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## Listening to the Voices of Aboriginal People in Their Struggle for Cultural and Linguistic Revitalization

### ABSTRACT

In my Story Circle at the LD30 Conference, I shared how my process of understanding Aboriginal people's cultural and language revitalization in Australia has shifted from fact-based to voice-based while listening to Aboriginal people's stories. In my journey of understanding, I concluded that while thinking about Aboriginal people in Australia, we also need to look at the situation around us; listening will lead us to not just understanding but to supporting indigenous peoples to revitalize their languages and cultures. In response to my story, participants shared their own perspectives and experiences. I collected their email addresses, and I am planning to be in contact with them so that we can write up a collaborative short article (1,000 words) together about recognizing minorities as a first step and getting interested in their situations. I have been listening to Aboriginal people's voices, and, after the Story Circle, I realized that it is time for us to look at the issues from new angles, one that is voice-based.

### MY JOURNEY OF UNDERSTANDING

*I acknowledge with respect that Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples from the past to the future are guardians of the Australian land.*

In my Story Circle at the LD30 conference, I shared my journey of understanding of Aboriginal people and their issues, which included online fieldwork and a visit to Australia. I could reflect on my story and gain new angles from the audience. I wish to keep deepening my understanding as well as finding how I could spread my story in an effective way. In this article, I will explain what I shared, people's responses to my presentation and how I want to continue my journey.

### WHAT DID I SHARE IN MY STORY CIRCLE?

#### WHY I CHOSE AUSTRALIA

I chose Aboriginal people's issues in Australia because of my long interest in indigenous people's language revitalization. When I was in high school, I first learned about indigenous people in Canada and assimilation toward them (a process of taking away a culture, including language, of specific groups of people and making them conform into another culture). It was very shocking for me, and I decided to inform myself more in university. In 2022, I chose Australia in a seminar at university to deepen my understanding of indigenous people's issues since it was well known for its indigenous people.

## **THE HISTORY**

Starting the research journey, I found out that Australia had an assimilation policy toward Aboriginal people. The Stolen Generations is one of the keywords we need to know to grasp the history of this policy: It describes the Aboriginal people who were taken away from their parents and put into “white” people’s schools to assimilate their Aboriginality. They were prohibited to speak Aboriginal languages, made to feel negative about their traditions, and dehumanized by having their belongings, identities, self-control/self-esteem, and basic rights stolen from them. They even became victims of mass killings (National Museum of Australia, 2018). The ultimate purpose was to maintain the blood ideology of European people by getting rid of the “blackness” of Aboriginal people. In 2008, the former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, officially apologized for the policy. Nonetheless, in October 2023, in a referendum organised by the advisory body called the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, people were asked whether First Nations People should be recognized in the constitution, and the majority voted “No”.

## **PEOPLE’S VOICES**

As part of my research process, I listened to video testimonies. One of the speakers was [Rita Wenberg](#) (Stolen Generations’ testimonies, n.d.). She has been a victim of the Stolen Generations since she was three years old. She has been dealing with many traumas including identity issues and silence. As for her identity, she commented that, “I really thought I was white. If you do go back home, which I did, I met a lot of, you know, it wasn’t like family. You know, they were my – they tried to make me welcome. But I just couldn’t fit in.” In my understanding, she meant that although she could finally go back where she was supposed to belong, she did not feel she was a member of the family/community. Also, she talked about her silence: “A lot of people don’t know what happened to me. My daughter doesn’t even know. I won’t tell the kids, it’s not right for them to know.” Because of the policies that lead to the Stolen Generations, she cannot feel a sense of belonging to her own Aboriginal community, and her experiences are so traumatic that she does not want her children to know her story.

Another person I talked about in my Story Circle was an Aboriginal activist/rapper, DOBBY. He is a Murrawarri and Filipino man, and addresses today’s issues of Aboriginal people, land rights and the environment. For instance, in one of his songs, [Walk Away](#) (2022), he expresses what assimilation has done to his Murrawarri people, but despite the struggles they have been facing, people in society tell them to, “let it go”. He wants people to listen to what he has gone through and felt as an Aboriginal person, and wants to share with others the situation he and Murrawarri people have been put in.

## **MY FIELDWORK IN AUSTRALIA**

While I was doing research in Japan, I listened to different Aboriginal people’s voices. And this led me to do some fieldwork in Australia for two weeks. In February 2023, I visited Sydney (Gadigal lands) and an Aboriginal community on the coast about 90 minutes away by plane. Before going to Australia, I contacted different organizations and individuals, and arranged several visits and interviews with local individuals and organizations working for Aboriginal people and communities. My goal was to listen to people’s strong voices and see their situation with my own eyes so that I could better understand their perspectives and concerns. Talking with them, I could see how each Aboriginal person and their ally proactively go to great lengths to revitalize their languages and cultures in their own ways, and pass them down to the next generations.

## **PEOPLE’S RESPONSES AND MY COMMENTS**

For me, people’s reactions to my Story Circle presentation were fascinating, and I am very glad that I could share about Aboriginal people and their issues, and my journey of understanding. They got to know about the Aboriginal people and their issues by listening to their voices. Through reflecting

on my presentation, the audience developed their own interests in Aboriginal people and their issues in Australia as well as ones in Japan.

It seems to me that Rita Wenberg's voice was very powerful and made the audience contemplate Aboriginal people's issues. Koa (pseudonym) responded that she was shocked about her being a victim of the Stolen Generation, and she commented on Rita's identity issue (despite her Aboriginal background, she believes she is European). She realized how much Rita's experiences of assimilation have affected her sense of identity even though she is no longer technically under the policy.

Koa's point of view reminded me of long-lasting impacts of assimilation. She listened to Rita and considered the Aboriginal issue from her own perspective. Another participant, Julia (pseudonym) made a connection to Rita with her own experience. Because of her cultural background/identity, she sometimes feels excluded from a Japanese community. Rita was relatable for her in this point.

After my presentation, members of the audience expanded their interests to Aboriginal people's issues in their own ways. Yosef (pseudonym) mentioned that he did not know about Aboriginal people and their issues in general and knew only their existence. He is now interested in their history and if there are any cases in which people have sorted out their issues. Some of the audience expanded their interests to Japan's case as well, particularly the Ainu. Koa and Yosef shared that they wanted to know more about Ainu people, their issues, and solutions.

Finally, in a reflection, Julia also mentioned hope for future change of Aboriginal people: Even if one action is not big, a mass of them can lead to a better situation. We, the participants, and I have seen the dark history that Aboriginal peoples have had to endure and the languages at risk of dying, yet we could find a light to a better future for Aboriginal people.

## AFTER MY STORY CIRCLE

By doing the Story Circle, I could get new perspectives from people and realize how powerful people's voices are. It was meaningful for me that I could know what people wanted to understand more about Aboriginal people's issues, and how they see the issues through their lenses. Plus, I was very surprised about reactions from the audiences to Aboriginal people's voices, especially Rita's. People's voices can be very influential and let people come to realize their situations. I hope my voice about Aboriginal people and their issues has led you all to ponder the issues and keep deepening your understanding in your own unique ways.

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