselves yet. With what they have taken in during the Dreaming, Aboriginal people build up their cultural identity or “Aboriginality” and they gain pride in their culture and traditions. Then, they can express this actively in the present. By doing so, they “heal” themselves from their dark history since the invasion.

In the present, more and more young people would be keen on taking actions in order to protect and make their own cultures thrive. This is one way they do this is through raps. Now, let’s continue our journey by getting to know about the work of an Aboriginal rapper, and how he story-tells his “Aboriginality” as his interpretation of the Dreaming.

Rapper DOBBY

In this new part of our journey, we bump into a rapper called DOBBY! He is a rap artist

and an activist with a mixed-heritage Murrawarri (from Weilmoringle, NSW⁹) and Filipino cultural background. He actively tackles today's issues faced by the Aboriginal people through music, performance videos, and lectures. His rap music deal with about issues such as land rights and environmental issues.

I saw a music video by DOBBY rapper for the first time when I was looking for real Aboriginal people's voices. I noticed his great sense of cultural pride through one of his songs, *Walk Away* (2022). This is his way to pass down what he has been story-told about Aboriginal people and their resilience, as well as to show how he feels about Aboriginal people's struggles. DOBBY does not want Australian people to forget about the assimilation in the past and its consequences. Rather, he wishes to encourage people to move forward together. In this song, he is storytelling about Aboriginal people's experiences with assimilation and invasion, as well as what they lost as a result.¹⁰ These lines are where I personally feel his message strongly.

*Assimilate us, and then you blamed us
Goddamn, that's a bitch
Talkin' shit, you might be liable to catch a fist
You took the voice of my Murrawarri people, and you
ripped it from our throat
Man, I swear I'm 'bout to let 'em all know
But you tell me, "Let it go"*



This song really expresses Aboriginal people's loss since the invasion, particularly that of the Murrawarri. DOBBY is very eager to let Murrawarri people know that their voices have been taken away by Europeans. And he tries to encourage Aboriginal people to keep story-telling about themselves and their struggles, not "letting it go". His song, *Walk Away*, can empower them to build their strong cultural pride for themselves.

Also, in other songs like *Peregrine*¹¹, DOBBY story-tells his own "Aboriginality". It is so powerful that audiences can sense this only by listening to his songs, which makes them want to rethink and take some actions. Through story-telling like DOBBY does, people can acquire in the present time cultural pride and endeavor to preserve their own "Aboriginality" with great passion.

After our time-traveling

We now have completed our time-traveling. Did you see how Aboriginal people always go on the journey to learn about their cultural values and philosophies through their ancestors? We don't necessarily have to be "Aboriginal" to go on the time-traveling journey to learn about them. Let's also recognize one of the most famous Aboriginal elders, Uncle Michael Jarrett. He has said that he "strongly believes in keeping his language and culture alive and proudly teaches anyone who wants to learn."¹² From this quotation, I feel that, even though I am a non-Indigenous writer, I am encouraged to deepen my understanding about Aboriginal people as much as I can. We all can keep

⁹ Loo (2020)

¹⁰ Sloan (2022)

¹¹ DOBBY.au (2018)

¹² State Library New South Wales (n.d.)

time-traveling more, and if we do, we will be able to consider Aboriginal peoples and the richness of their cultures from their side. This time-traveling is just the beginning: let's continue this journey together in the future (and also in the past).

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