Take back the stars and wear the Southern Cross with pride

Myles Russell Cook

Australian hip-hop artist and rapper 360 (Matt Colwell) caused an uproar earlier in the week when he said on Q&A that he identified the Australian flag and the Southern Cross with racism.

360 announced he would like to see more proud Australians wearing the Aboriginal flag on Australia Day. Why? Because the Australian flag has become synonymous with hate.

There was an angry response on social media: many took issue with the accusation that the nation’s flag had become the standard for racists and bigots. If we look a little closer at the Australian flag, and particularly at those seven shining stars, we might find symbols that can unite us anew.

The Australian flag is made up of the Union Jack, the Commonwealth star and the Southern Cross. The flag’s design was chosen in 1901 from a series of entries in a competition held following Federation. It was first flown in Melbourne on September 3 1901.

The Southern Cross is an easily identifiable emblem for all Australians and in Aboriginal Australian astronomy, the Southern Cross has had many different meanings.

For more than 40,000 years Aboriginal people have looked up at the night sky and its stars. The first Australians’ way of being in the world has been shaped by their relationship with the skies.

Five stars make up the Southern Cross - Alpha, Beta (also known as Mimosa), Delta, Gamma and Epsilon.
Crucis, also sometimes called Intrometida.

For the Guringai people in New South Wales, the cross marks the head of the Emu in the Sky; Alpha Crucis symbolises the shape shifting spirit Dharramaalan and the Crux his emu wife.

In Western Australia there are Aboriginal communities who believe the Southern Cross is the deity Mirrabooka, a giant sky possum, sitting in a tree.

In the central Australian desert the Aranda people believe the four stars of the Southern Cross are the immense talon of a great flying eagle, with Gamma Centauri being his leg. In the Torres Strait, many islanders believed Gamma Centauri is the handle of Tagai’s Fishing Spear, with the Cross forming a trident.

And as the Southern Cross is arguably the most recognisable constellation in our night sky, it seems a fitting emblem for uniting all Australians with a sense of national identity. After all, we all live under the same stars.

With that in mind I would like to note how intensely and personally disenchanted I am, along with 360, that such a seemingly perfect symbol of our unity has been all but hijacked and turned into a sign of racism and xenophobia.

The 2005 Cronulla race riots ushered in the beginning of a series of racially motivated gang attacks and denominational clashes in Australia. The Southern Cross was worn like a badge signifying whiteness.

A crowd gathers in Cronulla in 2005. AAP Image/Paul Miller

When I was a child I was bullied for having fair skin and identifying with my Aboriginal heritage.

After spending some time hunting stingrays with family on the coast of the Northern Territory, I came back to Melbourne with stories of my walkabout. People started bullying me, calling me “spear chucker”.

Last year I was tattooed with the image of a spear, because I wanted to reclaim that name. I believe we, as a country, collectively need to take similar steps to reclaim our constellation. We need to tattoo the Southern Cross on our national identity as a symbol of unity and peace.

A quick Google search of the Australian flag returns a substantial quota of images that are brazenly pro-racist. If we can concede that our flag and our constellation have been appropriated by a racist few, and have thus had a wide-reaching effect on our national identity, we can begin to undo some of those damages.

Our stars are associated with hate but they’re not synonymous. I propose we collectively meet those who have hijacked the constellation as a symbol of hate with a movement of reclamation. It’s time for all Australians to start wearing the Southern Cross with pride.