

Always was, always will be Aboriginal land

80,000 years of sovereignty and 250 years of occupation in Australia

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the following articles contains names and images of deceased persons.

The views and opinions in this article are Claire's own, and not the views of Safer London

“Don't you know lovey? You're Aboriginal”

We didn't find out, my mum and family, that we were Aboriginal until I was about 23-24 years old. Our story was one of hidden ethnicity.

Not unlike elements of the experience of some within The Stolen Generation – Indigenous children, up until the 1970's, were taken away from Indigenous parents if they had a degree of whiteness in them. Some were adopted by white families, or placed in church missionary or slave labour roles where their salary was paid to the government. Even today the over representation of Aboriginal children removed from their families, and often placed with white fellas, by social workers is argued to be the 2nd Stolen Generation. Ours was of that story, of hidden ethnicity. We thought we were Maori, First Nation Aotearoan (New Zealander).

If you look at my grandmother, she very much looks like a black woman but we thought we were Maori and were never told anything else. It was a common story that if you could pass for something else you were told you were something else like Italian or Greek or Indian or anything else to make life easier.

After my Nan died, mum was visiting her dad and Nan's sister, Dossie, was present. Dossie said *“I was speaking with the mob (clan) and they want me to become an Elder, but I don't know if I want to”* and mum said *“what mob?”* and Dossie replied, *“Don't you know?... know what? About the mob? What mob? ...don't you know lovey, you're Aboriginal...”*

Dossie linked us up with some Elders of our mob, the clan. In that first email connecting us all were the words *“we've found another one and she's freezing her arse off in Melbourne!”*. So, there was this hidden story, this family, this mob, this clan, this culture that was taken away from us; the impact of colonisation and the attempt to keep yourself and your children safe, sometimes in the only way available to you at the time. It's a common story of Indigenous Peoples, walking around, who don't know they're

Indigenous and these communities that have been torn apart. This narrative of people who don't know their story, don't know their family, and don't know their history, and whole generations of children stolen.



Bobby Sinn (Claire's Nan's brother)

Shortly after finding out, Mum went to the funeral of her uncle, Bobby Sinn (*Wills*) who was a boxing welter weight champion of Australia. This was the first time she'd been to a family event with the acknowledgement of her Aboriginality where she met cousins she wasn't even aware of.

After that Mum and I went to a women's gathering of the Junobin mob (*a specific family line within the clan*) – there were about 40 women and children. We arrived and all we could hear was this burst of laughter as women greeted each other; these women are laughing, everyone is coming together and they all know each other... and we walk in very nervous, and they asked "*Who are you?*" Mum and I said "*We're the Wills*" and with hand of welcome flung up into the air "*The Wills! The Wills! You've never been here, now we're complete, the five family lines of the **Junobin** family – the Borri's, the O'Day's, the Wills', the Enoch's, and the Page's – we're complete... we know who you are, we know your line, who your family are, you're a black fella!*"

Some of the family took us around the island and showed us our ancestral land, and showed us sacred places not share with anyone outside our mob. And it was then we understood that we were Noonuccal Ngugi women, of the Quandamooka People from Minjerribah (*North Stradbroke Island, off the coast of Queensland*).

An Elder of our clan, Chris, who is about the same age as my mum, tells a story of when she lived out in Western Queensland with her mum. Her mum worked as station cook. One day the police came to the station looking for 'half caste' Aboriginal children fathered by white fellas.

There was a flurry of panic as all the adults told the children to run and hide from the police who would take them away, the next Stolen Generation. Chris remembers being swept up and carried off by one of the other bigger children. When they tired from running and couldn't carry her any longer, they buried her in the sandy soil under a mulga tree to keep her safe, so only her mouth and nose was showing so she could breathe. She was 3 years old at the time.

Imagine being 3 years old, terrified, and hiding in the earth, alone, so the social workers wouldn't steal you away from you family. Imagine sitting with the ever-present fear as a parent that one day your child might be stolen from you, just because of who their father was, and you'd likely never see them again. What kind relationship would you have with police, with the justice system, with social workers, with the government? Why would mob trust these systems to do us right if this is our living history, the stories told within our families?

Chris told us that day of a metaphor commonly used by mob across Australia. *"You start out with a black cup of coffee, you add a bit of milk, it's still a cup of coffee. You add more milk, it's still coffee. It doesn't matter how much milk you add it's always gonna be coffee"*. And this is how we describe Aboriginality, it doesn't matter what bloodlines you have, you're always going to be Aboriginal.

I think about this cultural identity of blackness, and then I wonder what does this mean for the black fella who knows they're Aboriginal but doesn't know their mob, their clan, because of colonisation, because of hidden stories lost between families, or because they're part of the Stolen Generation?

What if they never find their mob, who they come from? Are they Aboriginal? What about all the things I've lost, that I don't yet know of, because I didn't grow up knowing? Lost identity, lost clans, lost family, and lost culture over the last 250yrs has now become part of the Aboriginal experience.

Speaking with mum later that night, I mentioned that when I pictured the faces of all the women I'd met for the very first time that day, it was like their faces had always been there in my mind. When I see younger photographs of my aunties, they look like my mum when she was younger, and like my nan.

The main reason I want to talk about this is because Indigenous Australians are often invisible in the global conversation about our country. Our story is not taught to British children in school. When I say Australia is a black country people in the UK usually respond with *"What?!"*.

We're invisible. When Aboriginal Australian stereotypes are located in drugs, alcoholism, domestic violence, and welfare dependence it's really difficult for us to take up space and highlight Indigenous excellence, because we don't get to take up those spaces. It's

easy for us to get knocked down again. We are held to a much higher account than anyone else and any time our imperfection shows, it's attributed to our Aboriginality not our humanness or individuality.

So, when I think of what Australia Day means to me it's an ongoing erasure because what happened in Australia is still happening today and it goes unacknowledged. And this all started because of Britain, when Captain Cook landed on Dharawal Country (Botany Bay) 250yrs ago.

The UK doesn't get to step away from that. I think the UK doesn't have an understanding of the link between colonisation of Australia and the direct causation of the Indigenous experience of intergenerational trauma, and the ongoing oppression we experience today.

It gets palmed off as an Australian issue. But it's not an Australian issue. I don't see what happened historically as separate to the now, because the British Empire legacy still exists. Settler colonialism is an ongoing process of denial, dispossession and destruction of history, people, and sacred sites. And that's how intergenerational trauma works. It still exists, in our stories passed between families, in our lived experiences today, in our literal DNA (*see epigenetics-trauma*). We have to have that acknowledgement.

You (Britain) don't get to step away from the treatment of Indigenous Australians. You were the ones who sent someone to invade our country and labeled it "*terra nullius*" (Captain Cook) meaning 'nobodies land' - a land without people, a legal fiction that meant you didn't have to provide payment or treaty. And because of '*terra nullius*' we were not recognised in the Australian Constitution as human beings until 1967.

We were 'flora and fauna' being 'plants and animals' - 16yrs after my mother was born, she became human. Imagine all the horrific things that can be enacted against a people when they are legally labeled as animals, dehumanised in law... on both an individual and institutional level. In a historical context, the UK don't get to step away from that.

I've had people in the UK walk up to me saying, "*You're from Australia; that's a really racist country isn't it*". It's that same mentality of imperialism, of superiority, and a belief of a greater 'progressive and civilised' nature that facilitated Britain to come to Australian soil and steal the land away from the people already there. And enact horrific acts of genocide, dispossession, destruction of significant cultural/spiritual sites, and cultural suppression against my people. Ironically, within the first few months of moving to London a British person threw a 'drunk Aboriginal on welfare joke' at me.

So, what has changed if this mentality, this narrative still exists in the UK...? There is a strangeness being here in London and it still being an invisible story. Because our story is your story.

There appears to be a struggle in the UK to hold the complexity of their identity, both historic and current, and this misleading whitewashing of history ends up being a barrier to critical reflection.

It seems at times that Britain is so keen to go back to its colonial 'Greatness' that the current political climate is centred on anti-immigration, Brexit, and desperately holding onto power and ongoing resource theft in the remaining 'Common' wealth.

Because of this blindness, there is little acknowledgement in the irony of enticing the Windrush Generations to the UK to 'rebuild Britain' only to deport these generations 50-60yrs later once the UK is done exploiting their labour. Or the UK selling £4.7billion of weaponry to Saudi governments that are then used to murder Yemeni people, while at the very same time the UK provide disproportionately less aid to Yemen, employing British civil servants to work on 'Yemen projects' – creating British jobs through the ongoing exploitation of UK funded war in other countries. Britain has a complex identity, a complex history, and a complex present-day.

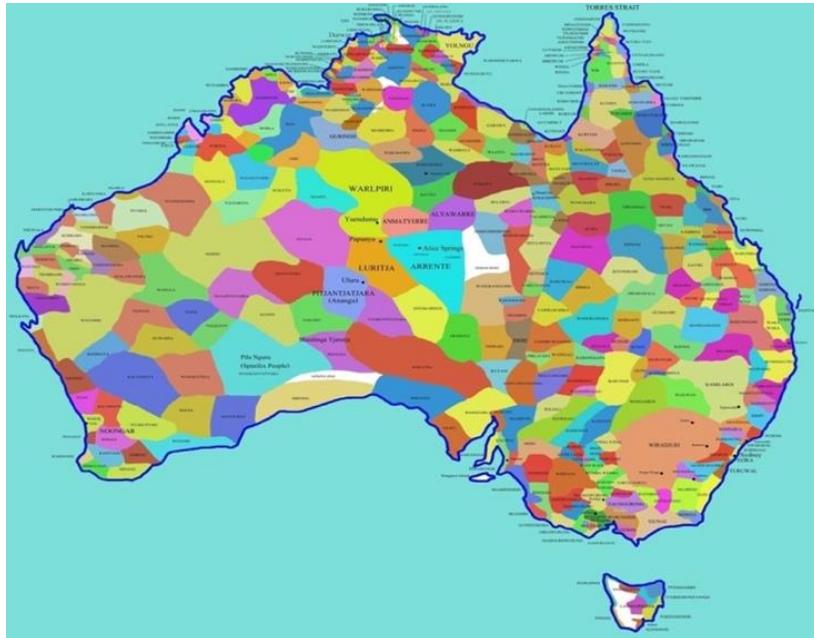
While there are of course things for Britain to be proud of, there is also a need for contemplative truth-telling when it comes to the significant injuring of people and countries across the world, in the last 500 years until today, all because of their interference and exploitation.



There was a narrative that we were passive hunter-gatherers who sanctioned the subjugation of our land. These stories are wrong; there were frontier wars, similar to the ones in America.

We fought for our people and we fought for our land, and in some places, we almost won against cannons and guns through complex guerilla warfare. A land of Peoples with 250 languages and 500 dialects and a multitude of differing cultural practices with a sophisticated agricultural, aquacultural, maricultural, engineering, architecture, social, political, and spiritual lore systems linked to custodianship of the land.

As custodians this means we don't own the land, the land owns us. Our spirituality, identity, and healing are directly linked to tribal Country. There is this strange pressure for us to stay fixed to appease white Australia's notion of a 'real Aboriginal', e.g., living on Country, imbedded in the old ways. But all cultures adapt to the context of their ever-changing environment but this doesn't change who we are.



Indigenous map of Australia

If you are identified as Aboriginal or First Nation Peoples, that will have ramifications in the same way it presents across the world – of high incarceration rates; inappropriate health care responses; poor mental health and high suicide rates; educational exclusion; the kinds of things that are common to First Nation People and those living under occupation across the world. As well as being governed by your oppressors who hold all the power to make decisions that directly impact your life on a day-to-day basis, your capacity to practice culture and stay connected to your clan and your land is compromised.

Indigenous Australians make up 2-3% of Australia's population and are the most incarcerated people in the world, per capita. We also have the highest rate of suicide in the world, per capita. There is a youth detention facility that is 100% Indigenous with children as young as 10yrs old. There have been over 440 Aboriginal deaths in custody since 1991. David Dungay Junior was also a blak Aboriginal man who used the words "I can't breathe" 10 times in 2015. He was being overpowered by 6 guards for eating a biscuit for his diabetes before he lost consciousness and died.

Australia Day isn't a celebration for Indigenous mob. It's a day of mourning that marks the beginning of 250yrs of genocide, occupation, and cultural and spiritual dispossession. The political nature of Australia Day becomes more visible each year and Indigenous protests in some states draw larger numbers than parades.

The backlash of this visibility is that at this time of year racism and hate-based violence against Indigenous mob tends to spike in the buildup to January 26th. Not to dissimilar to the spike in race-based hate crime in the UK since Brexit.

Extract from Quandamooka poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem "**A Song of Hope**"

*"To our fathers' fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow."*