

# Whose Land?<sup>1</sup>

By

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I haven't travelled enough in my life. I was born in Melbourne, I was raised in Melbourne, and now, as I'm getting ready to start my final year of senior school, I'm still in Melbourne. Melbourne is not a simple city. It's enormous and colorful. I may not have experienced its magnitude, but I know all about color. All I have to do is sit while our teachers take attendance. We've got plenty of names in our class for our teachers to call out. Some that simply roll off the tongue, and some that cause them to sweat and stutter. That's color.

My name is Debbie, short for Deborah. My parents chose this name for me, and some priest in summer 2007 officiated it during my christening. It serves me alright, since it doesn't seem to cause any trouble for my teachers. It does for me, though. I have no other name, but maybe I should have. Names have attachments. Like countries. We've got lots of countries in my class. The Netherlands, Vietnam, Italy, Poland, The Philippines, Greece, Afghanistan. That's where all the names come from. And mine? I share my name, its smooth pronunciation, with every sunburned, blonde Australian girl. But that's not me.

Wurundjeri<sup>2</sup>. It's not a country. It's not a nationality, either. It's my family's pride, the name of our tribe. It was always obvious that no British convict was my ancestor. That's why we celebrate Australia Day<sup>3</sup> differently than most. I've never attended a parade, never even gotten a good look at the fireworks. Instead, my parents would take me and my brother deep into the Warrandyte State Park, where the fire was confined to the

ground we step on<sup>3</sup>. I've been to a lot of smoking ceremonies. I've watched men and women older than my grandparents spring and leap over the burning leaves. I've been the one to hold the dish of burning plants, and cough as the smoke reached my eyes and blurred my vision. Their Australia Day has a set date. Someone marked the day on the calendar, and gave this country an age. That sting in my eyes is ageless. I imagine sharing it with thousands of girls before me. Too many to count.

I am occupying my own land. I've had this notion instilled in me, even as a child. And yet... that didn't stop the frustration I felt every time I looked in the mirror. I'd pick at my thick eyebrows, frown my plump lips, and pinch my nose until my nails left a mark on it. My mom wasn't happy about it.

“What've the whitefellas got that you don't, girl?”

Nothing, of course. That's the answer she wanted to hear, but I wasn't trying to play pretend as a whitefella in the first place. I was just struggling to understand. Because... if what my mom, and dad, and aunties all said was true, that we were the First People on this land, how come it's always the whitefellas that act like they own the damn place and make me feel like an alien.

That's why I never got along with the sunburned blondies. Even though we did share a name with some of them, we didn't have anything else to share. My best friend's hair is dark, as if sketched by charcoal, and, when touched by the sun, her skin merely acquires a flattering reddish hue. Much like mine does. Her grandparents arrived here over forty years ago from Afghanistan. She introduced herself as “Afghan-Australian” to me. I was very excited to learn about her heritage, when we first met in Middle School. I used Google to find out more about the languages of Afghanistan, about their different celebrations. I especially loved the idea of Nowruz<sup>5</sup>. Celebrating the New

Year in the middle of spring, instead of during the damp summer, sounds like a dream. I asked her what her family plans were for it... and she snorted at me. I soon discovered that calling herself “Afghan-Australian” was where her affinity to her grandparents’ homeland ended.

We were sitting together during recess, when I asked her what the point of sticking to this label was.

“I mean,” I said jokingly, “You even sound more Aussie than I do.”

“Yeah,” she shrugged. “But it’s not that simple with a face like mine. The minute I start calling myself ‘Australian’—no hyphens, no further comments—people start demanding I provide them with a whole family tree. A whole bunch of... where am I really from? Where are my parents from? Where were my grandparents from? That’s the answer they’re looking for. We have to take it all the way back to my grandma and grandpa for them to be satisfied. And I’m sorry but I don’t feel like explaining myself to every random stranger all the time.”

“That’s being a minority.”

She looked at me, “Yeah, you’d know.”

She knew I’d empathize with her, just as she empathized with me. She had no other place to call her own. No other language she spoke. She had been navigating Australian society since the day she was born, just as her parents had done before her. She had acquired all the proper mannerisms, knew when to infuse the conversation with typical Aussie sarcasm, knew to toe the line between crassness and heartfelt hospitality—and it wasn’t enough. She’d always be an immigrant; a newer addition to the Australian landscape. All because of her features. The features we shared.

I didn't want to feel vexed over her comment, but I did. I wanted to negate it. What do my parents always brag about? We aren't newcomers. We are the original people, are we not?

They even talk about us at school sometimes. Our music teacher once proudly showed us videos of didgeridoo players<sup>6</sup>, stressing its historical importance as one of the oldest musical instruments known to man. They ascribe a lot of prestigious epithets to us, to our ancient tribes, and our history... history... history. And it doesn't amount to s\*\*\* in the present.

For all these grand school lectures, and my parents' bragging, I still can't object to my friend's comment. She's right. I, too, am a minority. She and I are targeted by the same suspicion, by the same people. My younger brother cannot enter a store without being followed around by the employees; everyone's so afraid he's going to nick something. My dad had to present his birth certificate at the airport once, because they didn't trust his ID. They didn't trust he was really a citizen. My mom's a teacher and she's had f\*\*\*ing second graders call her slurs. And me? I've had my driver's license for a year, and I've already lost count of the times cops pulled me over to check for alcohol in the trunk.

So, where's my claim on my ancestral homeland? I can't seem to find it.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>“We are strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers,” wrote Oodgeroo Noonuccal in her poem “We Are Going” (1964), artfully, yet plainly, conveying the bitter feeling of feeling alienated in your own ancestral homeland. The title “Whose land?” is a direct response to this oxymoron. Sixty years later, our Aboriginal narrator is still struggling with this question, while the presence of her Afghan-Australian friend

represents the added layer of immigration in a country that is gradually being transformed by it.

<sup>2</sup>Wurundjeri is the name of an Aboriginal tribe. For more information, see:

<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/>

<sup>3</sup>Australia Day is the official national day of Australia, which celebrates the first hoisting of the Union Flag of Great Britain on Australian land. For more information regarding Aboriginal perspectives on this national holiday, see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERPeYonIAeA>

<sup>4</sup>Warrandyte State Park is located close to the city of Melbourne, on the banks of Yarra river. The Wurundjeri tribe historically “occupied” the Yarra river and its surrounding area, before being displaced by European settlers.

For more information on Aboriginal smoking ceremonies, see:

<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/services/cultural-practices-for-events/smoking/>

[https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/Life\\_Lore/Ceremony/Smoking\\_Ceremony](https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/Life_Lore/Ceremony/Smoking_Ceremony)

<sup>5</sup>Nowruz is the Persian New Year celebration. It is observed by Iranian peoples all over west and central Asia. Some countries include Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. It is also observed by Iranic diaspora groups, such as the Kurdish people.

<sup>6</sup>The didgeridoo, also called yidaki in some Aboriginal languages, is a traditional wind instrument.