**Want to be a healthy Australian? Don’t try and fit into other people’s boxes.**

Being an Australian is a funny thing, full of uncomfortable contradictions, painful home truths and happy, boastful pride. I adore this big, bold, beautiful country. I love its intensity, its uniqueness and its childlike spirit. I love being an Aussie. But really *feeling* like an Australian is something that I’ve slowly grown into.

My parents came to Australia from New Zealand a year before I was born. I didn’t grow up with big family barbeques and generations of Aussies around me, playing cricket in the backyard. I grew up with Dad cheering for the *All Blacks* and Mum teasing me for failing to use the Queen’s English whenever I said ‘dance’, or ‘plant’, or ordered ‘fiiish and chiiiips’, instead of ‘fush and chups’. The kids at school didn’t know what Mum was talking about when she asked them to get their ‘jerseys’ and every time something happened that Dad didn’t like it would be the fault of ‘you bloody Australians’. I grew up with the sense that Mum and Dad were on their own here, and that my sister and I were a new generation of something a bit different. We were bloody Australians.

We cooked damper on sticks, ate vegemite and spent summer days swimming at the beach. We also learnt that good food meant a happy *puku* and how to sing the *taniwha*song. We had competitions as to who had the angriest *pukana* face and biggest, broadest, tongue. We are part Maori too.

This part of me has always made sense. I feel it in my body and in my spirit. My people are full of fire, passion and dance. Sometimes we have to travel abroad to feel more deeply where we come from.  In Fiji, the heart of the pacific took me by the hips and I found an old, familiar rhythm in my body, in my blood. I ate lots of fish and sweet potato cooked in the earth. I danced with a pacific beat. I sat around the kavabowl, telling stories. I spent time staying in villages still run by Chiefs. I watched local rugby games. I flourished in the damp, sticky heat of the tropics. I’ve spent lots of time in New Zealand but it took the visceral pacific-spirit of Fiji Islands to awaken the warrior in me.

How much Maori is in me? I used to nervously over-explain this part of my heritage whenever this question was posed. Now I ignore it. Along with the statement, ‘but you don’t look like a Maori’. I’ve realised that no matter what your response is to this, you’ll be assessed as either too brown or not brown enough. So I let it go. You will see it in the way I live, in the way that I view things and in the way that I move. It’s a part of everything I am and everything I do. That’s how much Maori is in me.

But it’s not all that I am. I didn’t grow up in NZ surrounded by my cousins and the rest of the *whanau*. I grew up here in Melbourne, Australia. Always feeling a little bit different but also being comfortable with that. My classroom was full of kids with parents that had moved here from somewhere else. Being a bit different was the norm, or at least that’s how I saw it.

In my family, nationality became a fluid concept as my parents opened our home to students from abroad. I have a few brothers and a sister from China and I love them like they are my blood. Their pictures hang on the walls of my family home. I’ve shared their highs and lows. I’ve learnt about their culture, their dreams and their fears. I also have a brother in Norway and a brother-in-law from Nepal. I’ve always loved that my Australia is one of difference and that one of the things that binds us together is our appreciation for where we are and what we have. This is a lucky country.

It wasn’t until I worked and lived abroad that I felt distinctively singled out as Australian. For some people I wasn’t Australian enough. I don’t have a broad Aussie accent. I don’t have blonde hair. I can’t surf. For other people I was too Australian to bother to get to know. My Government is dominating and aggressive. My people are self-serving colonisers. I didn’t just feel unwelcome. I was explicitly told so. I tried to broaden my accent, whilst also extensively critiquing my Government. I distanced myself from Aussie backpackers with the flag draped across their shoulders. I became sickeningly people-pleasing and self-loathingly apologetic. I felt like I was defending myself against a narrative of nationality that has never been a part of my reality. It was depressing. It made me physically and emotionally sick.

So I shifted the focus from pleasing others to just being more of myself. I stopped trying to fit into other people’s ideas of what an Australian is and thought about what it meant for myself. I started to understand that feeling ‘un-Australian’ is actually, a very Australian experience. Feeling sorry and upset about our history and our treatment of Indigenous Australians but not knowing exactly how to reach out because the gap is so wide and the pain is so deep, is also a very Australian experience. I started to spend more time outdoors because connecting to country is a conversation that happens between your body and the environment. I swim in the ocean because I want to feel the difference in taste and texture of the sea depending on how far up the coast I am. I take naps lying on rocks because to understand a country, I think you have to get right down on the ground and feel it.

Sometimes I feel like I barely know this land at all. It’s like I am just dangling my toes in the edge of the water and there is still so much to uncover. It’s a vast, ancient country and I am just one small person. I think that’s a very Australian feeling too. Old land, new nation; we’re still figuring things out. This is what keeps me feeling fresh and alive, a sense of wonder. Knowing that my story is for me to write and doesn’t have to fit anyone else’s script. Knowing that other people don’t have to fit into my ideas either and giving them the space to surprise me. This is what keeps me healthy and openhearted.

I’m a proud part Maori, Kiwi-Australian. My tip for keeping your sense of identity healthy? Don’t try and fit into other people’s boxes. Discover who you are for yourself. Tell your story and let other people tell you theirs. Simple as that.