

“Whose Land” and the Question of Belonging in Contemporary Australia

by

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Nation-states as political entities presume the existence of a single, unified culture that constitutes the “nation”, whose members enjoy political power and are recognized as unquestionably belonging within its borders (Gellner 1983). Within this framework, inhabitation is not enough to grant someone symbolic “membership” of a given country. Representations of Australia as the land of blonde surfers, bogans¹ and an abundance of “Crikey’s”² have been popularized in films such as *Puberty Blues* (1981)³. Reading Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s “We Are Going” (1964), I was struck by two specific lines: “We are strangers here now, but the white tribe are // the strangers” (9-10). The band of Aboriginal people in Noonuccal’s work are unable to relate and attune themselves to the changed landscape around them. In my own story, I wanted to transfer this old sentiment of non-belonging to a modern, globalized context. I report on the experience of two teenage girls, one belonging to an Aboriginal tribe, and the other being Afghan-Australian. By virtue of their racial and ethnic identity, they are unable to meet the representational standards of colonial “Australianess” and are perceived as the Other within state borders, with shared feelings of unease and alienation.

The Other is not allowed fully realized selfhood, and is instead interpreted only via stereotypical notions that the dominant national group applies to them (Said, 1978; Hall, 1992). Each girl is targeted by different stereotypes. Our Afghan-Australian agent, even as she occupies the only country that is familiar to her, reflects on the suspicion she is faced with regarding her ethnic origins and affinity to Australia. At the same time, Debbie is exposed to stereotypes of substance abuse and criminality. These stereotypes have been so greatly internalized by White Australian society that young children feel emboldened enough to target against their own teacher, Debbie’s mother.

More specifically, the Afghan-Australian girl's phenotype is attached to a specific culture that is purportedly incompatible with that of Australia. Regardless of its geographic location, Australia has been re-imagined according to the culture of the early European settlers and their descendants and, hence, functions as a Western country.⁴ Edward Said states that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). The values and norms of Afghanistan, the country the young girl's grandparents emigrated from, have been conceptually constructed as being in direct opposition to Western ones. Within a framework of biological determinism, these values are intrinsically linked to the girl's ethnicity. As such, her adoption of Australian mannerisms and habits, even her lack of connection to her grandparents' heritage and traditions, do not enhance her belonging. She will always remain a "newcomer", with another land to pledge allegiance to.

On the other hand, Debbie's own marginalization has got an additional layer to it. Her friend's comment, "Yeah, you'd know", should have been heartening, but instead induces feelings of resentment (3). Debbie is part of an Aboriginal tribe, with a historical presence of thousands of years on the land they reside on. Debbie's own family claims sovereignty over the land.⁵ Nevertheless, the young girl's lived experience suggests otherwise. From an Aboriginal perspective, colonization is a process of replacement. Debbie's tribal culture antedates European presence on the land, yet is now considered alien and subaltern. Debbie's very name serves as a constant reminder of this new reality. She has been given an English, Christian name. The christening of Aboriginal children in Australia has historically been a forceful process. In the late 19th and early 20th century, colonial authorities, driven by Evangelical movements of the time, pushed for the violent assimilation of Aboriginal tribespeople, seeking to distance young children, especially, from their familial and cultural connections⁶ (Haebich 2000).

Decades later, these practices have ceased. Debbie herself has not undergone a similar traumatic process of re-education and renaming. To all appearances, her family is leading a comfortable life in one of Australia's urban centers. The same can be said for her friend, who is able to receive a standard education, despite her grandparents' immigrant status. Nonetheless, in essence, neither girl is granted full access to Australian society. Colonization and the imposition of western hegemony has forced both girls into an in-between state, where they are rejected by the land they occupy, while simultaneously lacking a deep cultural connection to their ancestral heritage.

Endotes

¹The Australian slang term "bogan" refers to a person of a working-class background.

²"Crikey!" can be an exclamation of excitement, amazement or dismay, common in Britain and commonwealth countries, such as Australia.

³ "Puberty Blues" (1981) is centered around surfing and surfing culture, which is shown as an activity that is quintesentially Australian. The agents in the film are, naturally, all white.

⁴Stuart Hall in "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" (1992) defines "The West" as a political rather than a geographical category. He argues that "what we call 'the West' [...] did first emerge in Western Europe. But 'the West' is no longer only in Europe, and not all of Europe is in 'the West'" (Hall 185). He considers it to be a historical construct, as the word "western" has come to refer to "a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular and modern" (Hall 186).

⁵Aboriginal sovereign and ownership rights were recognized by the state in 1992, as a result of the *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* legal case.

⁶Aboriginal families were not legally recognized as their children's guardians, a title held by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, instead. This allowed the state to separate children from their families, employing any means possible. Children were sent to special "care" institutions to endure horrid abuse and re-education. Aboriginal families were finally able to gain legal guardianship and protection of their children as late as 1969. For more information see Haebich, A. (2000) *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*. The events of these years have also been fictionalized in the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), which is based on a memoir and first-hand account of these events.

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