

Dear Australia,

As a Malaysian-Australian migrant-settler descendant, I am privileged to be writing on the unceded lands of the Kulin nation. I'm writing to discuss migrant solidarity with First Nations justice and want to start by paying deep respect to the First Peoples of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung lands of the Kulin nation who have maintained continual care and connection to the land, seas, and skies I now call home. I extend this respect to First Peoples across Australia, indigenous peoples globally and any First Peoples reading this letter now. I accept responsibility for the horrific acts of colonial violence upon First Peoples, both historic and ongoing, which have directly made space for people like me.

I was born and raised in Southeast Asia and inherited Australian citizenship from my father. Growing up as a mixed-race person, I was often asked the question "Where are you from?", usually followed up by a variation of "originally." I learned to say I was from Australia, despite how foreign it felt. Home to me was tropical heat, mangosteen season, and the hours spent sweating in the Malaysia-Singapore causeway traffic.

When my family and I moved to Melbourne in 2014, I thought I would immediately feel a sense of belonging. Instead, I was asked "where are you from?" with even more intensity, like a rejection record on replay. For a large part of my teenhood, I felt lost in the liminal space of a multicultural identity.

I first properly engaged with Indigenous histories and perspectives in my first year of university, after developing a curiosity from brief points of learning in high school. When I say I'm studying a degree in Indigenous Studies, I am often met with profound silence. It's as if non-Indigenous people are so afraid to say the wrong thing, they don't say anything at all. Reflected within this are national silences and colonial myths about the history of this country. But through my studies, I've found a better understanding of my place in Australia, using my unique position and privileges in allyship with First Nations justice.

It is important to note here that settler-colonialism is a structure, not an event and that it operates upon the daily institutional and individual acts of cultural and physical genocide of First Peoples. Almost 50 years on from the Stolen Generations, Indigenous children are removed from their families at higher rates than ever before. One in three of those children are physically and sexually abused in out-of-home care. More than 3000 Aboriginal sacred, cultural, and ecological sites have been deregistered for the use of large-scale mining companies, irreversibly destroying Country cared for by First Peoples since time immemorial.

For non-Indigenous people—migrant-settlers and their descendants—it can be difficult to know where to begin. Often when accountability and action for First Nations justice is discussed, what follows is discomfort, defensiveness, and anxiety about structural change. However, I compel you to proceed instead with curiosity: what would a just and equal world look, sound, and feel like? What actions would be required to make that world a reality? What action can you take?

For me it was to learn about the history of the land I walk on. As I began learning the Indigenous names, histories, and continuing significance of places I visit, I felt a deeper connection to place than ever before. I saw, too, the responsibility I hold as someone with settler privilege. This meant taking an honest look at the ways I could affect change, from discussing First Nations injustice with non-Indigenous people around me, to advocating for reparations and repatriation of Indigenous land and materially contributing to First Nations justice where I am able.

Placed in the margins, multicultural and migrant communities have often been grouped together with First Peoples despite vast differences in experiences between and among our communities. When I migrated to Australia, I was guided into a settler-colonial society that revealed very little about First Nations injustice. I didn't know that the physical space I occupy is a direct result of the attempt to erase First Peoples. I wasn't present for the two hundred years of previous colonial violence but I am here now and can choose not to perpetuate further injustice and erasure of First Peoples.

If I am to advocate for anti-racism and equal opportunity for migrant communities in Australia, I have realised I must also recognise my settler privilege and work in solidarity with First Peoples' justice. My vision for an equal and just world is one where nobody is left behind.

Dr Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."

So, I offer a small list of how and where to participate in solidarity with First Nations justice:

- Look up the Indigenous histories and present significance of the places you occupy and then share this with others.
- If you have capacity, make a monthly donation to an Indigenous-led organisation of your choice like my favourite, Seed Mob, Australia's first Indigenous youth climate justice organisation.
- Listen to First Nations leaders, Elders, and activists in the physical and online spaces you occupy, seek out these voices and platform them. Gamilaraay Kooma Yinnar grassroots activist Ruby Wharton (@gudhigudhi_ on Instagram), for instance, is an incredible leader to look out for.
- Immerse yourself in Indigenous-made art, music, film, and theatre to educate yourself in a creative way while also supporting Indigenous artists. Screen Australia has compiled a comprehensive list of Indigenous film and TV called 'The Black List' for easy googling.
- Take time to understand First Nations-identified issues and reflect on how you can give support. Ask yourself how you can use your privilege and position to speak up on these issues and mobilise for justice.

In the words of Goorie-Koori poet Evelyn Araluen, “We must act now as if we had the capacity to effect change even if we don’t, because our actions will create rhythms of solidarity and support.”

There is great value and impact in the ripple effects of our actions. Your thoughts and words are powerful.

Sincerely,

Leela Gray.

About Leela:

As a 'third culture kid' with an upbringing all over Southeast Asia and a nationality inherited from Malaysia, England, and Australia, Leela Gray is proud to have an identity you can't neatly pin down. Currently in her final year of a Bachelor degree at the University of Melbourne, Leela studies a double major of Political Science and Indigenous Studies. In her personal time, she works as a volunteer at global peacebuilding NGO Initiatives of Change and mutual aid project The Food Angels and has an ongoing role as a youth advisor for the Centre for Multicultural Youth. Leela enjoys baking, bike-riding, and finding warm pockets of sunshine to rest in. She's a passionate advocate for human rights policy reform, racial literacy and community-building and aspires to achieve positive change through both top-down and bottom-up avenues in order to create a just and equitable future for all.