

# WHERE?

By Jordan Collins, Illustrated by Phil Lesnie

## Cultural Safety

Before you begin, carefully consider the steps you can take to ensure that you are providing a culturally safe and inclusive space for everybody in your classroom and school. This may include undertaking cultural competency training, and reading widely and proactively to self-educate.

**RECOMMENDED FOR:** 8–12 years old, Years 5-8, UPPER PRIMARY to LOWER SECONDARY

**THEMES:** Racism, humanity, prejudice, tolerance, belonging

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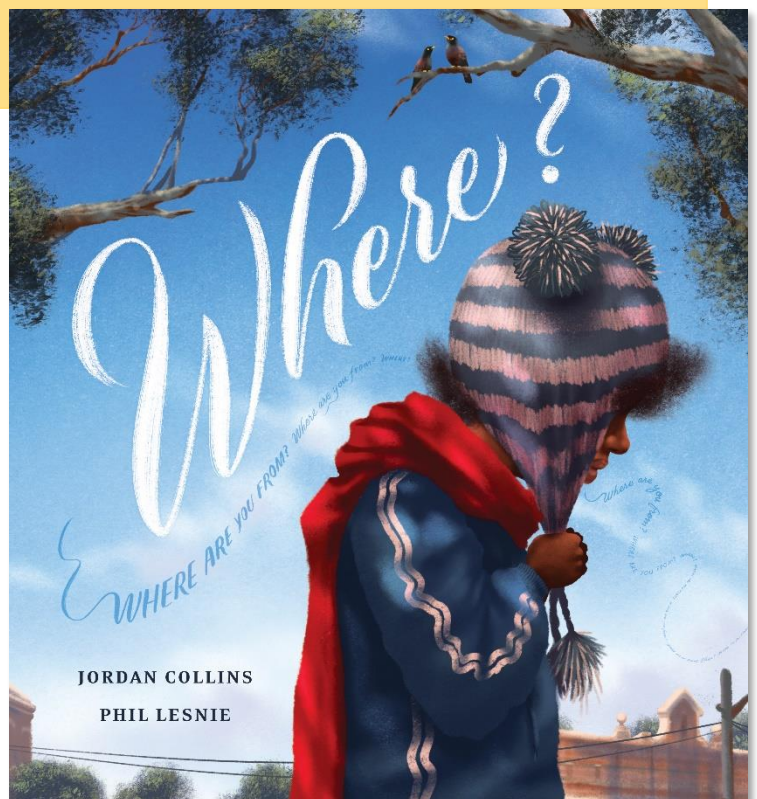
### CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- **ENGLISH:** Language
- **LITERATURE:** Poetry
- **Visual Arts**
- **General Capabilities:** Intercultural Understanding
- **HASS:** Space and time

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Dr Radhiah Chowdhury

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	2
Before reading <i>Where?</i> .....	2
Q&A with the author and illustrator .....	3
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES .....	4
ENGLISH: Language .....	4
Visual Arts.....	4
HASS .....	6
Intercultural Understanding .....	6
LITERATURE: Poetry .....	7
About the writer of the notes.....	10
A Word from the Author .....	10
A Word from the Illustrator.....	10
Online Resources .....	11



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# INTRODUCTION

*'Where are you from?' they say.*

*What they mean is,*

*'Why is your skin that colour?'*

*'Why does your hair look like that?'*

*I am from the mountains,*

*The seas and the sky.*

*I am from children of millions of years,*

*A timeline of humanity.*

*I am from this planet*

*And all others.*

A heartfelt challenge to racism from an exciting new voice that is simultaneously a cry of pain and a declaration of strength and resolve. *Where?* takes us on an intergalactic journey past collapsing stars and glowing nebulae to remind us not of our differences, but of our shared humanity.

## BEFORE READING

### Laying the foundation

- Ask the class whether they have ever been asked where they come from, or whether they have asked this question themselves. What are students' impressions of this question? Teachers are advised to discuss this question sensitively and appropriately to the context of your classrooms.

### On the cover

- As a class, look at the front cover of the book.
  - What emotion do you think the main character is feeling? What leads you to infer this? Discuss the way the character's stance and body language convey their emotions in this image.
  - Trace the textual path of the repeated question, 'Where are you from?' Why is this question represented in this way? Discuss the repetition, changing typeface, the curves of the words, and the way they shrink into the distance.
  - What do you think this book is going to be about, and why?
- Turn to the first double-page spread after the title spread. The cover image is repeated here, as is the question, 'Where are you from?'. Build upon student responses to the previous activity to discuss how they interpret the repeating question in different colours, typefaces and styles.



## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR JORDAN COLLINS AND THE ILLUSTRATOR PHIL LESNIE

**What do you see as the essence of this book?**

**JC:** Race and belonging.

**PL:** *Where?* takes a cosmic, long-form view of the original microaggression – really, the platonic ideal of a microaggression. It takes a small, annoying, everyday occurrence in the lives of all people of colour, places it inside of its larger social context of compulsory whiteness, and stretches the canvas of that context across the inky blackness of space and time.

**Can you tell us about your inspiration and how you came to write and illustrate this book?**

**JC:** This book was originally written as a slam poem and performed at the 2015 Poet’s Picnic when I was fourteen years old. Originally, I was too shy to go and didn’t even want to write anything. After some encouragement from my teachers and my long-suffering mother, I finally wrote the poem ‘Where’ that became this book.


I am African–American–Greek–Australian, meaning I have dark skin and curly hair. As one might imagine, my whole life I have been looked at and asked where I’m from, asked what my ‘background’ is.

The poem was written with a degree of frustration over being asked these questions over and over again, because what people mean when they ask something like that is ‘why is your skin dark or your hair curly?’, ‘why don’t you look like me?’. The poem was

a way for me to connect with people who ask these questions and let them know that I’m just human, like they are. That I’m not a wonder or an enigma just because of the colour of my skin. I also wanted to give hope to other kids like me who have grown up their whole lives being asked where they’re from, letting them know that they aren’t alone in feeling ‘othered’.

**PL:** I jumped at the chance to illustrate this book. What struck me immediately about Jordan’s poem is that even though the details of our backgrounds and experiences are wildly different, Jordan and I share this experience, and they describe it to perfection. I’m Filipino on my mother’s side. I don’t look it, but I don’t quite pass as white either – the ‘where’ question comes up a lot. Like, it came up today. Sometimes the answer is detailed and patient, and sometimes the answer is clipped and terse. I teared up as I read Jordan’s poem. It gives permission I wish I’d had when I was younger.

My first instinct about how to approach the art was to draw a grounded visual narrative that was all counterpoint – Jordan’s words were already hurtling us through space and time and into a deeper understanding of each other, maybe my part in this should be to detail the mess on Earth. But I had the incredible privilege to meet Jordan, who told me, ‘Nah. I kinda wanted to go to space.’ And so, here we are, in space. They were right, of course. It’s good up here. We really are from the same place.



I’m from the interiors of collapsing stars,  
From the explosion that made the big bang  
and the iridescent glow of a nebula.

I’m from the void and the cosmic dust  
around our solar system.

# CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE



### Tone

- ‘And they’ll laugh. / Because it’s funny. / A joke. A good gag.’ Consider the way these sentences are written, staccato and over three lines.
  - What tone is being conveyed here? What makes you think so?
  - How do you interpret the tone when paired with the accompanying illustration?
  - Does the narrator look like they’re enjoying the joke? What about the other child on the swing? What makes you think so?
- What does the other child mean when they ask, ‘But really, where are you from?’ Why is the question repeated here and throughout the book? What is the effect of this repetition, both on the narrator and on you as the reader?

### Figurative and literal language

- Use the language in the spreads from ‘I’m from the interiors of collapsing stars’ to ‘I am from the redwood trees’, and ‘I’m from voyagers on the seas’ to ‘You see skin and I see supernovas’ to introduce the concepts of metaphor and hyperbole. This activity will be useful in the exploration of poetry later in these notes.
  - What is metaphor? What is hyperbole? Write working definitions on the board for students to refer to throughout this discussion.
  - Draw a T-chart on the board, with one column labelled ‘Literal meaning’ and the other labelled ‘Figurative meaning’. What is the literal meaning of the line, ‘I’m from the interiors of collapsing stars, / From the explosion that made the big bang and the iridescent glow of a nebula.’? Write the class answer in the first column. Repeat this with all the lines containing metaphor from the indicated spreads.
  - As a class, work through what the figurative meaning of these lines might be. Record the responses on the second column of the T-chart.
  - Consider the responses in both columns. Is the figurative meaning explicitly the opposite of the literal meaning of each line? Or is it an exaggeration of the literal meaning?
  - What is the effect of using hyperbole across these lines? How does it change or enhance the meaning of the text?

#### Communicating and socialising

Interact with others, sharing and comparing experiences, personal perspectives and points of view on topics related to immediate environment and personal world.

#### Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating

Identify some differences between imaginative and informative texts.

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising and questioning to understand and discuss texts listened to, viewed or read independently.

#### Interacting and empathising with others

Discuss perspectives related to objects, people, places and events.

## VISUAL ARTS



### Visual literacy

- Look at the two consecutive spreads, ‘But sometimes they push’ and ‘And how do I respond?’ What changes in the setting can you identify between these two spreads? How does the setting shift from real-world to imaginary? Why do you think the illustrator makes this shift? How do you interpret the dreamlike sequences across space and time?

#### Expressing and Developing Ideas

Explore the contribution of images and words to meaning in stories and informative texts.

Explore where, why and how people across cultures, communities and/or other contexts experience visual arts.

Explore examples of visual arts created by First Nations Australians.

Use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to create artworks.

Share artworks and/or visual arts practice in informal settings.

## Motifs in Art and Writing

- Introduce the class to the use of motifs in art and writing. This activity will be useful in the exploration of poetry later in these notes.
  - What is a motif? Write a working definition on the board for students to refer to. How might a visual motif in artwork differ from a literary motif in writing?
  - As a class, re-read *Where?* and compile a list of the motifs you can find in the illustrations and in the text. Organise the list between literary motifs and visual motifs.
  - In small groups, select a motif and discuss the following:
    - How many times is it repeated in *Where?*
    - What do you think this motif might mean?
    - Each group shares their thoughts on their selected motif to the class.
- One of the visual motifs found on the front cover of the book and on several pages is [the Indian myna bird](#), an invasive species introduced to Australia.
  - How was the Indian myna introduced to Australia?
  - Why is it considered an invasive species?
  - What impact do Indian myna populations have on native Australian habitats?
  - What steps have been taken to control Indian myna populations in Australia? How effective have these measures been?
  - What are the dangers of introducing species into native habitats? Why is this a particular concern in Australia? In your answers, consider Australia's geographical isolation from other landmasses, how this might have protected native species, and how local ecosystems were impacted by European colonisation.

**Extension activity:** Australia is now home to several invasive species that were introduced without proper consideration of their impact, which have significantly impacted native ecosystems. Select another invasive species introduced to Australia. Research how it came to be introduced, why it has thrived here, what impact it has had on native ecosystems, and what measures have been taken to control and/or reverse that impact.

## Surrealism

- Introduce the class to the surrealism art movement. This brief explainer from [Tate Kids](#) is a good place to start.
  - Examine the illustrations that follow the spread 'And how do I respond?', particularly focusing on the final two spreads, and ask the students whether they think the illustrations are surrealist or realist. What real-world objects and motifs appear in the final illustrations? What effect do they have on the image?

**Extension activity:** Students take inspiration from the artwork of *Where?* to create their own surrealist pieces using everyday objects and motifs placed in their own dreamlike settings.

# HASS



## Time and Space

- As the narrator steps through the imaginary door, they are flung into the cosmos. Discuss the concept that humans are made of stardust. You may find [this video](#) from the *Smithsonian Magazine* a helpful resource to foreground discussion.
  - What are the core elements that make up our DNA and our bodies?
  - Where did these elements originate?
  - How does the narrator use poetic language to convey these scientific concepts on the two space spreads?
  - Research the big bang theory and the origins of the universe. Present your findings in a PowerPoint presentation or poster.
- Using your research from the previous activity, create a timeline of the universe and humanity's place in it, as described by the narrator throughout the pages of *Where?*.
  - Discuss the way the narrator places their own smallness within the vastness of space and time. What is the effect of this contrast of scale? Carl Sagan's [Pale Blue Dot](#) is a useful complementary resource.

### HASS – Past and Present

Develop questions about objects, people, places and events in the past and present.

Interpret information and data from observations and provided sources, including the comparison of objects from the past and present.

Develop intercultural understanding and learn how to build knowledge about history, geography, civics and citizenship, and economics and business, by posing questions, researching, analysing, evaluating and communicating information, concepts and ideas.

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES

### INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

#### Developing respect

- 'You see skin and I see supernovas. You see hair and I see nebulae.' What is the narrator saying about the nature of humanity on this spread?
- As a class, discuss the way power is conveyed through both words and images.
  - Not counting the title page image, how many characters appear in the illustrations of *Where?* How many speakers or narrators does the book have? If there is only one speaker in the book, who holds the power of words? Explain your answer.
  - How is power conveyed in illustrations? Consider the composition of an image, e.g. the scale of characters, the way colour and light are used to emphasise particular elements in an image.
  - How do the illustrations interact with the words to change the balance of power? For example, compare the spread beginning, 'People ask me that question' to the final spread, 'So no need to ask again'. The same characters appear on both spreads, but is the balance of power in both images the same? Explain your answer with reference to the composition of both illustrations.
  - Why is the question 'Where are you from?' never presented in the regular typeface of the rest of the book? Why does it always stand out? What effect does this have on how you read those words and how they interact with the rest of the page?
- The core concept of *Where?* is that despite our superficial differences, we share more commonalities than we do differences. However, it's important to note that the narrator takes a very macro view of those similarities – we share a grand common ancestry that ought to render our superficial differences insignificant.

#### Recognising Culture and Developing Respect

Investigate culture and cultural identity

Explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices

Develop respect for cultural diversity.

#### Interacting and empathising with others

Communicate across cultures.

Consider and develop multiple perspectives.

Empathise with others.

#### Reflecting on Intercultural experiences and Taking Responsibility

Reflect on intercultural experiences.

Challenge stereotypes and prejudices.

Mediate cultural difference.

Is this the same thing as saying that the things that make us different, such as our different cultures, heritage, backgrounds and upbringing, are not important at all? Conduct a class debate on the topic, 'We should only focus on the things that make us the same.' In constructing their arguments, students should consider the weight of the word 'only' in the topic statement and what bearing it has on the nuances of their argument.

### After Reading Debrief

- After finishing a reading of *Where?*, revisit your initial discussion of the question, 'Where are you from?' Have students' impressions of this question changed? Why/why not? With sensitivity to the context of your students, discuss what the implications of this question can be for people who come from culturally minoritised backgrounds. Teachers are advised to use relevant tools such as a talking circle, small groups or communities of inquiry to ensure cultural safety for all students during this activity.
  - What does it mean to belong to a community? To a locality? To a nation? Allow students time to consider their own sense of belonging and what factors inform whether they feel like they belong or don't belong somewhere. Can that feeling change? What factors might change it? Which of these factors are within your personal control, and which of them are not? The illustrator's note at the end of *Where?* might provide a helpful framework for this discussion.
  - Is it undesirable to be curious about a person's background? What might prompt this curiosity? Using the author's note at the end of *Where?* as a starting point, discuss the different ways a person could interpret a question about their background.
  - Brainstorm some more appropriate and mutually respectful ways to explore our backgrounds than asking the question, 'Where are you from?'

**Extension activity:** Introduce the concept of racial colour-blindness versus colour-consciousness. MTV Impact's [video on racial colour-blindness](#) is a useful starting point. Why is racial colour-blindness a less effective way to engage with the world than colour-consciousness? See Online Resources for further resources to guide this discussion.

### Communicate across Cultures

Study the lives, cultures, values and beliefs of people within and beyond the familiar world, coming to recognise similarities with other people, and to better understand differences.

Refer to a range of sources portraying different cultural perspectives to understand the nature, causes and consequences of cultural interdependence, dispossession and conflict.

## LITERATURE

### POETRY

- *Where?* initially began its life as a slam poem that was adapted to the picture book format. The book is a great way to introduce students to various forms of poetry both in print and in performance. The poems linked in the following activities should be reviewed prior to use to determine their suitability for your classroom contexts.
  - Begin by discussing as a class what students know about poetry, recording their observations on a whiteboard or similar. Some questions to guide the discussion include:
    - What is poetry?
    - What classifies a text as poetry?
    - Does a poem have to rhyme?
    - What forms can poetry take?

### Examining Literature

Recognise different types of literary texts and identify features including events, characters, and beginnings and endings.

### Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising and questioning to understand and discuss texts listened to, viewed or read independently.

### Responding to Literature

Respond to stories and share feelings and thoughts about the events and characters.

### Composing texts, through speaking, writing and creating

Create and deliver short spoken texts to report ideas and events to peers, using features of voice such as appropriate volume.

- Consider inviting poets to workshop poetry in practice with your classes. [Red Room Poetry](#) is an organisation that can facilitate poetic learning within the classroom.
- Compile a list of approximately five poems to share with students. You might select these from multiple sources, or a single source, such as [Red Room Poetry](#). Be mindful of unconscious cultural biases and try to select diversely across historical periods, gender and cultures. Across five days, provide students with their own copies of each of these poems. Emphasise that there is no right or wrong answer in this activity; it is designed to help them process their subjective reactions to the text as literary analysis.
  - Read the poem aloud to your class. Ask them to simply listen to the reading.
  - Read the poem aloud again. This time, ask students to follow along with their printed copies, circling or underlining the parts of the poem that stand out to them. Once completed, ask students to write their reasoning for why those parts of the poem stood out to them.
  - Ask students to now quietly read the poem on the page. Do different parts of the poem stand out when it's read in this way?
  - Ask students to privately give the poem a star rating out of five, with one or two sentences explaining their rating.
  - Repeat this activity over five days, with a different poem each day.
  - At the end of the cycle, allow students time to review their notes and make any adjustments to their ratings and reasoning. In pairs or small groups, ask students to share and discuss their notes and impressions of each poem.
- Allocate one of the following poetic forms to student pairs. Pairs will research the form, including its history (particularly focusing on whether it is part of an oral/performance or written/print tradition), one or two notable examples of poems and poets within this form, and what sort of communication is best suited to this form. They then present their findings to the class, concluding with personal reflections on whether this poetic form resonated with them, and why/why not.

Blank verse	Sonnet
Rhymed poetry	Elegy
Free verse	Ode
Epic	Limerick
Narrative poetry	Lyric poetry
Haiku	Ballad
Pastoral poetry	Villanelle

- Poetry uses certain techniques and devices to create rhythm, heighten emotional impact and enhance meaning. Different devices are more or less effective across the various forms of poetry. Explore poetic techniques as a class. [The AATE's Glossary of Poetry Techniques](#) is a useful starting point. Ask students to build their own glossary as they explore poetic techniques.
- Using the examples of concrete poetry below, or any others that might be suitable, explore the ways in which poetry can use the written form to innovate and enhance meaning:



- e. e. cummings, '[r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r](#)'
  - James A. Lindon, '[Doppelganger](#)'
  - Colleen Thibaudeau, '[Balloon](#)'
  - John Hollander, '[Swan and Shadow](#)'.
- Using the examples below, or any others that might be suitable, explore the ways in which performance poetry can use the oral form to innovate and enhance meaning.
    - Warsan Shire, '[Home](#)'
    - Solli Raphael, '[Australian Air](#)'
    - Arasely Rodriguez, '[Checkmarking a Box](#)'
    - Yasmine Lewis, '[If They Can Pronounce Shakespeare](#)'.
  - Build upon your discussions in the previous two activities to explore Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise' in both [print](#) and [performance](#). Emphasise that print and performance forms of poetry are not mutually exclusive, and that a poem can exist in both forms. Students write their responses to the following question: How can a poem connect with its audiences in both its oral and written forms?
  - Return the class focus to the picture book, *Where?*. Observing the line breaks and text layout, write out the text of the book as a poem. What poetic form from the 14 previously explored would you consider this poem to be?
  - Re-read *Where?* once in print form, taking in the way the words appear on the page to enhance meaning. Then, re-read the text aloud, taking care to observe the rhythm of the words while also showcasing the accompanying illustrations. Which – if either – form did students respond to? Why?
  - Many picture books have a rhyme scheme and can function as poems as well as picture books. But can you think of other picture books that could be read as free verse poetry? Explore the available books in your classroom or library to identify other picture books that can also function as free verse poetry.

**Extension activity:** What is it about the picture book form that lends it so well to free verse poetry? Consider the role that illustrations play in visualising figurative language, and the way picture books are often read aloud in shared reading scenarios. Has what you have learned about performance poetry changed the way you read picture books? Why/why not?

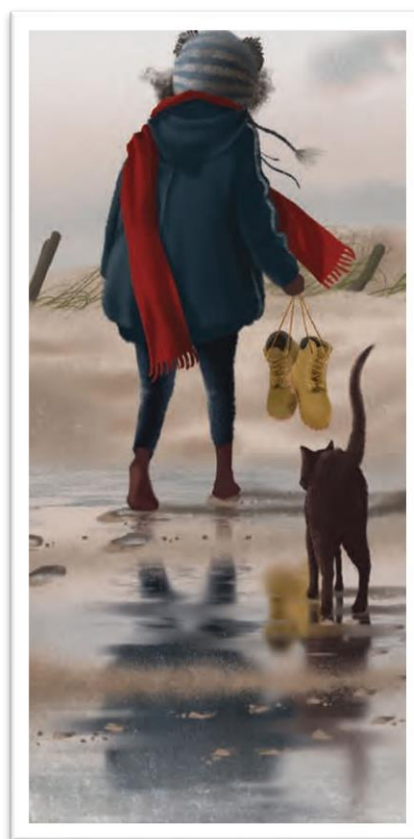
#### Creating Literature

Retell and adapt familiar literary texts through play, performance, images or writing.

Create and deliver short spoken texts to report ideas and events to peers, using features of voice such as appropriate volume.

#### Communicating and Informing

Convey information on specific topics using formats such as oral or digital presentations, displays, diagrams, timelines, narratives, descriptions and procedures.



## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THESE NOTES

Dr Radhiah Chowdhury is an editor, writer, creative producer and advocate based on unceded Darug and Dharawal Country in Sydney's south-west. She received her Doctor of Philosophy in children's literature from the University of Sydney in 2011, where she has also been a sessional academic in the School of Literature, Art and Media. She was the Australian Publishers Association 2019-2020 Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellow, awarded for her research project, *'It's Hard to Be What You Can't See: Diversity Within Australian Publishing'*. Radhiah is also one of the founders and moderators of the Australian First Nations and People of Colour in Publishing Network, a peer support and professional development network for First Nations and POC publishing professionals in Australia.

Radhiah's debut picture book, *Jumble* was published by Omnibus Books in 2019. Her second picture book, *The Katha Chest* was published by Allen & Unwin in 2021 and was a 2022 CBCA Notable Picture Book of the Year. She is one of the contributing editors of the anthology *Admissions: Voices Within Mental Health*, forthcoming in October 2022 from Upswell Publishing. She is currently Senior Editor at the NSW Department of Education and Chief Creative Officer for Arise Foundation Australia, a not-for-profit organisation supporting survivors of financial abuse.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

'I was born in Chicago in the United States and moved to Australia when I was eight. I wanted to be an author since I was little because I love reading, and the book you are holding originally started its life as a slam poem.

'I'm African-American-Greek-Australian, which means I have dark skin and curly hair. My whole life I've been looked at and asked, 'Where are you from?' What people are really asking is, 'Why don't you look like *me*?' I wrote the poem 'Where' partly out of frustration over being asked questions like that over and over again. The poem was a way for me to connect with people who ask these questions and show them that I'm just human, like they are. That I'm not a wonder or an enigma just because of the colour of my skin. At first I was too shy to perform the poem, but after my teachers and mother encouraged me, I performed it at the Poet's Picnic when I was fourteen. *Where?* was written to give hope to other kids like me who have grown up their whole lives being asked where they're from, letting them know that they aren't alone in feeling othered.'

## A NOTE FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

The problem is, I usually get asked 'Where are you from?' in places where it's important to be polite and make nice. I'm sure that's how it persists as small talk. I was once asked it at a funeral.

These days, mostly, the answer I give is 'the Philippines', although that's not true at all – it's where my mother is from, but it's also the quickest way out of the conversation. 'Australia' is factually accurate for me yet somehow dishonest; it confirms common experiences and beliefs that I suspect we don't share. It's the answer I always gave defensively when I was younger, when I felt in flight from my own ancestry. What a thing to be reminded of, in taxis and barbershops, in introductions and interviews, that one's lifelong relationship with a sense of belonging has been fraught.

And we *can* talk about it, of course. Sometimes I *like* to talk about it. This isn't about pretending we're from nowhere. We ask *each other* all the time. But, mostly, I am tired of being asked. Instead, ask me what I'm reading at the moment. You'll see my face light up. That's where I'm *really* from.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

AATE, 'Glossary of Poetry Techniques' AATE: Australian Association for the Teaching of English.

<https://www.aate.org.au/resources/pages/glossary-of-poetry-techniques>

Adia Harvey Wingfield, 'Color Blindness Is Counterproductive' *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/color-blindness-is-counterproductive/405037/>

AEPMA, 'Indian Myna Bird' *Australian Environmental Pest Managers Association Ltd*.

<https://aepma.com.au/PestDetail/92/Indian%20Myna%20Bird>

Beverly Daniel Tatum, 'Color Blind or Color Conscious?' *AASA: The School Superintendents Association*. <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14892>

Carlsagandotcom, 'Carl Sagan's Pale Blue Dot OFFICIAL' *YouTube*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO5FwsblpT8>

MTV Impact, 'Why Color Blindness Will NOT End Racism | Decoded | MTV News' *YouTube*.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4LpT9TF\\_ew](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4LpT9TF_ew)

Red Room Poetry

<https://redroompoetry.org/>

Smithsonian Institution, 'We're All Made of Stardust. Here's How.' *Smithsonian Magazine*.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/were-all-made-of-stardust-heres-how/>