**Vignettes - Season 3, Episode 1: Land Back - Transcript**

**Millie Baylis:**

Hi there!

Welcome back to Vignettes, the EWF storytelling podcast.

My name is Millie and I’m the Program Coordinator here at the Emerging Writers’ Festival. I’m also excited to be the new host of this season of Vignettes.

I’m recording today from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. EWF pays respects to their elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches. As we’ll reflect on today – this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Over the next month, we’re really excited to bring you our third season of Vignettes. You’ll hear brand new audio stories spanning genres, forms and themes – from some of the most exciting emerging storytellers working across so-called Australia.

As we’re still in lockdown here in Victoria and across many parts of the continent, we’re still recording from our homes – so we hope you’ll continue to forgive our not-always-perfect sound quality, too.

To begin this season, we wanted to share stories that acknowledge First Nations sovereignty and the egregious effects that ongoing colonisation still has today.

Today’s episode title and theme - Land Back - comes from a global Indigenous movement that seeks to return the control and care for country – that was forcibly stolen during colonisation – back to First Nations people.

Today, we are really privileged to hear from Sissy Austin and Dakota Feirer, speaking to what calls for land back mean to them.

To begin, we will hear from Sissy Austin….

Sissy Austin is a Gunditjmara, Keerray Wurrung, Peek Wurrung and Djab Wurrung woman, and a community advocate for grassroots change. Sissy is a grounded 27-year-old Aboriginal woman and she believes strongly in the power of Aboriginal voices and stories creating grassroots change in communities.

Sissy has a history of advocacy, campaigning, community organising and navigating the intensity of Aboriginal politics and she is consistently advocating for self-determination to be the driving principle in all that she does.

Sissy also has a personal blog called ‘Silent No More’ and has written articles for various outlets.

For this episode, Sissy reads a piece that was originally published in the Guardian about the 2020 destruction of a sacred tree on Djab Wurrung country.

**Sissy Austin:**

My name is Sissy Austin, I am a Gunditjmara, Keerraay Woorroong, Djab Wurrung woman. I am 27 years old, I am a kinship carer and I work full-time as a paralegal support worker at an Aboriginal Family Violence legal service.

I am currently on Wadawurrung country and I acknowledge this beautiful country and pay my deep respects to the caretakers of this land.

I enjoy to write as a tool for reflection, healing and having my voice heard as an Aboriginal woman.

This piece I am reading out is a piece I wrote in response to the destruction of a sacred tree on Djab Wurrung Country and was published by The Guardian

I have written other pieces regarding the fight to protect Djab Wurrung published in both Mamamia and IndigenousX.

This piece is titled, “The destruction of a sacred tree on Djab Wurrung country has broken our hearts”.

On Monday our biggest nightmare became a cold hard reality. The sounds of chainsaws, excessive police force, the crying of children. We felt defeated as an element of our culturally significant landscape was torn away, taken, gone forever. We are the last generation to ever be in the powerful presence of our directions tree on Djab Wurrung country.

*Meriki Onus: “I’m really saddened to see the directions tree chopped down. I feel like Victoria are dancing on our graves with doughnuts and whisky.”*

It has been 862 days since the establishment of the Djab Wurrung heritage protection embassy to protect sacred women’s country from the Victorian government’s Western Highway duplication project in the state’s western district.

Country is who we are, country is what guides us and what grounds us in all that we do as First Nations people. This particular 12km stretch, where the expansion of a road between Melbourne and Adelaide is planned, holds a deep intimate connection for Djab Wurrung women, with birthing trees that are more than 800 years old. Thousands of generations of Djab Wurrung babies have been born in this country.

Over the last two years Djab Wurrung people have risen to protect these trees. Our determination to rise has been fuelled by the deep power our country holds. That power is one that guards our spirit and our soul when coming up against the coloniser.

We are seeing right now the weakness of the Traditional Owner Settlement Act and other associated legislations and incorporated organisations that are creating tidal waves of pain and loss for our people.

*Aunty Donna Wright: “When Aboriginal corporations are complicit in the desecration and destruction of sacred sites they need to be held accountable. How can we treaty with a government that destroys our sacred sites?”*

Every single person has played a role in getting us to where we are now, giving their blood, sweat and tears. The hours spent in mediation and courts, begging with tears rolling down our faces for an understanding, bodies on the frontline on the hottest days and the coldest nights.

There is this indescribable feeling that comes with attempting to seek justice and empathy from the very same system that was built to destroy. Destroy it did, and destroying it continues to do.

Victoria claims to be progressive in its relationship with Aboriginal people and communities. There are conflicting agendas here, one where the government is supporting the progression of the treaty and the other where they’re comfortable in proceeding with the irreversible destruction of significant cultural heritage.

Our bodies are at one with the country, we can feel the chains of the chainsaw grinding through our souls, our spirits. The sounds of those chainsaws will haunt us forever and be added to the already existing intergenerational trauma shadowing our people. There are no words to describe the emptiness we as Djab Wurrung are feeling right now.

*Arika Waulu: “Hearts are broken forever as the world watches sacred birthing sites be erased just like peoples have been. This is one of those National Geographic sick stories your grandchildren will be disappointed in.”*

Our hearts are broken, our trust in the “progressive” Andrews government is broken. We are experiencing a loss like no other, with the restrictions of Covid-19 further restraining us from coming together to mourn.

*Lidia Thorpe: “My heart is broken and I can’t help to feel betrayed by a government who say they want to treaty with us. Blaming other traditional owners for signing off is a cop-out. The cultural heritage legislation is committing genocide and it needs to be abolished.”*

In an attempt to make it through each painful hour of the current days, I am listening deeply to Uncle Kutcha’s song’[Is This What We Deserve](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LClzKSWEDLM)’ with tears rolling down my face. The lyrics ring so true: “We’ve been here since time began, our ancestors’ footprints buried in the sand, we are but caretakers of this ancient land, but you still don’t understand.” How many more generations of my people will find themselves like us, crying to the songs written by generations before us?

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Sissy.

And now, here is Dakota Feirer…

Dakota Feirer is a Bundjalung man living upon Dharawal and Yuin Lands. As a young poet, Dakota has performed for live audiences including Yours and Owls Festival and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Dakota’s body of work consists of poems, stories and reflections that critically engage with intergenerational trauma, gender, spirit and healing; all of which informed the methodology of his recent thesis which explored Indigenous cultural sovereignty in the 21st century.

Dakota is carving out a path as an independent researcher, educator and advocate for healing country and First Nations communities through art and storytelling.

**Dakota Feirer:**

Jinge Walla, My name is Dakota. I am a Bundjalung man, a brother, a son, and a writer. Though my voice carries through time and space in this moment, where I am situated, is Dharawal Country. The place of Fig and Cabbage Tree Palm, the Flame Tree, Wondangar the Whale, and where merrigong the mountain escarpment, spills into Gadu, the sea. It is a place where many people meet, and where mining of minerals and extraction of sand dunes have disrupted spirits and ecology. Middens are eroding here. I spent most of my life south, on Yuin Country. A landscape devastated in the Black Summer bushfires. Though these places are healing, and with them, so am I. I will be reading 3 poems that explore the condition of Country and sovereignty. In the honeymoon years, I sat with poetry for the purpose of my own healing. Now I’ve come to realise the transformative power of the form, as a vehicle for the ancients, to tell their stories, and stories of Country. The following three poems, ‘Untitled’, ‘Heal Country’ and ‘Death By Vertigo’ explore the feelings associated with Country and sovereignty. So thank you for listening, and remember, this always was, and always will be, the land of our ancients, the land of First Nations.

‘Untitled’

Each full moon

the ocean takes home more of her shells,

dissolving histories from man

who wanes from the sacred

Land back starts with washing hands and hearts clean

Where sweet water creek meets the salty kiss of the sea,

whirlpools dance with urgency

Full moon has come

None, as sovereign as she.

‘Heal Country’

If I wrote a letter to my Country, how would it read?

Dear Bundjalung Jugun,

Or Dear Yuwinj Dhari?

Will she forgive you and me for discrepancies of the anthropocene lately?

Because it took too many ancestors before you and I to arrive.

And wisdom belongs not to me,

but to the old man that plants a tree,

Of which its shade he’ll never sit underneath.

I only speak truth and of no new philosophy,

And I’m growing tired of repeating the words *Heal Country.*

When today we live in a place where one Dark Emu can’t walk through a plain of murnong & burning circles-

-without dying of thirst but first stripped naked & told he’s not Biribaan,

Not worthy of calling himself emu.

When today for one of us to choose her, over power & money,

Or to choose truth, over paradigms lined with lies.

We dismember their name and body, and refute their claim to sovereignty.

Whatever that word may mean.

Days will go by and the words *Heal Country* will still echo,

Few who choose to linger in this echo will find themselves alone,

‘Til the next Blak week swings around,

Or the next Blak trend snatches the nation’s attention.

Where Country made me there’s a ceremony ground piling with dead leaves,

So much I lit a cultural fire at my doorstep, so my feet wouldn’t bleed.

And if this colony is a house, it’s doorstep is where I sleep.

I keep checking it’s mailbox to find this letter to my Country,

Stamped in red ink: *Return to Sender.*

Or, maybe I’ll just print my heart on a letter,

Stamped in red ochre: *Return to Ancestor.*

‘Death by Vertigo’

*The Killing Times have ended*

so say the books I’ve read.

Though windows watched apocalypse,

recorded moments in social posts.

Until glass cracked like country roads,

and melted like highway signposts.

A child’s eyes bathed in wildfire

grows fear in adult minds.

Scrolling through our species

undeserving of love or virality.

Unlearning their true story,

yearning to be sung again.

Information seems an abyss

of numbness. Carted around in pockets.

Our care now also dwindles.

On cliff edge of news fatigue.

Joining the livestream

of endangered species.

Desacralised in a thirsting ember

of shorthand violence - media cycles.

Third eyes are blinded

by burn marks and blue light.

Burnt carcasses wired

on our coat of arms.

Our totems wailing,

those unburnt lost in haze.

Anthro-gaze is failing

generations proceeding us.

The unborn pleading:

*Please stop her bleeding.*

*Please tend to bandaging*

*your nationhood’s fragility.*

*Please consider our inheritance,*

*our now lifeless Country.*

To heal a corrupt legacy,

we weave with finger and reed.

Baskets, hands, poetry and opinion piece.

Listen. Breathe. Firestick. Drying Leaves.

Through necessity

we must re-pattern.

Rematriate our love

for the Mother.

Together deradicalise love crimes,

like protecting birthing trees.

Learn the plight of our waters.

Listen close to fish screams.

Cleansing a stinking silence,

that reeks across riverbeds.

The Killing Times are of the past,

so the journos have said.

Distrusting them, I consult the stars:

*When will the birthing times commence?*

**Millie Baylis:**

That was Dakota Feirer, and before him, Sissy Austin. Thank you to these artists for sharing their words with us today.

Just wanted to make a note today to say if you’re a settler like me wanting to help support Indigenous sovereignty and pay reparations, we encourage you to check out Pay the Rent – a grassroots collective that supports various Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander community initiatives. You can pay the rentby going to paytherent.net.au and set up a monthly payment for living on stolen land.

We also encourage you to check out the Dhadjowa foundation at<https://dhadjowa.com.au/> - they’re a new-ish foundation doing amazing work to provide direct support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families whose loved ones have died in custody.

Thank you for listening to *Vignettes:* The EWF Podcasttoday*.* If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving us a review and recommending us to your friends.

And stick with us over the next four weeks as we bring you more Spring readings. Our next episode will feature more brilliant emerging writers speaking to the theme ‘Body Language’.

This podcast was audio produced by Joe Buchan, and our theme music was created by Thu Care. You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website – at emergingwritersfestival.org.au

Thanks!

END EPISODE.