BOS number: 26414989

Deconstruct & Reconstruct:

An Exploration into the Navigation of Contemporary Indigeneity

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Introduction

Yawuru leader Mick Dodson, in considering the extent of negative historical and contemporary representations of Aboriginality, suggests that '*since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality*.[1] My Personal Interest Project (PIP) is about being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent in today's social, political and economic systems. I chose this area of study because I am in this position myself as a young Aboriginal man, and for me it has been a battle to define my identity and find my strength. In referring back to Dodson's statement above, I often feel that I am positioned as unauthentic and the personal tension I face every day arises from the navigation of established stereotypes and frameworks that regulate Indigenous identity. My PIP is an opportunity to challenge and interrogate these representations and consider some of their impacts, particularly in terms of my own experience. In doing so, in Chapter One I discuss how Indigeneity has been constructed historically, by non-Indigenous people. I also aimed to uncover assumptions that underpin certain representations. In Chapter Two, I looked at how these representations manifest today in the lives of Indigenous people. I then developed and applied the Two Worlds theory that has helped me understand my own experience with Indigeneity and also my research participants. In Chapter Three, I advanced my discussion onto the topic of re-presentation. I assert my central hypothesis, which is to consider possible new understandings of Aboriginality in today's world as created by Aboriginal people ourselves, which challenge those historical representations.

In undertaking this project I hope to demonstrate an improvement in my social and cultural literacy through the findings and understandings logged during my engagement with focus groups, interviews and various sources. These understandings will be demonstrated at certain points throughout this PIP, as I reflect deeply on my prejudices and judgements of others and myself, respecting all perspectives.

[1] Dodson, Mick. "The End in the Beginning – Re(de)fining Aboriginality." Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994. p.3

Throughout this PIP I gathered primary and secondary research to inform my hypothesis of Indigenous identity as a foreign construct that has shaped representations and misconceptions of Australian Indigeneity, within past and present experiences of colonisation.

My methodology included the use of focus groups, interviews and personal reflection. I used interviews and focus group methodologies because they served as a culturally appropriate "*yarning device*"[2] that was best suited to my research questions and participants. I created a space that was more comfortable for participants, where they were able to build on each other's ideas. The open-ended interview gave me an advantage, considering that I was interviewing younger participants who felt slightly uncomfortable responding directly to close structured questions. The open-ended format allowed us to negotiate the structure and content of the interview together, enabling participants to build the confidence to talk through their ideas and answers comfortably. It also allowed me to improve my social and cultural literacy as I had to step back and reflect on my judgement or opinions, accepting completely their point of view.

[2] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta, personal communication 2015

Log

Before I officially started my PIP, I had a general topic that I had been thinking about deeply throughout my studies in Year 11. I was aware the topic would be appropriate for the PIP as I could relate to it personally, due to my experiences growing up and in particular at school. As I continued on the journey and engaged more extensively with primary and secondary research, my interest evolved as I began to understand, appreciate and comprehend my research topic on a micro/personal level and also within my macro world (within my community and Australian society more broadly). It also became clear along the way that this entire project may be a manifestation of my own journey of uncovering my identity; and what I represent as a Gumbainggir Australian man.

The research I employed was quite effective due to the fact that I planned my methodologies well in advance. For example, I knew I wanted to conduct a focus group with Aboriginal participants. Rather than limiting my research to just my own community, I looked ahead in the year and saw I would be spending a week with Aboriginal students and staff from all across NSW on an academic enrichment program in April. I saw this as an ideal opportunity to expand the scope of my research, and therefore planned my questions and recording methods in preparation for this time. In this way, I felt my methodologies sophisticated my PIP as a process and as an endpoint, essentially because their format was culturally formal.

Another reason I saw my research methodologies as effective is due to the importance I placed on using Indigenous academics to avoid reinforcing what I was essentially attempting to critique. This also meant that my research process was a bit slower than expected due to the fact that I was searching specifically and critically for Indigenous academics, which form a minority of all academia.

Along the way I had some unexpected findings that triggered me to look inward and question myself more deeply than ever before. There were points when I didn't have the answers, so in order to overcome this barrier; I reached out to my networks in my micro world, which assisted me to navigate any confrontational content with ease. In hindsight, a personal flaw in my approach to this process and this idea was the matter of subjectivity I carried throughout my research. It was towards the middle of writing my PIP, that I came to a realisation that I myself was succumbing to my own internalised colonialism, I was approaching 'Indigeneity' as if it was one identity, as if there was such a thing as the 'black' identity, that it was the one model that we all fell under. This was a challenging point in my journey. In labelling my error, from then on I approached my research and my ideas with the mindset that identity has depth and breadth and for everyone it is different, and the issues around them are diverse.

Chapter One

Deconstructing Indigeneity: Is it all an illusion?

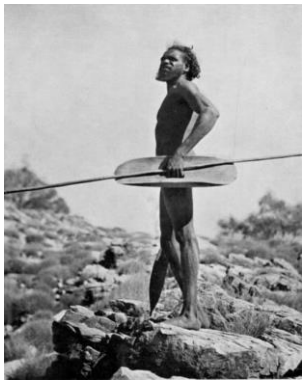

Figure 1[3]

In this chapter of my PIP I will discuss the concept of 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' identity ('Aboriginality' or 'Indigeneity' are other terms meaning the same thing) as constructed/represented by this recent society. It has been widely acknowledged that the processes of invasion and genocide employed to establish the nation state Australia, came hand in hand with perceptions, beliefs and constructs of Indigenous people as primitive, savage and uncivilized. [4] Indigenous people have historically bore the brunt of western conceptualization and definitions, which have justified colonisation. In Australia, our very land-base and relationship with it was categorised as *Terra Nullius* or a 'land belonging to no one'. [5] Indigenous people were placed into, and expected to act within, the boundaries of a category of authenticity manifested and established even before European arrival. This model of authenticity, which regulated the Aboriginal persona since, then follows the popular model of '*the Noble Savage'* [6]- which as demonstrated in *Figure 1*, is a romanticised image of pre-colonial custodial life. It is also representative of man's connection and dependence on the land he inhabits, and as

[3] Figure 1. 'The Aboriginal … as … seen by early explorers'. *Walkabout*, January 1936. Photo Roy Dunstan. http://press.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/transgressions/mobile_devices/ch05s05.html

[4] Augoustinos, Martha, Keith Tuffin, and Mark Rapley. (1999), "Genocide or a Failure to Gel? Racism, History and Nationalism in Australian Talk." *Discourse & Society* 10, no. 3: 351–78

[5] Lindqvist, S. (2007). *Terra Nullius: a journey through no one's land.* Granta.

[6] Dodson, M., 1994. The End in the Beginning – Re(de)fining Aboriginality. Presented at the The Wentworth Lecture, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Montagu suggests '*as if not men, but as the simplest essence of man.* '[7] As Dodson asserts *"to the early visitors, we varied from the noble savage to the prehistoric beast".*[8] As Tainaiake and Corntassel further argue "*indigenousness is…an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonisation.*" [9] The term '*aboriginal'* for example, is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as something *'inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times or from before the arrival of colonists'.*[10] These definitions are important in the context of my project because it is an exploration into the foundations of the construction of Aboriginal identity. This standard definition of the adjective 'Aboriginal' implies that a necessary condition of 'Aboriginality' is that it has been colonised, and exists post-colonially or in a recently civilised settler colonial society. Thus Aboriginality, as defined within this context, can only exist with the occurrence of invasion, conquest or colonisation[11].

"*The term "Australian" was co-opted by settler colonials to describe themselves, while "Aboriginal" was used to homogenise what was even then a very diverse population, covering an immense geography."* [12]

Yet, as a result of the western value system, all of these Peoples were grouped under the umbrella of 'Aboriginal', 'Native', 'Indigenous', 'The Other'. They were forced into the generic model of what a 'Noble Savage' (as depicted in *Figure 1)* is supposed to look and sound like – and when they didn't, they were considered un-authentic.
Every established colony in the world has a narrative of their 'other', or their 'Aboriginal', which is often defined in relation or opposition to the power of colonising force.

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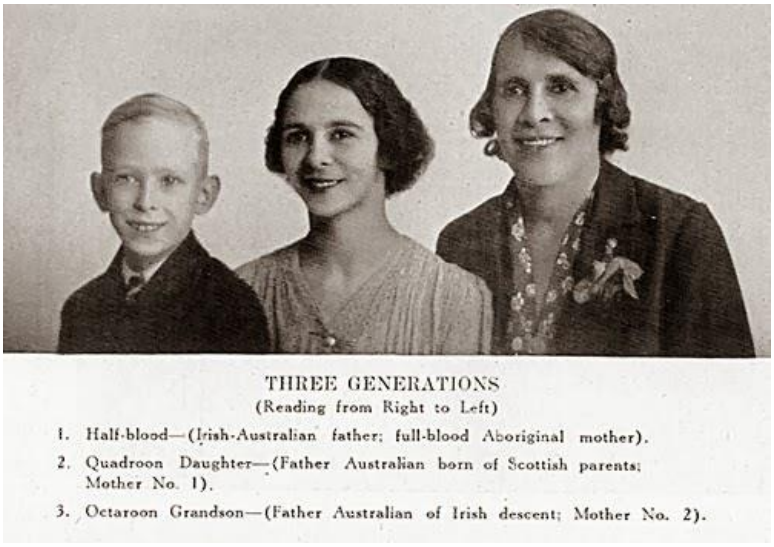
[7] Montagu, A. (2013). *Coming into Being Among the Australian Aborigines: The Procreative Beliefs of the Australian Aborigines*. Routledge.
[8] Dodson, M., 1994. The End in the Beginning – Re(de)fining Aboriginality. Presented at the The Wentworth Lecture, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
[9] Tainaiake, A and Corntassel, J. (2005) 'Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism', *Journal of Government and Opposition*, Vol. 40, Issue. 4, p.597 (http://web.uvic.ca/igov/uploads/pdf/Being%20Indigenous%20GOOP.pdf)
[10] (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aboriginal)
[11] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta personal communication june 2015
[12] Grieves, V. (2014), 'Culture, not colour, is the heart of Aboriginal identity', *The Conversation*

Coram suggests, in her analysis of the '*aping*' of Aboriginal footballers that "*the mediation of the indigenous 'other' constructed through time and space form the basis for the development of a racial project that highlights the expression of nature, animalism, savagery and infantilization*" as markers of Aboriginality. [13]

She further suggests that this positioning serves to invoke 'the subordinate status of the 'other'', the other being Aboriginal people. Arguably, in being labelled 'other' the power and right to identify and define ourselves has been taken away.



THREE GENERATIONS
(Reading from Right to Left)

1. Half-blood—(Irish-Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal mother).
2. Quadroon Daughter—(Father Australian born of Scottish parents; Mother No. 1).
3. Octaroon Grandson—(Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2).

Figure 2. A.O. Neville's project aimed to 'purify' white Australians through controlled 'breeding out' of Aboriginal 'blood.' [14]

The idea of 'authenticity' has been consistently argued over, since it never originated from Indigenous people's own politics or values. This way, colonists are empowered with the right to name Aboriginality and what makes it real or fake, positive or negative, authentic or illegitimate. This tactic has been the cause for over two centuries of social and structural racism and disadvantage that is still current in our political discourses through, for example, the representations of Indigenous people in our colonised society today.

Since first contact, Indigenous people have been stereotyped and their identity questioned by non-Indigenous people.[15] The use of some terms originating from

[13] Coram, Stella. (2007), "Race Formations (Evolutionary Hegemony) and the `Aping' of the Australian Indigenous Athlete," *International Review for the Sociology of Spor*t 42, no. 4: 391–409.
[14] Illustration from Neville, A.O. *Australia's Coloured Minority: It's Place in the Community, Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1947.*
[15] Tainaiake, A and Corntassel, J. (2005) 'Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism', *Journal of Government and Opposition*, Vol. 40, Issue. 4, p. 597

discourses of eugenics [16] in Australia, remain today as colloquial language when many non-Indigenous and Indigenous people speak about Aboriginality (*see Figure 2*). The term *'half-caste'* for example comes from early colonists, and refers to the ethnicity or mixed descent of an individual that had a *'full-blood'* Indigenous parent and a white or non-Indigenous parent. This kind of terminology denotes Aboriginality as being simply a 'biological' inferiority, difference or disadvantage. It has subsequently lead to the marginalisation of many groups over the course of post-colonialism. As evident in *Figure 2*, conceptualisations of Indigeneity weighed in the balance of eugenic representation; a discourse belonging to western perceptions and knowledge. It is these attitudes and terminology that hindered my grasp of my personal identity and how I fit into this society. During my exploration into these ideas, especially western perspectives that essentially aimed to shape the identity of my ancestors and I, I demonstrated reflexivity towards the content and commentators on the same topics. I did this by examining any personal conceptual remorse and remaining objective in writing my PIP.

If identity means the way in which people see themselves, then why are Indigenous people's identities subject to criteria based on genetic traits, which are used to underpin constructions of 'authenticity'? This notion of identity is detrimental in the fact that it is built on skin colour, and the foreign idea that we can be 'part' Indigenous or 'full' Indigenous. This idea of identity has been thrust onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and in many cases been internalised as a '*proper*' way of identifying. [17] Whenever the topic of being part Aboriginal came up in discussion with the participants of my primary research, the individuals collectively offered much frustration:

[16] Wyndham, D. (2003). Eugenics in Australia: Striving for national fitness.
[17] Nakata, N. M. (2013). Identity Politics: Who Can Count as Indigenous?. *The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity*.

> "*It wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault our children were taken away, or that my great grandmother was raped by a white man. It's not my fault my skin is like this, so why am I made to feel shame and feel like I am something other than myself".* [18]

As a consequence, considerable debate still exists regarding definitions and ideas of what it is to be Aboriginal, what criteria Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to meet to prove their identity, and who can count as Indigenous/Aboriginal/Black.

Patrick Dodson emphasises the importance of challenging historical and current representations while forging new understandings. He suggests that:

> "*We must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous peoples*". [19]

We have far to go to improve our collective comprehension of what it means to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Many non-Indigenous people might say: Indigenous identity is something that can be 'claimed', and that fair-skinned Aboriginal people have no right to this claim. [20] I have found that many Indigenous people would consider this outrageous. The first step is deconstruction. When we critically think and label where these passive stereotypes, ideas and constructions are coming from, then we can move towards goals like reconciliation, and address the contemporary issues facing Indigenous and essentially non-Indigenous Australia.

[18] Focus group
[19] Dodson, Mick. "The End in the Beginning – Re(de)fining Aboriginality." Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994 p.6.
[20] Commentary of Andrew Bolt -2009

Chapter Two:
How does success in this era coincide with our Indigeneity? Are we caught in-between Two Worlds?

"Too black to be white,
Too white to be black.
Caught in the middle
Belonging no where" [21]

Modern misconceptions and stereotypes of Indigeneity also serve to inform notions of 'authenticity', which are rooted, it has been argued, in the fact that white Australia perceives pre-colonial Australian people and society as primitive and uncivilised. [22] Racist notions of inferiority and primitivism still persist in the current day in different contexts, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. [23] I have come to understand the concept 'Aboriginal' as a term employed as a generic idea originated from western European politics and values. [24] Wiradjuri author and intellectual Anita Heiss, in talking about colonial and objectifying representations of Aboriginality, asserts that "*finally, it must be understood that whitefellas have largely constructed 'Aboriginal Identity' in a way that makes it easily understood to themselves.*" [25]In this chapter I will be focusing on how modern constructs of Aboriginality affect Indigenous peoples' experience and perceptions of success in today's post-colonial society. In addition to sharing the

[21] *McGee-Sippel. 'Belonging Where?'* Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3), p.1.
[22] Russell, L. (2001). *Savage imaginings: Historical and contemporary constructions of Australian Aboriginalities*. Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd
[23] Lani Guinier. (2009), 'Race and Reality in a Front-Porch Encounter', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
[24] Loomba, A. (2015). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.
[25] Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3), 1.

perspectives of my research participants, I will look at sport and the arts as two accepted, yet often detrimental, ways Aboriginality is considered authentic. [26]

In discussing modern impacts of these historical representations I will draw on primary and secondary research and discuss the potential "Two World" abstract (a term coined by my personal synthesis) that plays into the current condition of contemporary Indigenous Australia. In acquiring personal reflection as a methodology I was enabled to consider the current research and literature I was reading and felt that I could synthesise the ideas into a relevant term for my PIP – "Two World" abstract.

Personally, through primary and high school I was labelled as a 'role model' or a 'leader', on the simple merit that I was an above average 'student'. Upon reflection, these attitudes may very well have been alluding to the fact that I was exceeding expectations as being Indigenous and a student. My academic ability meant I didn't fit the stereotype. I was moving out of the box, and I was no longer just Aboriginal but an 'anomaly' of an Indigenous representation. What may have been perpetuated initially with supportive and sincere intent, comments and expectations like these can lead to a damaging impact on a group and just as much an individual, as I found out in my early stages of high school. Suddenly, it was no longer a matter of academic ability - I was smart because I was only '*half*' or '*a quarter*' black - *"It's because you're only half, you're mum is white"* [27] - (I had some 'white' in me so that was my advantage). But then when it was my sporting ability, that was because I was '*black*' – "*yeah it's just because you're black, that's all"* [28] (the somewhat of black in me was now giving me the advantage). These remarks pushed my attitude away from academia and school altogether, for I had to hold onto my Aboriginality (or my 'quarter' of it).

My Aboriginality was apparently outside of school; it was only out on the football fields, the basketball courts and in art class. My identity wasn't something that belonged to me,

[26] Evans, J. R., Wilson, R., Dalton, B., & Georgakis, S. (2015). Indigenous Participation in Australian Sport: The Perils of the 'Panacea' Proposition. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *7*(1), 53-77. *(p.98)*
[27] personal communication upon personal reflection
[28] personal communication upon personal reflection

it was something that was outside of me and that I had to go and act under. Throughout my interviews with Indigenous students at my school, they felt tension between what people thought of them and how they thought about themselves:

> *"Most people think and see Aboriginal people and see you as like the worst person. Like you don't do anything, you don't try hard, you're not smart, as most people think of us so".*
> *"My family has higher expectations of me, because they know me better".* [29]

The effects of the differing experiences of Indigenous people in this society take many shapes and forms for many individuals. Everyone has their own personal identity - I had to constantly be mindful of this during my research and approach to the topic. I exercised social and cultural literacy by not allowing my personal experience with my own Aboriginality and attitudes hinder or cause any judgement towards others' experiences and opinions that were expressed in my research. The nature of the 'Two World' abstract is a personal and common experience that may be faced by many Indigenous people today. [30] It impacts an individual's integrity and sense of empowerment towards their self-definition. And can greatly affect our micro and macro worlds.

> *"One of the complexities of contemporary Aboriginality is the mental state of what many call 'straddling two worlds' - that of white and Black world in Australia. For some this 'straddling' is not an issue, but for others it raises the issue of belonging"* [31]

Heiss asserts the idea of the 'Two Worlds' as a 'mental state', and that it influences our micro and macro conceptualizations of 'belonging'.[32] But the issue may stretch even farther than that. Through my research and personal reflection, this manifestation of internal and social colonisation weaves its way through our institutions and our personal

[29] Interviewee,year 10 Indigenous student.
[30] Focus Group methodology
[31] Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3)
[32] Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3)

and community relationships. It can cause detrimental impacts such as deindividuation, and the marginalisation of Australian Indigenous peoples. The ultimate negative expression of internal and social colonisation is lateral violence, which I will revisit briefly in Chapter 3. When we move out of the box, or the 'construction' of Indigeneity, worlds begin to collide, but only because those boxes and stereotypes continue to be accepted as appropriate, by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

The first step in this PIP was deconstruction, then I asked: can the Indigenous persona and the Indigenous community truly achieve success?

"As a country we've gotta embrace Aboriginal success. Money and materialism shouldn't be seen as anathema to Aboriginal Identity. Because it's not anathema to the rest of Australia, so why should it be anathema to Indigenous people? And there's still a lot of resistance to the idea of Aboriginal success. On the one hand we say we want it, but on the other hand there's a kind of strong cultural and social resistance to it". [33]

This quote speaks to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. What is stated bluntly as 'money and materialism' is in fact the basis of socialisation and success in a western context. Among my research I studied in particular, conceptualizations of success from cross-cultural points of view. I then found that 'success' in our era is often framed superficially; "financial and educational connotations are definitely tied to the word"[34].

I came across many ideological, social and economical perspectives on the idea of 'success'. I exercised social and cultural literacy by constantly reflecting on suppressing my personal interpretation and attitudes towards the idea of success, when implementing these perceptions in my research.

Taking into account my 'Two worlds' theory and appreciating that Indigenous people culturally have a different approach to the word success, I explored the question: "What is success to you? What does it look like?" among my focus group and interview

[33] Fernando, Todd James (2014), *Beyond Primitivism: The Era of Indigenous Excellence*

[34] Focus group participant

participants. They seemed to acknowledge the western connotations and discourses around 'being successful' and then moved onto their own deeper personal response to the word success - or state of being successful. For example:

> *"(western culture) – is about making ourselves into a success, reaching a final point. In our culture we are successful, and will continue to be, there is no final end point. We are a continuous never ending process of success".* [35]

This theme of colonisation has had a large impact on Indigenous peoples at the micro and macro interface. There can be great tension towards Indigenous people 'succeeding'. This is brought on and perpetuated by Indigenous and Non-indigenous audiences particularly in the areas of sport and arts.

Sport and the performing platforms exist in both colonial cultures and Indigenous cultures, but these platforms may be perceived to be the only parallel, or common ground between both cultures. This again re-enforces situations where for example, an Aboriginal student excelling at maths and literature, as opposed to football, begins to move away from his or hers identity (or what their identity has been shaped as). [36] Therefore it could be conceived that a product of our identity is being shaped by the media. Sport, singing and dancing, have been positioned as a platforms that allow Indigenous people to succeed and remain 'cultural', or 'authentic'. The cause for these boundaries exist in the simplicity that White Australia does not understand Indigenous culture and identity, and has decided to shape this to benefit its own position.
In the discourse of western civilisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are openly participating in the civilisation and or achieving great success in its mediums can be held heavily under scrutiny. Western oppression can then be seen to follow socialisation, in many cases, gender diverse Indigenous people can be targeted, for the homophobic/transphobic reasoning that being gay is not a part of their authentic culture – but a part of western popular culture. [37] These perceptions are held within

[35] Focus Group
[36] Comedic representation by Black Comedy, Alger-Bra, ABC 2015
[37] Clark, Maddee (2014), 'Against Authenticity' 215 Winter p. 4

colonisation, and within internalised aspects of colonisation in the indigenous community.

On my personal journey of identity, I have experienced many inner conflicts brought on by external factors that influenced my perception of identity. The 'Two Worlds' idea is transparent through almost every expression of a struggle with identity, as most Indigenous people can feel caught between two Australia's that they are equally obliged to participate in, two micro and macro interfaces. What was identified as '*code switching'* in my focus group and my interviews, is an expression of the movement between two worlds - among this person's family and friends, and described the micro management of these mediums, often turning out to be detrimental to the individual and reciprocally the group. On a macro level, the Two Worlds could be interpreted through macro perceptions, including stereotypes, success ideals, and politics of authenticity. As this research participant stated:

> "*A challenge for us it that we have these pressures to be an individual and be financially, professionally successful, while also as Aboriginal people we have an obligation to our communities and family, two roads and two equal obligations, which way do we go?*" [38]

When identifying this contemporary cultural issue, individuals almost have no choice but to 'choose a side', or settle in a constant sway between both, avoiding as much scrutiny as possible. This may not be interpreted as a navigation of our identity, but a navigation of colliding cultures. May it just be the nature of contemporary Indigeneity? - The relationship between pre-colonial and postcolonial constructions of Indigenous identity can differ greatly. In my opinion, both should not exist. However, contemporary activism against the foreign control over identity may be perceived as the following:

> *"People fighting against stereotypes and racism today, are not deconstructing, they are just trying to make the box bigger. We need to get rid of the box altogether. So we as Indigenous people, can start to re-present ourselves, as ourselves, by ourselves".* [39]

[38] Focus group

One could interpret, that this way, the majority of Indigenous people are just further accomplishing their own oppression. By not considering re-presentation, but only re-negotiation. This may be because of the lack of discourse around Indigenous re-presentation by Indigenous people in the mainstream community. Self-definition must come first, then our society can move towards bridging the gaps between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and relationships.

[39] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta 2015

Chapter Three:
Indigenous people Re-presenting Indigenous Identity: Reconstruct and Re-define

An important aim is noted by Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata, he suggests that "*new and thoughtful ways of thinking and talking about Indigenous identity*' are needed to '*eventually transform the current community consensus*". [40]

The representations we see in the media, and 'truths' within discourse I have touched on in previous chapters, begin to influence our own behaviours and ideas. Essentially, the idea of authenticity is predicated on the legitimacy of evidence put forward regarding what is authentic and what is not. [41] That is why; in this chapter I will discuss Indigenous identity as a concept not yet completely understood, although it has been shaped to be so. And conclude with the answer to the question: can we navigate and maintain our Indigeneity within contemporary colonialism?

The ideas resonating from this PIP may be enough to inform our perspectives that non-Indigenous Australia has had more than enough to say about Indigenous identity.

A first-hand account of how non-Indigenous people seem to be perpetuating these inaccurate representations of Aboriginality came from one of my interviewees. They spoke about their experiences of how authority and power shape these representations on the micro and macro level. For example, my interviewee spoke of how teachers and commentators are telling the next generation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, what it means to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. As one student from an interview noted:

[40] Nakata, Martin.(2013), *"Identity Politics: Who Can Count as Indigenous?" In The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity,* edited by Michelle Harris, Bronwyn Carlson, and Martin Nakata, 125–46. Sydney: UTS ePublishing, p.143
[41] Heiss, A. (2014). Am I Black Enough for You?. *B/HEIS*.

"I don't like it when teachers try and teach me about my own culture and my own people. They always get it wrong". [42]

Influences of power and authority today continue to perpetuate skewed Indigenous representation, and constructing identity and expectations of Indigenous people. This is occurring at institutions on the micro and macro level. This is also one of the causes of the internalisation of negative perceptions of Indigenous people and identity.

One of the biggest consequences of lateral violence and internalised racism due to current forces of colonialism is the assumptions of how much success we are entitled to, whilst remaining 'Authentic'. For example, terminology like "coconut" or "sell out" may be used towards Individuals in a community. [43]

"Anytime you get close to a little bit of success, it's shut down, it doesn't belong to you, it is because of your Aboriginality, that is how you got it" [44]

In my own personal experience, whenever I returned from an academic camp or a university that I was studying at, it was always the same re-occurring questions and challenges from my peers and teachers alike:

"Oh was it another Aboriginal thing? It's only because you're black. You just get more benefits than us because you're Aboriginal". [45]

In many cases, these assumptions and expectations flow into academia and discourses of success. In this way, they tend to reflect past constructions of Indigenous peoples and seem to override any contemporary understandings of Indigenous identity. It's important to note that these are colonial point of views. One participant in my focus group gave me the following response to such assumptions:

[42] Interview Indigenous year 10 student

[44] Focus group

[45] Micro communication upon personal reflection

"The problem with these assumptions is that it is grounded within deficit models. Yes… of course it is because I'm Aboriginal, it is because of everything that has given me: fuckin' love and power and knowledge and all that stuff that made me strong, it IS because I am Aboriginal. But then it's also despite my Aboriginality, my great grandfather wasn't allowed to go to school, my grandmother wasn't allowed to go to high school, and my mother didn't give a fuck about school - she was too busy trying to raise her children. Despite the structural, institutional and societal racism and disadvantages that come with being Aboriginal and a part of a minority, I AM still where I am. ***I am here because I'm Aboriginal but then also despite the fact the I am Aboriginal****"* [46]

When I asked another question - "What is Aboriginality to you?" the participants in my focus group gave answers that were quite personal, and complex. This made me realise that there is no single all-encompassing 'white' or 'black' identity, everyone's story and identity are as unique and different as the other - as I could recognize my own to be as well.

One participant explained, "*My brothers and my sisters ARE my Aboriginality, so is my father and my mother (****who is non-indigenous****)".*[47]

After hearing this I realised the depth and breadth of Indigenous identity and what it means to be Aboriginal, our identity isn't up to just us, it is around and outside of us, it may be invested in our relationships and our community. This was a massive turning point for me on the journey of writing my PIP. In coming to terms with this knowledge, it allowed me to look at my own micro world and appreciate the forces that influence my identity day by day, whether they had anything to do with what was 'authentic' or 'Aboriginal'. This had a large impact on my relationship with my mother, who is non-Indigenous, and was the most significant/valuable part of my journey and process of manifesting this PIP.

[46] *Luke Patterson, focus group participant, student of University of California Berkeley, Aboriginal poet, 2015*
[47] Indigenous academic, and focus group participant. 2015

"*I believe that such a search and any conclusions reached must come from us, ourselves. We must determine our own identity within the parameters established by us".*

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Having 'Indigenousness' or 'Indigeneity' means by definition, being a descendant of a group of people that pre-existed the event of colonisation. [49] Aboriginality as a construct, doesn't exist without colonisation and its comprehensions. Before colonisation we just were, we were just people, there were no Aborigines. [50] It - Aboriginal identity - lives not only in perceptions, but very much in the current post-colonised model society. However, it should not be defined or authenticated by the basis of pre-colonial/traditional conceptualisation either.

"In any university texts of Aboriginal history/culture/identity, not one mentions colonisation".

51

Ironically, our identity and our communities are openly subject to colonised point of views, but then lacks true discourse in colonialism. [52] The absence of inclusion of colonisation in the story of Aboriginal Australia is neglecting a very important medium that reflects contemporary identity, its complexities and the continuity and change of the Indigeneity and its aspects.

Through oral discussion during the process of my PIP research, I came across the following analogy that I credit to a teacher of mine:

"A boat sits on the water out at sea, responding to the waves, currents and wind patterns around it. It is completely exposed and vulnerable, it is in a constant responsive relationship with its surroundings".

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[48] Nyoongah, M. (1992), 'Self-determining our Aboriginality: A Response to "Discourses on Aboriginality and the Politics of Identity in Urban Australia', *Oceania,* Vol. 63, Issue 2, p. 156
[49] Taken from the definition of 'Indigenous' accepted by the United Nations Working Group for Indigenous Peoples 1972.
[50] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta (personal communication)
[51] Focus group participant
[52] Loomba, A. (2015). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.
[53] Teacher/Tutor, personal communication.

The boat is identity and nature is society and culture. From this we could interpret identity as locked in a constant and complex relationship with its surroundings its our societal and cultural context. And it may most importantly conduct the relationships with the individual and their micro and macro worlds. This is the same for everyone, not just Indigenous people. The following comments were findings from my primary research:

"We are contemporary, we always have been contemporary".

"For many millennia, we have been travelling thousands of kilometres, in exchange with each other for languages, stories, knowledge, culture. Remaining contemporary - is a part of our law, it is a part of who our people are…" [54]

These perspectives were enough to convince my personal conceptualisation of Indigenous identity. The fact that we may not be 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal' after all, considering people should not be subject to terminology layered with constructions that construes and shapes our understanding of the matter. There is not (and there never was) a singular shape of identity that belonged to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are all diverse peoples, and we are forever growing and learning new knowledge processes. This way, our Aboriginalities and who we are as people can be perceived as eternal. We exist 10 000 years ago, and 10 000 years into the future, we always have and always will gather new understandings and have new ways of identifying.

Today, in reflection, such progress into the reconstruction or re-presentation of identity continues to only aim at expanding the pre-existing parameters that make up the box of Indigeneity. When the box is what must be diminished altogether. [55]

[54] Focus group
[55] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta, Personal Communication, 2015

As Yunkaporta asserts, *"Culture is not what your hands touch, it's what moves your hands"*[56]. I found this understanding to be fluent in most academic expressions of Aboriginality. For example, "*I always say that I'm Aboriginal first…Then I'm a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, woman, writer*"[57]. From this, we can build new understandings of Aboriginality, as not anything we can choose or 'claim', it is just there, it is who we are. It could be identified as the forefront of our perceptions and interpretations. And accounts for everything that we think and feel.

The navigation of Indigeneity in contemporary colonialism is unachievable if it is predicated by colonisation. However, in reflection to my research, most of the people that exchanged conversations and knowledge with me were successful in their navigation of their Indigeneity wherever they were. The pressures of contemporary colonialism have a lesser influence on older generations and their grasp of their own identity. As a young Indigenous man, I am positioned at the cusp of my socialisation; this is where most issues around Indigenous identity can impact an individual. That is why I offer this PIP to others that are experiencing the same themes I have on my journey.

[56] Dr. Tyson Yunkaporta, personal communication, 2015

[57] Jackie Huggins. "*Experience and Identity Writing History"* 'Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3),

Conclusion:

During this journey I learnt that abstract or not-easily-definable qualities come with identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in this society. I learnt that the complexities of Aboriginality is different for everyone, and that essentially it is up to us to conceive of what our personal identity means to us - that is what matters most. Gaining control over inner prejudices and internalised perceptions are key to self-definition and self-determination. My research proved my central hypothesis, which was to consider possible new understandings of Aboriginality in today's world as created by Aboriginal people ourselves, which challenge those historical representations.

My research tools and methodologies were effective and appropriate in facilitating this process as a personal journey. In hindsight the majority of my research may have been over excessively based in the micro worlds of individuals. This was very much a personal journey. Though my ideas may have developed differently if I expanded more among the macro platform of these issues.

If I were to revisit this topic and these ideas again, I would consider my research processes to move furthermore outside of myself and my personal society and culture. This being said, my methodology and process would have to be altered. Personal reflection would no longer be a valid methodology. The sophisticated, culturally favourable "yarning" method (or focus group) might not be as applicable or appropriate with different participants. Although I would not hesitate in implementing this methodology in orientation around any sort of social and cultural discussion or topic. It was a very effective way of gathering data and building my topic. I would most likely maintain the open structured interview, because of the advantage it gave as a more comfortable space and process to build stronger responses, and essentially continue to build my ideas.

My research and findings have enhanced my social literacy to an extraordinary extent. I have taken away a sophisticated understanding of myself, and my micro and macro

worlds. This journey turned out to be more than just writing a PIP, I was able to experience, learn and build myself from it.

Resource List:

Primary Research

Interviews

Date: *7/3/2015*
Name: Anonymous
Role: Indigenous student, year 10.
Comments: This individual was quite reserved and took time to process the questions and return with an answer, which seemed to appear like their answers were more authentic this way.

Date: *7/3/2015*
Name: Anonymous
Role: Indigenous student, year 10.
Comments: The individual I interviewed was a personal friend, at times they might have been giving me the answers they thought I wanted. But overall they gave what seemed genuine responses to my broad range of questions.

Focus group

Date: 12/4/2015
Roles: 3 Indigenous students(including myself), all year 12. And 6 Indigenous Academics.
Comments: Although participants were all close friends and mentors, their approach was very formal and responses were genuine, the space seeming informal at the same time. It was a very comfortable and deep discussion. This discussion built a strong foundation for my ideas to further develop into the PIP that is presented here. I felt greatly advantaged in this aspect.

Secondary Research:

Journal Articles

Augoustinos, Martha, Keith Tuffin, and Mark Rapley. (1999), “Genocide or a Failure to Gel? Racism, History and Nationalism in Australian Talk.” *Discourse & Society* 10, no. 3: 351–78

This article provided me with an excellent insight into macro perceptions and around the issues of Indigenous identity. However, the language was challenging for it was aimed at an academic audience.

Clark, Maddee (2014), ‘Against Authenticity’ 215 Winter

The discussion in this article enhanced my ideas around illegitimacy of the construction of authenticity. It specifically accompanied the ideas expressed in chapter two around the ‘Two World’ abstract.

Coram, Stella. (2007), “Race Formations (Evolutionary Hegemony) and the `Aping’ of the Australian Indigenous Athlete,” *International Review for the Sociology of Spor*t 42, no. 4: 391–409.

This article further re-enforced the adjectives around authenticity, and media portrayals of Indigenous success. However, some of the language appears overly subjective. But the ideas remained valid to my topic.

Evans, J. R., Wilson, R., Dalton, B., & Georgakis, S. (2015). Indigenous Participation in Australian Sport: The Perils of the ‘Panacea’ Proposition. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *7*(1), 53-77. *(p.98)*

Again an article that helped develop some of the conclusions in my PIP. Only challenge was the academically based language.

Fernando, Todd James (2014), *Beyond Primitivism: The Era of Indigenous Excellence*
I had a personal connection to this thesis, which may have influenced any bias towards my interpretation of its content as completely legitimate. However it is a legitimate academic article and the ideas strongly accompanied and helped develop my own.

Grieves, V. (2014), 'Culture, not colour, is the heart of Aboriginal identity', *The Conversation*
This article gave me a huge advantage. It completely backed up my ideas against authenticity and offered new understandings of identity, which only strengthened my project and my own understandings.

'Heiss, A. (2014). BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL*, *14*(3),

This academic article assisted the development of my ideas greatly. The writer is in a similar position as myself and refers to my ideas much in her work. I could apply content and knowledge I gathered from this article and this Indigenous writer all through my PIP and essentially my perceptions.

Lani Guinier. (2009), 'Race and Reality in a Front-Porch Encounter', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

This gave me an advantage of having an alternate point of view of racial identification, and legitimately disputed the ideas of race and essentially Aboriginality. However it was off topic of Aboriginality, it still provided strength to my arguments and ideas.

Nyoongah, M. (1992), 'Self-determining our Aboriginality: A Response to "Discourses on Aboriginality and the Politics of Identity in Urban Australia', *Oceania,* Vol. 63, Issue 2, p. 156

An Aboriginal academic speaking about Aboriginal people re-determining Aboriginality was useful in strengthening my thesis, specifically chapter three, where his central messages was that identity discourses must be from Indigenous people. An amount of bias may have influenced the validity of their statements.

Tainaiake, A and Corntassel, J. (2005) 'Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism', *Journal of Government and Opposition*, Vol. 40, Issue. 4, p597
The content in this article was very relevant to my ideas and notions of colonisation being contemporary. Only challenge was the academically targeted audience.

Books

Dodson, Mick. (1994), "*The End in the Beginning – Re(de)fining Aboriginality."* Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, p.6
In reading this, I gained an advantage of knowing that re-definition exists. Which strengthened my argument towards chapter 3.

Heiss, A. (2014). *Am I Black Enough for You?. B/HEIS*.
This book accompanied my arguments of authenticity strongly. The ideas this writer expressed paralleled my own greatly. I may have had a bias towards this writer and her content considering I could see the essence of my own personal story in her work.

Lindqvist, S. (2007). *Terra Nullius: a journey through no one's land.* Granta.
Not on the topic of identity, the advantage this gave me was the re-affirmation of Indigenous people as not human, which essentially offers a blank slate for construction of identity.

Loomba, A. (2015). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.
Colonialism and post-colonialism theory gave me further knowledge on the role of colonisation in Indigenous identity and discourses. It was a little off my central topic, but provided me with confidence in my ideas.

Montagu, A. (2013). *Coming into Being Among the Australian Aborigines: The Procreative Beliefs of the Australian Aborigines*. Routledge.
This offered me a greater insight into politics of Indigenous people and how constructions misinterpret who we are as people.
Nakata, Martin.(2013), *"Identity Politics: Who Can Count as Indigenous?" In The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity,* edited by Michelle Harris, Bronwyn Carlson, and Martin Nakata, 125–46. Sydney: UTS ePublishing, p.143
This academic work offered a powerful insight into Identity and how it has been constructed and authenticated. It was a long document and the targeted audience were academic so the language was challenging at times.

Russell, L. (2001). *Savage imaginings: Historical and contemporary constructions of Australian Aboriginalities*. Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd
This document provided me with parallel arguments for my ideas and re-enforced my own understandings greatly. Specifically contributed to chapters 1 and 2.

Wyndham, D. (2003). *Eugenics in Australia: Striving for national fitness*.
This article provided me with arguments of authenticity, in chapters 1 and 2. However it wasn't entirely based around contemporary identity, mostly historical representations of identification.

Multimedia
Figure 1. 'The Aboriginal … as … seen by early explorers'. Walkabout, January 1936. Photo Roy Dunstan.

This provided me with a strong visual representation of the construction of Aboriginal identity. And caressed my argument of the noble savage being the only authentic version of Indigeneity.

Figure 2. Illustration from Neville, A.O. Australia's Coloured Minority: It's Place in the Community, Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1947.

This interpretation of eugenics in Australia, gave me a strengthening visual representation of perceptions of Aboriginality and authenticity. It ultimately supported my PIP focus and why it was important for me to be writing this.