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# I am not here for your convenience

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**W**hat you are called is part of your identity as an individual and as a population of a nation.

The reclaiming of a nation's identity to distinguish itself from the colonisers can be seen right across the globe. Taiwan in an international arena must be called Chinese Taipei because China still has a firm grip on the country, which has a one-China Policy.<sup>1</sup> On independence, the Gold Coast changed its name to Ghana, and the Dutch East Indies changed its name to Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

A simple act of self-determination for a collective is being able to name the group you belong to. Self-determination is an underpinning principle of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. A small but essential act of self-determination for the original inhabitants of the nation now known as Australia is defining what we are called. More recently, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we have been reclaiming our right to name ourselves. This right, however, is often undermined by media outlets, academics, governments and non-Indigenous people who continue to use terms that are inconsistent, incorrect and inappropriate. The authors, through this article, share their personal views on why people who are not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to respect our self-determination rather than making decisions that are convenient for them.

## Kootsy Canuto

I was born and raised on the traditional lands of the Yidinji people, and I love these lands dearly, but I am not an Aboriginal person. I have never been an Aboriginal person and will never be an Aboriginal person despite the ignorance of some commentators.

My father is a Torres Strait Islander, and my mother is a non-Indigenous Australian.

Me – I identify as a Torres Strait Islander belonging to my father's people, the Wagadagam clan of Mabuiag Island.

When one is speaking about issues relating to Torres Strait Islander people, do not let ignorance, convenience or laziness dictate how you refer to us. When Torres Strait Islander people talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, we do not say Torres Strait Islander issues. We do not conveniently or lazily exclude the word Aboriginal from our dialogue. We do not caveat our writing by saying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, from here on in respectfully referred to as Torres Strait Islanders. Whether in print or spoken, this is wrong and sides with those who continue to be ignorant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are *not* the same.

Torres Strait Islander people are a minority group; in fact, we are a minority within a minority, but this does not give anyone the right to rebrand us and call us something we are not. Do not pigeonhole me for your convenience, do not call me or refer to me as something I am not.

I am a Torres Strait Islander person, a descendant of the Torres Strait's original inhabitants, and I identify as being so. I am accepted as being so from the community I belong to. Although we, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, strive for equality, equity and similar rights, we are not one people.

It frustrates me when universities, research institutes and other organisations receive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander funds but cannot be bothered to use the term Torres Strait Islander in their papers or curriculum, or include the Torres Strait Islander flag alongside the Aboriginal and Australian flags.

In Australia, we have three national flags: the Torres Strait Islander flag, the Aboriginal

flag and the Australian flag. These three flags are proudly flown across the country and overseas at places like Australia House in London. So, if we have three national flags, why are Torres Strait Islander people dropped from conversations and/or referred to as 'Aboriginal' people for the convenience of others?

I have no grievance or animosity towards the 300-plus Aboriginal groups, the non-Indigenous Australians who call this place home or our recent immigrants and refugees; I have many that are family. I am asking everyone to please acknowledge Torres Strait Islander people/communities/issues as first Australians who are independent of Aboriginal people.

I understand and accept those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who prefer to be known by their traditional country's name and do not want to be known as an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander person for the convenience of others; I share their plight. Likewise, Torres Strait Islanders are not one people.

We may be few, but we are fierce, resilient and determined, but what we are not is equal, and we are not getting a fair go or receiving proper acknowledgement or respect.

I have been told many times by my mentors that you get more flies with honey. However, I believe at times you just have to call a spade a spade – using Aboriginal and leaving out 'and Torres Strait Islander' when referring to all First Nations peoples of Australia is disrespectful to all Torres Strait Islander people. I am asking authors to respectfully include us, and yes, this may require you to trim your word count elsewhere.

## Summer May Finlay

I am an Aboriginal person from the Yorta Yorta nation and grew up on Awabakal/Worimi Country on Lake Macquarie, New South Wales. I am the product of a union between a Yorta Yorta woman and an Australian man of Scottish and English heritage. While I have grown up learning to walk in two worlds, Aboriginal and the dominant culture, I am proud to be an Aboriginal person of the Yorta Yorta nation. While I respect my father and his heritage, my identity is and always has been as an Aboriginal person.

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Identity is intensely personal and how you label yourself reflects your inner self. Likewise, how people label you reflects how they see you.

The global media conglomerate, News Limited, has stubbornly refused to change its style guide and continues to use 'indigenous' rather than 'Indigenous'.<sup>3</sup> The mere act of capitalisation changes the words from a descriptive term to a proper noun.

Academia, including peer-reviewed journals and research funding bodies, is often guilty of promoting colonised language that does not reflect the preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Often in academic journals and government documents, you will see this phrase or something similar: 'Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter Aboriginal)',<sup>4,5</sup> which essentially conflates the distinctly different Torres Strait Islander Cultures with Aboriginal Cultures, despite there being a distinct difference between the Cultures. In academia, this is likely to reduce the word count to meet strict limits. In government documents, it may also be due to word count considerations or, in states and territories other than Queensland, an attempt to show respect for the original inhabitants of the state/territory.

We need organisations in positions of power such as academic institutions, research funding bodies and governments to ensure that all documents follow a style guide that aligns with the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prefer to be referenced. Authors should be required to adhere to the style guide to demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, much like the Public Health Association of Australia and the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* have by referring people to the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guide to Terminology*.<sup>6</sup> Documents such as funding applications and manuscripts that do not comply with the style guide should be rejected. They do not demonstrate a level of cultural safety and respect required to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As an Aboriginal woman from the Yorta Yorta Nation, I support my brother Kootsy's calls for Torres Strait Islander people to be recognised as distinct Peoples.

Also, to reduce the word count, some people, organisations, governments and academic institutions have gone even further and

reduced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the acronym 'ATSI'. Reducing us to a mere acronym for the convenience of a word count is offensive to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

When I see people use the terms 'ATSI' or 'indigenous' with a lower case 'i', the authors are telling me who I can be, how I can be perceived and – of course – what they will allow me to be called. Deciding what I and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be named is an act of colonisation and oppression. Determining how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be referred to, in contradiction to what we call ourselves, signals that you believe you know us better than we do. These acts might be unconsciously done, but their impact is the same. Many people who use terms we believe are inappropriate will be shocked to be labelled a coloniser and oppressor. I appreciate that this may be uncomfortable. However, from my point of view, if we cannot trust our allies and accomplices to get the simple things right, like appropriate terminology, how can we trust you to work with us on the big stuff?

This is why I have been advocating, alongside other people such as Kootsy, for more respect and understanding for the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people refer to themselves.

### **We are not at your convenience**

If you are a person or institution who believes they support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people you need to stop referring to us in ways that are not consistent with how we want to be labelled.

You may not understand the implications of an acronym, starting a word with a lower-case letter, such as 'indigenous', or even why Torres Strait Islander people are not Aboriginal, but you do not need to. You just need to *stop* and use the appropriate terms.

We recognise that people are not sure what terms they should be using. If you are working directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people you need to ask them how they want to be referred. If you are not working with a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group we recommend that you refer to the Public Health Association of Australia's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guide to Terminology*, published in November 2020, which can be found here: <https://www.phaa.net.au/documents/item/4897>.

If you do not decolonise your language you continue to actively oppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perpetuating a colonising process that began with the invasion.

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