

**white people
are nomads**

jenny hunter

White People Are Nomads © Jenny Hunter

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Creator: Hunter, Jenny, 1962- author.

Title: White People Are Nomads / Jenny Hunter.

ISBN: 9781925497359 (paperback)
9781925497403 (eBook)

Subjects: Aboriginal Australians--History.
Aboriginal Australians--Social conditions.
Cultural pluralism--Australia--History.
Australia--Social life and customs.

Dewey Number: 305.89915

Published by Jenny Hunter and InHouse Publishing
www.inhousepublishing.com.au



The verse is shifting. The sound of the meditative will take
you there. There are good things happening.

Let's talk about the good things.

For Kirstin and Lauren

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acknowledgements

I used to read the acknowledgements in books and wonder why there were so many people to thank. After all, I thought, writing is a solitary activity. I now understand how this would not be possible without the assistance and encouragement of a large support group. I am particularly grateful to the following people who may or may not know how they influenced the writing of this book: my beautiful and wise mum, who planted the seed three decades ago; my friend Alicia, who assumed with utter faith that it would germinate and there would be a book; my sister Kath and my daughters, Kirstin and Lauren, for gentle reminders with gifts of journals. I love you all for this.

I thank all the Aboriginal friends and colleagues I have had over the years who touched my life lightly or made a deep

impression—you have taught me so much. Special thanks to Ted for sharing some of your story here as well as your mum's. Thanks, Ronnie, these contributions to this book are a gift. Thanks, Noel, for your eternal wisdom and humility. I thank Rose Carnes for believing, as much as me, that life is the best university there is and there is no substitute for life experience!

From there on this journey, I thank the Notre Dame Writing Group, Jennie Gray for her editing feedback, her friendship, faith, and positivity. Melissa Grantham for sharing this journey, her detailed edit, and brilliant suggestions. Pete Grantham for always making life lighter. Rachel, Leigh Straw, Kat, Hannah, Alex, Kirana, Abi, Lisa, Hayley, Danielle, Vina, Janine, and KJ. Thanks to all of my friends for enriching my life. Thanks, Adele!

I am deeply appreciative of my Kimberley family. All there for our own reasons and length of stay. Almost the minute you arrive you are held by that. This family stays strong. The shared journey and the small collective history that was experienced together is the glue that forever binds. Like the way Aboriginal people stay connected. Years after leaving, an old friend, colleague, or acquaintance may call out of the blue. The switchboard lights up when that connection is

reactivated and it feels amazing. We are back in the red dirt, the blue skies, orange hills, and desert flowers, the ocean or the river, the sunsets and the full moons.

Storytelling is an ancient art. Stories are what we are all made up of. I am deeply grateful for having been given opportunities that have allowed me the privilege of hearing so many, from all sorts of people whose lives have intersected with mine. From my work in the 'Sharing Our Stories' program in Kununurra, I learnt that every story is valuable and it was through this program that I met Ted. It was through storytelling again that I was able to build a picture of the children on my caseload whilst working at the Department of Child Protection. These kids taught me over and over that the system was both helping and failing them at the same time. I listened again to the kids on the streets at night who told me their stories and how they were so afraid they had to rely on each other for safety. I heard stories from the other side of community who judged harshly these 'gangs' of youth.

I have heard stories from women who were victims of domestic violence, who lived in shelters behind locked gates in a self-imposed prison that was preferable to their home. I

have sat on many verandahs in communities and listened to people whose voices were choked up with frustration, anger, forgiveness, and shame because their stories are still are a part of the silent history.

I heard many stories whilst working with the homeless people in the Kimberley and again in Perth. I have listened to women in prisons, to young people in the justice system, to our Elders, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to children in the schools I taught at in rural and remote locations.

I have listened in my various working roles up and down the linear western ladder and outside of it as well. I am privileged to have been given a glimpse through stories of how humanity plays out in all different ways, which otherwise I would know nothing about. I have been blessed to share the journey of these people for a short or long time and their stories have taught me more than I could ever imagine learning. I have learnt that at heart, we are all the same.

I share this story through a painting metaphor. Every country has a story and within it a similar or not so dissimilar narrative. Within that country, every individual story is valuable and significant. We are all born with a canvas

already painted. As we grow, our journey is rendered with new layers sometimes masking over the old and sometimes integrated with the new. Although the layers become invisible, they are nevertheless still there. Collectively, our personal journeys contribute to the painting that is now.

If we look, we will see ourselves in this painting. Even though it is shared through the eyes of a few, it is hoped the hearts of many will acknowledge their connection to the story. Maybe we don't want to see the whole painting. But we are surely missing out on learning and loving and celebrating the whole lot of it. In the end, we all become stories and in the end, there is little to be gained in taking the story of us, untold, to the grave.

I respectfully acknowledge our ancestors, past and present—the first people of Australia. I also pay my respects to all people who now call Australia home—the second people of Australia.

Jenny Hunter

introduction

Dr Noel Nannup is a Nyungar/Injabarndi man and a well-respected Elder. He is a known story teller and cultural guide, an instructor, and a mentor. He is currently the Edith Cowan University Elder-in-Residence and advises as ECU's Cultural Ambassador.

There are synergies in everything. Our soil used to be layered with many colours. That was how it was before the tall ships came with the new people. They dug it all up and mixed it all to brown. I remember hearing a poem at school and it began with the words, 'I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains. Of rugged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains.'¹ There's no way you can write words like that unless you are beginning

¹ 'My Country', Dorothea Mackellar, first published in 1908

to gain an understanding that can only be provided by spirit.

The spiritual essence will never be truly captured by the strokes of pens and paintbrushes. Because it is truly a deeply spiritual place where everything is connected. Not just to a living individual, but to the souls of everyone who has ever interacted in a truly deep and meaningful way. But as the great teacher, this place gives us the ability to know that we must try to write about it and paint it. Everything begins its life in water. And paints need water to produce colour.

The chapters in this book, although written by a wadjella (non-Aboriginal person), echo with some clarity, the plight of the Aboriginal people since the tall ships came. It is clearly articulated by a person who has worked with Aboriginal people and has a great understanding of who we really are. In today's world, we find many people who think they understand Aboriginal people. However, I have always found the greater majority of these people will always fail when it comes to fully understanding Aboriginal people in a true spiritual sense. Jen is one of these rare individuals who restore not just my understanding as an Aboriginal person, but every other person who has faith in humanity. This doesn't mean everyone has to be a bleeding heart because it's

not about that. What it is truly about is an understanding of the truth. It is not just about us Aboriginal people or people, full-stop. It's about the spiritual land we live in.

Dr Noel Nannup

Readers are advised that this book contains images of people who have passed away.

Stories, artwork, and photographs have been reproduced with permission from Ted Carlton.

prologue

the painting

Every journey starts with a blank canvas. A gifted artist paints a story by revealing the layers beneath as well as what we see on the surface. It is the creative realm that helps us to more easily process the uncomfortable. It invites us to ‘see’ through other perspectives and ‘listen’ to what we do not want to hear. It invites us to integrate these connections by adding them to our own personal canvas. We are both attached and detached but we can be transformed in a moment of time. That story becomes part of our story. Each story, which adds another layer to the painting, contributes to the whole picture and our fields of vision are enhanced by each and every one.

The story of Australia has been painted, until recently, by the victors who 'won' the battle over one hundred years ago. As we stand today, one might see our painting filled with fear and ignorance, paternalism, racism, elitism, apathy, and lack. We need to repaint this canvas.

The stories with all their beauty and spirit will add layers infused with spirit to create a healing canvas in a metaphorical sense. A canvas of strength, resilience, respect, trust, love, laughter, and reminders. A reminder that we are all connected and we are all a part of the painting. A reminder that the oldest living culture in the world is here to share a wisdom and softness, and a new palette to replace the old.

There are so many privileges amongst that and a beautiful canvas for us all.

book one
the second people

*'The very ink with which all history is
written is merely fluid prejudice.'*

Mark Twain.

chapter 1

impasto

A very long time ago, a continent in the southern hemisphere, known today as Australia, was divided into hundreds of nations and before colonisation, many different groups of Aboriginal people called these nations 'home'. Home was their country. Each group, clan, or mob lived in their own 'country', much the same as people live in Europe today. Physical and spiritual borders such as rivers, creeks, mountains, and song lines formed natural boundaries. The geography of this country was as diverse as its climate. Arid, temperate, sub-tropical, tropical. To the north, the country spanned deserts and rivers and arrived at coastal monsoonal and sub-tropical coasts. To the south, the country crossed from arid coastal, inland to

woodlands, and further down to the tallest hardwood trees in the world. Dry deserts, icy tarns, rainforests, bushland, coastal shrub, mountains, rocky outcrops, rivers, creeks, tall trees were some of the elements of this great landscape. The climate varied from extreme heat in the north to freezing temperatures in the south. The people who lived here numbered up to a million at any one time and they had lived here for thousands of years. They were the indigenous people who had adapted their lifestyle around the geography and climate with harsh extremes to mild and gentle. These people mostly travelled within their own boundaries. They did not wander across the vast continent of Australia.

A man named Norman Tindale produced a map of the Aboriginal tribal boundaries of Australia, dividing different language groups. As an anthropologist and entomologist, he was able to record genealogies of Aboriginal people over three generations. His map began in the 1920s and took fifty years to produce. It challenged the assumptions many had that Aboriginal people roamed the country with no fixed attachment to lands. His map shows over three hundred nations and six hundred language groups. Other maps have been produced since by various people showing the language groups and tribal boundaries. All have disclaimers

excusing omissions, oversights, or even errors that may be proved another time. These admissions perhaps give insight to the complexity of Indigenous Australia and the challenges met each time academics metaphorically draw neat lines in order to categorise an Indigenous race of people under a western construct. Continuing attempts to capture these people physically, metaphysically, and spiritually still proves to be a fantastic and frustrating challenge today.

In 1770, Captain James Cook landed at Botany Bay in New South Wales. He declared the country ‘terra nullius’, empty and vacant, and from that point on, began to repaint the canvas that lay before him. Although Cook saw the canvas as blank and waiting for his mark, he was actually looking at a painting of the oldest living culture in the world. Invisible to him was a society of people delicately and inextricable weaved into the landscape and connected to the earth and the sky and everything in between. Over three hundred thousand people were in that painting. Highly organised family network systems designed to keep order and peace, unwritten laws which held together the complex structure of their society—the colonisation of Australia painted over all of this. Sophisticated land management and sustainability practices, traditional ecological knowledge, spiritual wisdom, ancient survival techniques, intricate

understanding of the patterns of time, the cosmology of all things, deep knowledge of earth cycles, ancient rituals linked to the spirit world, detailed knowledge of the plants and animals, respect, reciprocity, a clear knowing of relatedness, and an acceptance that all things are connected, a necessary responsibility to ensure cultural sustainability—all wiped out and painted over with a new hierarchical system and a new Western ideology.

The painting that was done by Cook and the settlers is extremely difficult to look at, which is probably why many people have not seen it yet. This history is hidden over decades behind words now written in history books such as ‘dispersal’. A seemingly innocuous word that translated into violently and forcefully removing Aboriginal people from their land. In the 1800s it was legal to kill Aboriginal people. They were ‘dispersed’ from the 1700s through to the early 1900s. Hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people murdered, captured as slaves, or dying from smallpox and other diseases for which they had no immunity. This cultural genocide must be included in the shared history of Australia. We cannot shine the light if we deny the darkness. Essentially a cultural clash, which played out so shockingly it still has repercussions today. This was the beginning of the hardest spiritual, physical, social, and emotional journey that

a race of people could endure. The beginning of dominance, superiority, and disrespect from those in power. How did this happen? The settlers had arrived after eight months of travel from England. They had battled high seas and harsh conditions. They had endured with excellent sailing skills, advanced navigation techniques, bravery and courage to make decisions in the face of adversity and the unknown. It had got them to Australia. They were pioneers competing in a man's world. They were victorious.

Today there are many people who can see through our painting beyond the facade it presents. These people have knowledge of the layers beneath and are steering our country towards healing. It is time to strip back these layers and repaint them authentically. For generations, we have endured being told what to do and how to do it. We need to understand the layers, the composition, the pigments that remain, and the pigments that have faded. We need to see who was holding the paintbrush all these years.