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Postcard From Australia: Where Some See Souvenirs and Slang, a Race-in-America Reporter Sees Stereotypes

By John Eligon

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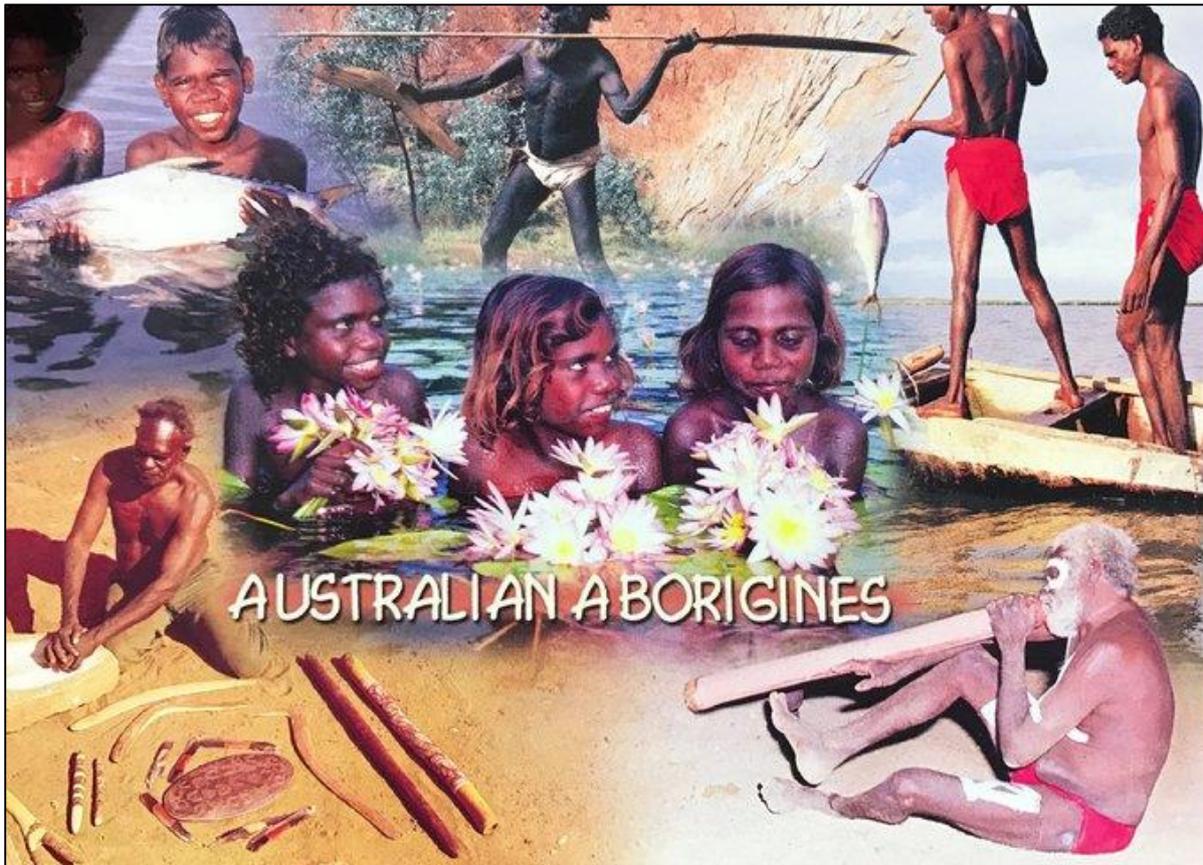


John Eligon on a boat on the Torres Strait.

BYRON BAY, Australia — I wandered into a gift shop in this picturesque Gold Coast town, and it was hard to miss the rugby balls and jerseys, beach towels and flags. I browsed a rack with hundreds of postcards touting the same Aussie flair, including two that parodied the country’s slang — “He’s blotto,” for instance, means that someone is too drunk to stand.

But as I looked closer, another postcard stood out, and not for its playfulness. “Australian Aborigines,” it read. It featured pictures of shirtless, dark-skinned people engaging in all manner of bush activities: throwing spears, carving tools like boomerangs, and fishing.

For the previous two and a half weeks I had been traveling to indigenous communities across the country reporting a Times article and filming a documentary in collaboration with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Foreign Correspondent” television news magazine. I met a range of indigenous Australians: Aboriginal youths raising horses in a remote town, young fishermen earning a sparse living on the Torres Strait and a university lecturer in suburban Brisbane striving to hold onto a middle-class existence for her family.



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I heard stories of frustration and anger, resistance and resilience. What I saw was a complex reality for Australia’s First Nations people. It was far from what the postcard depicted: primitive bush dwellers stuck in a culture and society unfit for today’s globalized, tech-savvy world.

Yet stereotypes like these continue to complicate the lives of indigenous Australians. “It’s that hum of racism that people deal with every day,” said Stan Grant, a television journalist and one of the country’s best-known Aboriginal people. “It’s not that, you know, this is necessarily going to ruin someone’s life. But it makes you defensive. And it reinforces the message that if you’re Aboriginal, you’ll be seen differently or treated differently.”

Mr. Grant and I exchanged frank stories of encountering racism.

As I have discovered as a national correspondent covering race in the United States over the last several years, racial stereotypes have real consequences. They prevent people from getting jobs because of false perceptions of how capable they are. That makes it difficult to level a playing field made uneven by violent colonization.

From what I observed, it would seem laughable to question the abilities of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Many exhibited such an intimate knowledge of their country. I saw it when I was riding through an outback area with Ted Hall, an Aboriginal elder, who described the medicinal uses of every plant and tree on our

route. And when I was speeding through the Torres Strait on a dinghy with a young boy who was able to point out oyster shells amid vast underwater coral reefs. Yet I also saw the country's First Nations people scarred by the images that white colonizers thrust upon them.



When asked in school to draw a picture of her culture, a 7-year-old girl from a suburb of Brisbane sketched her parents in the bush — her father holding two spears (he was a police officer), her mother holding a boomerang (she is a university lecturer with a Ph.D.).

Take what Chelsea Bond, a senior lecturer at the University of Queensland, told me about a school assignment her daughter got when she was about 7. She had to draw a picture of her culture. She sketched stick figures of her father as a man in the bush holding two spears and her mother as a woman holding a boomerang. They were surrounded by bush animals.

Here was a girl who had lived her entire life in Inala, a suburb of Brisbane, with a mother who has a Ph.D. and a father who was a police officer, yet she represented her culture with a drawing of a scene she has never known.

“I use that to teach students about how we’ve come to know the Aborigine so much so that we don’t even recognize ourselves, our lived cultural story, as authentic, as legitimate, as real,” Ms. Bond told me. “And this is a 7-year-old girl. That’s how early it starts.”

Creating change can be difficult for an indigenous people, who make up only about 3 percent of the country’s population. That seems to make it harder for them to establish a broad resistance movement. The country is just so white. Virtually every news reporter I saw on television was white, as were all the politicians I saw stumping during elections in the state of Western Australia. Even when I arrived on the Torres Strait

Islands, the unique place in Australia where almost everyone is black, I was taken aback to see that many of the restaurants, shops and hotels were run by white people. That lack of ownership creates a palpable frustration among Torres Strait Islanders — seen most clearly in their efforts to control the fishing on their seas. White fishermen with more resources still have a deep hold on the trade, even though the High Court has ruled that the Torres Strait seas belong to its indigenous people.

“Now if we controlled the economics in this region, we could solve the problem [of indigenous plight],” said Maluwap Nona, a Torres Strait Islander and activist for fishing rights. “If the High Court can recognize that we have ownership and we have management over natural resources in the water for 9,000 years, isn’t that an indication to anyone out there to say, ‘Well, these people can manage themselves.’?” That’s a message I heard from indigenous people all across Australia. But that change starts with trust, a bridge that white Australia has yet to cross with its First Nations people.