

Stan Grant's 'Racism is Destroying the Australian Dream' speech

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"Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free," calm and practiced, Aboriginal journalist Stan Grant's voice rings out across the stage. I'm watching a video of a speech of his that went viral in late 2015, the subject matter being 'racism is destroying the Australian dream'. Thus far he's made clear points, drawing on a recent scandal surrounding Indigenous AFL player Adam Goodes. But honestly, he's losing me a little with the national anthem. It's a confusing song, not least because it uses the now defunct word *girt*.

But Grant's issues with the anthem aren't quite the same as mine. In true fact-finding journalistic fashion, he's giving me stats on Indigenous life expectancies and incarceration rates. Then back to culture, he recites the opening lines to Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country'. I, a pale, freckled girl, wince slightly at the word "sunburned", but more so on Grant's next words, "my people were killed on those plains. We were shot on those plains, disease ravaged us on those plains."

In eight and a half minutes, Grant, who has since been awarded an honorary doctorate by UNSW (Verass 2016), methodically lays out an Aboriginal perspective on colonial history, punctuated with personal stories of his father, grandfather, grandmother and great-great grandfather. He uses them to create portrait-like images in our minds, like icons of the past. A hard worker, a loyal soldier, a caring mother, a wrongfully imprisoned man. It's incredibly powerful.

Grant is aware, however, that icons are not enough. Like any good journalist, he turns to the credibility of eye-witness accounts. He brings up the views of well-known white men like Charles Dickens and Captain Arthur Phillip, quoting their intent to kill and purge Indigenous populations. He shores this point with references to the *Sydney Gazette*, and to Australian law, challenging his audience to "read about it. It happened."

But just as I – a non-Indigenous Australian – am beginning to prickle with an uncomfortable level of confused, potentially misplaced, guilt, Grant changes the tone entirely. He brings up Indigenous "heroes", Albert Namatjira, Vincent Lingiari and Cathy Freeman. He applauds those who supported Adam Goodes, who have supported other moves for reconciliation and mutual support, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Each example is punctuated with a repeated "they are better than



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that [racism]”. The rhythm of his voice is subconsciously lulling members of his audience into nodding their heads.

He brings the speech back around to the national anthem, and the patriotic feeling he has created in the room – the patriot feeling he has created in me – makes people feel lifted and hopeful.

“And one day, I want to stand here and be able to say as proudly and sing as loudly as anyone else in this room, Australians all let us rejoice.”

Stan Grant is a smart man, and a practiced orator. He balances hard and soft systems to create a speech that is factual, but whose true power lies in the emotional response by the audience. If I allow my mind to forget exactly *what* Grant spoke about, I still remember that I felt impassioned and supportive. In structuring the speech as he did, my emotional response doesn’t even need to be shaded with guilt.

I’m not the only person who noticed this response. Writing for the *New Matilda*, Aboriginal journalist Amy McQuire, states,

Grant’s speech was great, but it was his eloquence, his position as an award-winning journalist, and his non-threatening diplomacy, that laid the foundation for this overwhelming enthusiasm from white Australia.

Simply put, Grant steps away from the guilt associated with the ‘black armband view of history’ (Blainey 1993). I found this interesting, given that after the speech was given, parallels were drawn between Grant and Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson (Razer 2016), who once argued,

In my experience, it is for those Australians who resist the truths of history and who yearn for a return to the Great Australian Silence, and who deny some responsibility to deal with the legacy of the past in the present, that guilt seems to be an ingredient. The more vehement the denials the more they betray an anxiety to exorcise guilt. (1996)

When I think about Grant’s speech through the frame of Pearson’s argument, I realise that it’s possible that we try to avoid the sensation of guilt when thinking back on Australia’s history, and on Indigenous affairs today. Problems occur when this avoidance turns into denial, especially denial that manifests as racism. In this way, any forms of ignorance – of which denial is one – are unconstructive. The guilt and the ‘black armband’ view are not truly diminished, merely ignored.

This denial is what Aboriginal anthropologist, William Stanner, calls out when he discusses the ‘Great Australian Silence’ (1969). Stanner is aware of gaps in Australia’s narrative, regarding Indigenous history. It’s more than likely that those gaps have been created, and in many cases sustained, because the white consciousness has elected the path of ignorance and denial, rather than that of shame and guilt.

But in his speech, Grant has demonstrated a new way forward, especially in the case of non-Indigenous Australians. He leads us through the history of his family, educating and challenging his

audience. He makes no excuses on behalf of anyone that came before him. We, as an audience, feel shame and sorrow. But he doesn't end there. Grant demonstrates the truest way to "exorcise guilt". He praises efforts of reconciliation, and of Indigenous achievement. He provides hope and demonstrates that while we cannot change the past, we must work to understand it, so that the future can be better.

For my part, I cannot view McQuire's words on Grant's "non-threatening diplomacy" cynically. As Noel Pearson also once said, "we need to appreciate the complexity of the past and not reduce history to a shallow field of point scoring" (1996). Stan Grant took the opportunity given to him in this debate, not just to release his pain and frustration, but also to constructively and gracefully lead an audience to the understanding that we can be better than what we are now. That reconciliation will mean addressing uncomfortable emotions and ingrained behaviours, but that there is good reason to have hope in our progress.

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