

ALWAYS: ALWAYS WAS. ALWAYS WILL BE.

A SOMBRE VIGIL AT BARANGAROO REFLECTING ON EVENTS THAT CHANGED
THE COURSE OF HISTORY FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA.



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by Nilmini De Silva | Jan 27, 2019

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER & CIVIL ENGINEER PROMOTING NEW PARADIGMS FOR LIVING.

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Hundreds of people have gathered at Barangaroo Reserve, in a part of the country where the clans of the Eora Nation once thrived. It is the 25th of January — the day before the First Fleet arrived.

We have come together to participate in a vigil and reflect on the impact of colonisation on Australia and to reflect on what a more inclusive country might look like. It is all part of this summer's Sydney Festival. It is a beautiful night and the cool breeze off the ocean is refreshing after the heat of the day. Camp fires light up the faces of the people who have assembled here under an almost full moon that unfortunately drowns out most of the Milky Way.

The evening commences by opening up the song-lines of Country.

Everyday Australians entertain us with a beautiful song sung in local language. They have taken the time to learn it from Auntie Jacinta Tobin and Yuwaalaraay woman Nardi Simpson. The crackling fire lights up our faces in the gathering darkness. We sit around the campfires as people did for generations and listen to the stories narrated by the aunties and younger people who may be elders one day. I love that fire is both a symbol of destruction and healing. It is through fire that the Australian bush springs to life, so it is also symbolic of our hopes for the future.

Some of the songs they sing give me goosebumps. They sing of Country and of their grandmothers who were mere babies when they were stolen. Of language lost because they were forbidden to speak it. I lie on the grass and let the sounds wash over me. I think about the thousands of Aboriginals and non-Indigenous people who died in the frontier wars. I glance up and the sculpture towers over me. It is stunningly beautiful, set against the backdrop of the harbour bridge. The sculpture with the word ALWAYS has been designed by local Bangarra artist Jacob Nash.

ALWAYS — Always was, always will be.

The word ALWAYS faces the harbour and provokes discussion. It's beautiful rusty exterior can only be really appreciated during the day as it is lit by a series of coloured lights at night. It encourages us to have a yarn with a stranger. The reverse side faces us and is a mirror that encourages reflection. Over a hot chocolate we chat with Warren Roberts from YARN Australia. He tells us that he is working to build connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-First Nations Australians. It has also been the theme of the UTS Big Thinking Forum we had attended earlier in the evening. I came away thinking about the 3 things that define our Nation. We are home to the longest surviving culture in the world. We were founded as part of a larger British Colony and we are the most successful multi-cultural nation in the world.

The stories we tell and celebrate must embrace all three of these elements to be inclusive. Our leaders wish us to be fearful of each other. The algorithms of our social media feeds keep us divided and tribal. A nation that is fearful is easy to govern but surely we are bigger than that. Let us live life courageously, be welcoming to the new stranger in our midst, so we can all thrive through embracing our diversity.

Australia Day must be both a day of reflection and a celebration of all of our history. When we celebrate this day must also sit well with all of us if we wish to be inclusive.

"... the natives of New Holland are far more happier than we Europeans being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous but with the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe :...they live in a tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition. The Earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life. They covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff, etc..." ~Captain James Cook (Journal Entry 1770)