While Australians value equality, our multicultural nation contains markers of racial discrimination. Some are so innocuous we may not recognise them.

Experiencing racism is part of the everyday lives of many Australians. What is it like to negotiate daily life in a material world that often excludes you, or selectively seeks to control you?

Let’s try to understand the experience of everyday racism by negotiating the material world of an Aboriginal person in northern Australia. You have come into Katherine, Northern Territory, from a remote community. It might be say, Barunga, 80 kilometres away, or Bulman 300 kilometres away, or Lajamanu, 600 kilometres away.

Shopping

You shop for food at the Woolworths complex. You use your Basics Card to pay. This is a bit embarrassing as it declares you to be living on managed government money. You understand that this card is a legacy of the NT Intervention, designed to ensure that Aboriginal people spend half their government benefits on food and essentials. You understand that this “income management” signals a lack of faith in your ability to budget your own money.

Get your news from people who know what they’re talking about.
You purchase some power-cards to pre-pay electricity in your home. You hope you won’t have to share them with friends or family who run out of electricity. You understand that power cards are not the norm in towns or cities of the NT, only in Aboriginal communities.

After shopping, you need to go to the toilet. It is the tourist season and the toilets in the Woolworths complex charge $1 per person. There is a guard at the front to collect the money. Throughout the town, the toilets have “closed”, “staff only” or “patrons only” signs. Often, the public toilets in the main street are out of order.

Meeting family in town

You want to meet some relatives in town. It is difficult to meet at the Woolworths complex due to the “no loitering” signs.
You understand that these signs are not intended for townspeople, who have homes to go to, or tourists, who are staying in hotels or caravan parks. You understand that they are aimed at you, and people like you.

There are other signs that are not aimed at you. Those signs, such as the lead photo for this article, depict variations of “ideal” white Australian families. Such signs exist throughout Australia. Inadvertently, they exclude those who do not fit the proposed ideal.

There is a nice sitting area at the tourist information centre but it is fenced. You would have to be a bit braver than you feel to go in. So you sit on the ground outside the fence, next to the car park. You watch tourists eating their lunch in comfort at the tables inside the fence. You wonder if they wonder why you don’t come in.

Driving home

Like most Territorians, you enjoy a beer in hot weather. The bottle shop has police officers stationed at it. You have to show your address and explain where you will drink the beer. However, your address is that of a remote Aboriginal community, one that does not allow alcohol consumption. You do not have a town address, and for you to buy beer the police officer has to believe you will not consume it in the town’s public areas.

You’ve convinced the police officer that you will drink your beer at the unofficial “drinking spot”, 25 kilometres from your community.
On the way there, you pass the rest area for tourists, replete with lights, toilets, water tanks, tables. You could stop here, but you wouldn’t feel comfortable – and you would be moved on if a tourist complained to the police. At the Aboriginal drinking spot, there are no such facilities. You are expected to sit in the dirt, drink from the creek and go to the toilet in the bush.

There is no light either. While sitting at the drinking spot, you think about the people who have been killed here by vehicles driving at night. You are aware that there is no mobile phone coverage to call in an emergency.

On your way to the community, you pass road signs with Aboriginal people depicted in a cartoon-like fashion. You are glad the graffiti on the Liquor Act sign, “This means Niggers, too” has been erased. You pass the “prescribed area” sign, which warns against bringing alcohol or “prohibited materials” into the community.

Erected in 2007 as part of the Intervention, the original signs were more explicit: “No Liquor. No Pornography”. Somehow, these signs seemed to imply that everyone in your community wants to get drunk or use pornography. You wonder how people in the cities would feel if they had a sign like that at the entrance to their suburb.
Racism is just one form of discrimination

Archaeology can provide unique insights into how material culture can reflect racism. However, racism is not the only form of discrimination. The Scanlon report on Mapping Social Cohesion in Australia found that experiences of discrimination on the basis of “skin colour, ethnic origin or religion” increased to 20% in 2016. The report does not provide figures for Indigenous Australians, but records an increase in negative sentiment towards Muslim people.

Nevertheless, the report argues that Australia is characterised by strong social cohesion. We may have problems, but it seems that we are a long way from the treatment of Muslim women who want to wear Burkinis on the beaches of France.

A system of discrimination

Racism occurs in everyday life. It happens to everyday people in everyday locations. It can be redressed through everyday practices.

There are reasons behind the differences described in this article. Townspeople have had bad experiences with some community children leaving a mess in public toilets (itself a reflection of the dearth of adequate working bathrooms in Aboriginal communities). Rest areas are under different government jurisdictions. The Basics card helps people to budget (and now it is being rolled out in wider Australia).

But while there are explanations for individual practices, taken together they create a system of control and exclusion. The outcomes include mental health issues for individuals, barriers to economic participation and a weakening of Australia’s social fabric.

Minimum standards of courtesy, safety and equality should be maintained for all Australians. The systematic discrimination of everyday racism diminishes us all.