

Where our identity lies: Confirmation of Aboriginality— narratives of colonial and lateral violence

AlterNative
2024, Vol. 20(1) 3–11
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/11771801241235756
journals.sagepub.com/home/aln



Emma Walke, Marcelle Louise Townsend-Cross^{ID},
Jasper Garay^{ID}, Veronica Matthews, Michelle Dickson,
David Edwards and Candace Angelo^{ID}

Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are facing growing levels of scrutiny to prove their identity to access Indigenous-specific government services designed to mitigate the impacts of past government policies. Yet, it is those who have been most severely impacted by past government policies of forcible removal from Country and separation of families who often face challenges obtaining evidence to prove their Indigeneity. Employing narrative inquiry and collaborative autoethnography, this article draws on the personal reflections and experiences of the Aboriginal authors to explore the health and wellbeing impacts of deficit discourses, perceptions, and judgements about Indigeneity in Australia. Our personal stories are shared to enliven discussion on how proof of Indigeneity requirements may systemically compound ongoing intergenerational trauma. These stories and perspectives are shared to stimulate review of proof of Indigeneity policies and procedures by government agencies and education institutions across Australia.

Keywords

Aboriginal, colonisation, higher education, Indigeneity, proof of identity, Torres Strait Islander

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia are overrepresented in all the high-ranking burdens of disease and burdens of mortality compared to the rest of the Australian population. They are less likely to have access to educational opportunities, be appropriately housed, have access to a healthy diet, and are less likely to have good health literacy (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020). They are more likely to experience racialised violence and discrimination (Beyond Blue & TNS Australia, 2014) and are grossly overrepresented in the child protection, criminal and juvenile justice systems (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to die in police custody and in prisons at “unprecedented levels” (Anthony et al., 2021, p. 16). These disparities are a direct outcome of the ongoing impacts of colonisation and government policies, or in other words, the ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism.

The Australian Government has devoted considerable resources to address these disparities, to *Close the Gap* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face growing levels of scrutiny to prove their Indigeneity to access

Indigenous-specific services and programmes that range across many social determinants of our health and wellbeing. Increasingly, government and nongovernment service providers and the higher education sector require documented evidence as proof of Indigeneity, also known as Confirmation of Aboriginality (CoA). Obtaining this evidence can be very difficult for many individuals, given the context of colonial policies that dispossessed people from their Country, forcibly removed children, separated families and required our forebears to denounce their Indigeneity. Providing formal CoA evidence to western institutions perpetuates the historical colonial violence of administrative manipulation and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities.

Current policies and processes in government agencies and the higher education sector vary greatly, though all already require formal documentation, including statutory

Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author:

Marcelle Louise Townsend-Cross, Faculty of Medicine and Health,
The University of Sydney, 61 Uralba St, Lismore, NSW 2480, Australia.
Email: marcelle.townsend-cross@sydney.edu.au

declarations, as proof of Indigeneity. The higher education sector is experiencing changes in policies that require individuals to demonstrate proof of identity to designated Aboriginal organisations who may or may not know the applicant. The empowerment of individuals within those organisations to confirm or deny a person's Indigeneity affords the opportunity for the abuse of that power. When Aboriginal organisations and individuals are complicit in challenging or rejecting peoples' identities, they engage in a form of lateral violence that compounds the impacts of colonial violence. Lateral violence has been characterised as the "tendency of peoples from oppressed groups to direct their anger and frustrations toward members of their own culture" (Whyman et al., 2021, p. 1). Historical and continuing colonial oppression and control have been identified as *creating the conditions* for lateral violence to flourish (Gooda, 2011). The synthesis of colonial and lateral violence retraumatizes those already living with the impacts of ongoing transgenerational trauma and fortifies barriers to equitable access to services for the very people the services were designed to assist.

This article draws on our research into the personal experiences of the authors, all of whom identify as Aboriginal people. Our discussion is framed around a series of vignettes where we reflect on our experiences in relation to the impacts of proof of Indigeneity processes on our identities, on our sense of belonging and on our wellbeing. We begin the discussion by presenting the methodological foundations of our research, narrative enquiry and collaborative autoethnography. We then outline the socially constructed stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities that inform ideologies of authenticity in relation to Indigeneity, what we refer to in this article as "the real Aborigine" syndrome (Gorringer et al., 2011, p. 3). While the term Aborigine is considered offensive by the authors, it is used here to identify and expose the "erosive mind-set of deficit [that] pervades many Aboriginal communities . . . [including] perceptions of authenticity widely adopted from similar views held about Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous Australians" (Gorringer et al., 2011, p. 3).

We follow with an examination of the history of colonial governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities to illuminate the links between colonial constructs of our identities and ideologies of authenticity that inform current and pending proof of Indigeneity requirements. By highlighting these links between the past and the present, we aim to demonstrate that contemporary CoA requirements perpetuate colonial administrative control over our identities and, therefore, perpetuate the trauma of the past. We then define lateral violence and explore its compounding impacts when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and individuals challenge, deny and reject our identities based on colonial ideologies of authenticity. We conclude with a collective statement from our hearts where we plead for a more inclusive, compassionate and respectful process that recognises, supports and celebrates the great diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities in Australia today.

Methodological framework

Narrative inquiry

We employed narrative enquiry for our study, a phenomenological qualitative research methodology, to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity (Ford, 2020). In discussing identity as Aboriginal academics, researchers and humans embedded in cultural, social and institutional contexts (Clandinin et al., 2018), we share vignettes to position ourselves in the discussion as a practice of relational accountability (Barlo et al., 2020). Narrative enquiry enables us to share stories of our real-life experiences in an attempt to stimulate discussion and strive for resolutions. As described by Wang and Geale (2015), "[n]arrative enquiry amplifies voices that may have otherwise remained silent" (p. 195). This resonates, as often the people who are most impacted by policies are the ones whose voices aren't heard.

Collaborative autoethnography

Our research began as a series of collegial discussions around shared concerns about proposed and actual changes to CoA requirements in the university sector. We exchanged personal stories of our experiences when our identities had been challenged, attacked and rejected. We discussed the possibilities of conducting research and publishing our findings to speak back to the power of institutional policies that would dictate how we are able to identify as Aboriginal people. We identified our shared personal stories as an appropriate data set and committed to writing up our stories as vignettes. Taking a collaborative autoethnographic approach enabled our research group to transform our "collective self-narratives, observations and experiences into rich qualitative data" (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 385).

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was productive for our research as it affirmed our unified stance against oppressive CoA policies and procedures and supported our goal to better understand and communicate our individual and collective experiences in the broader socio-political context (Anderson et al., 2019). As is appropriate when undertaking CAE research, we conducted multiple cyclic stages of collaborative discussion and reflection, reviewing of the literature, negotiating interpretation and analysis of the data and writing and review over a 9-month period (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Undertaking collaborative research to interrogate such a distressing issue was a very cathartic, supportive and empowering process for our research team. As Roy and Uekusa (2020) observe,

[h]aving a research team to simply talk about what we personally go through, which is already part of the CAE research process, can be an important stress-coping mechanism and a driver for personal empowerment. . . It can provide a supportive, trustworthy set of equally vulnerable colleagues with invaluable emotional support and a sense of empowerment when researching. (p. 388)

As a group of Aboriginal researchers writing and collaboratively analysing our autoethnographic accounts of

our experiences, our article is anchored by our Aboriginal standpoints. Sharing stories of our experiences, from our standpoints as Aboriginal people who are directly impacted by CoA requirements, has enabled us to collaborate in a decolonial process of “reclaim[ing] the narratives that structure our . . . lives” (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 6). This is the beginning of our reclamation of our own identities; these are our voices on paper.

With regard to terminology, we use the term “Aboriginal” when referring to ourselves and “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” when referring to diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. We use the terms “Indigeneity” and “Aboriginality” interchangeably to refer to Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander identity. We refer to Australians who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as “non-Indigenous” people.

Diversity in identity and the *real* Aborigine syndrome

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities remain diverse and complex in contemporary Australia. Yet socially constructed stereotypes of what we, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are meant to look like, where and how we live and the characteristics of what our lifestyles involve remain dominant in the imagination of the public. We continue to experience discrimination based on stereotypes of what is considered authentically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This discrimination occurs whether we live in a dark or light-skinned body or live on Country—that is on one’s ancestral homelands—or elsewhere. For example, those of us with darker skin remain challenged by the racist constructions imposed to justify invasion, dispossession and oppression from the earliest colonial times. Those of us with lighter skin can experience challenges to the authenticity of our identities and we are often expected to defend and justify who we are. We are often labelled “only part-Aboriginal”:

Being a young Koori [a First Nations language term for First Nations peoples from southern New South Wales and Victoria, Australia] who calls Sydney home, I know too well people will be more inclined to criticise or debate Aboriginality, rather than have interest in genuinely understanding the reality of my identity. Is it my job, as a Koori, to persist through denial and doubt, to consistently explain the intricacies of colonisation and racism to untrusting people? Is it my responsibility, when discussing Aboriginality, to share every fine detail of family, heritage, and cultural connection, regardless of the deep trauma with this history, to people who will still doubt? Is it my reality, that no matter how much education, cultural competency, reconciliation, and progress is made, that by having fair skin and living in an urban environment, I am considered not Aboriginal? (Author C)

Regardless of what externally imposed stereotype is designated to an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander person, a common experience is to have our identities questioned, challenged and even denied by others. This can occur in any context, but it is especially common in

employment and education sectors, as experienced directly by the authors. There is much misinformation and lack of understanding that creates the opportunity for others to feel they have a right to decide on our behalf, if we are, in fact, Aboriginal or not, particularly if we don’t fit the perceived aesthetic of a “real Aborigine” (Gorringer et al., 2011, p. 3):

I was invited to sit on a panel for one of a series of public talks. Me and two other First Nations colleagues were presenting on the topic of decolonisation and how we might, as a community, walk the talk of decolonisation. I was invited to do the Welcome to Country. I took pains to explain that I live off-Country and therefore not in the position to do a Welcome, though I would be happy to do an Acknowledgement of Country. I was asked for, and provided, a short bio that could be used by the MC [master of ceremonies] to introduce me to the audience.

On the night, the MC proceeded to introduce me as a “part-Aboriginal woman who will conduct a Welcome to Country.” Clearly, my bio did not describe me this way and the discussion about Welcome to Country verses an Acknowledgement of Country had fallen on deaf ears. My identity was publicly diminished and my cultural integrity was called into question by a person who had never met me before—a non-Indigenous person who felt authorised to judge the authenticity of my Aboriginality based on their stereotyped perception of who a real Aboriginal person is. I was humiliated and left feeling vulnerable at the prospect of needing to publicly defend and explain myself on-the-spot. (Author B)

Challenges to and denials of our identities can severely impact, resulting in harm on individual, family and community social and emotional wellbeing (Clark et al., 2016). The ideology of the *real Aborigine* informs the justification for government agencies, educational institutions and other systems to increasingly require documented evidence to demonstrate proof of Indigeneity. Many systems will deny access to identified Indigenous-specific health, education, welfare and employment services and opportunities without approved documentation. These services and opportunities are designed to counteract the damaging intergenerational impacts of historical government policies. However, not every Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person can prove their identity in this way *precisely because* of the impacts of historical policies.

The colonial politics of Indigeneity: a history

Governance and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities is a defining feature of the ongoing colonial process in Australia. Bringing with them notions of scientific racism, colonial powers homogenised diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities into the construct of an inferior race—the Aboriginal race. The history of eugenics in Australia documents this ongoing colonial process (Anderson, 2002). At least 67 different definitions of Indigeneity have been formally constructed, prescribed and enforced through legislation since 1788 (McCorquodale, 1997), with shifting racialised constructs of identity informing state and federal policies related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

During the White Australia Policy era in Australia that ended with the establishment of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975 (Bourke, 1994), access to basic human rights and civil liberties was determined by race (de Plevitz & Croft, 2003). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this largely equated to being denied our human rights and civil liberties under protectionist legislations that varied from state to state. For many years, Australia manipulated constructs of our identities to justify the dispossession, segregation, humiliation, incarceration and institutionalisation of our people (Clark et al., 2016). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to map the myriad of ways that successive Australian governments—state, territory and federal—have deployed racist constructs of our identities as justification to oppress us. However, it is worth citing examples of how governments engaged identity definitions to support the practice of forcibly removing children from their families and to issue Exemption Certificates.

The stolen generations

An unfathomable number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been forcibly removed from their families. In early colonial times, children were stolen for their anthropological value, for their labour and for sexual exploitation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). Early colonial protectionist legislation and policy included provision for the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2022). The practice became acute and entrenched with the introduction of assimilation policies by Commonwealth and all state governments in the 1950s (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2022). Assimilation ideologies determined that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies, minds, and spirits would be absorbed through interbreeding with non-Indigenous Australians (Moran, 2005).

Children and young people's skin colour and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander blood quantum were used as justification for removal. Lighter-skinned children were deemed "less Aboriginal" and considered more likely to be successfully assimilated into White society through *retraining* programmes in institutions such as Kinchela Boys Home and Cootamundra Girls Home in New South Wales (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). Blood quantum percentiles such as half caste, quarter caste and octoroon were used as yardsticks for removal and retraining (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). In the 1970s, this type of caste language was still rife and experienced by some of the authors contributing to this discussion. We suffered removals and separations, as did so many, based on the perceived percentile of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander blood:

Anyway, I was having a conversation with an old friend, they had been doing some contract work in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. They are not Aboriginal. While talking, they said "my friend who is quarter caste." . . . My first response was, "oh no, I am so sad for them. We do not do that;

we either are or are not Aboriginal—I want to give them a hug." These comments were automatic—I feel so passionate about this subject. Unfortunately, my friend felt I was attacking and patronising them, and rather than listen about Aboriginal identity and blood percentile terms, got incredibly angry with me. We didn't talk for some time. (Author A)

Exemption certificates

In the early to mid-20th century, Exemption Certificates were offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were considered *clean, clad, and courteous* and worthy to live among other Australians (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022a). Exemption Certificates exempted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the restraints of protection policies that, in essence, denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access to their human rights and civil liberties. Exemption promised freedom of movement and employment, the right to open a bank account and to own land, access to health, education and housing services and entitlement to social service benefits. Exemption, however, came with the heavy price of identity abandonment, cultural loss and family separation (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022a).

In practice, conditions of exemption meant that certificate holders would have to denounce their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity, and cease to associate with other non-exempt people, including their own families. They were not permitted to speak their heritage languages or practice their cultural traditions. However, exemption did not necessarily translate to equitable treatment by non-Indigenous Australians of the time. In many places segregated areas were designated for Black Australians to live, do their work and access services (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022a). There are many stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who made the choice of Exemption for a better life, who chose something that promised better opportunities and outcomes for their families. However, for many, their experiences of extreme racism were worse than the option of remaining on an Aboriginal mission or reserve under protection legislation (Ellinghaus, 2022).

Colonial policies and practices have been, at their core, genocidal practices of identity manipulation (Wolfe, 2006). As the late Aboriginal author and activist Kevin Gilbert (1973) observed, since the initial colonisation of Australia there have been continual and ongoing attempts by governments to remove any sense of group identity shared by Aboriginal people. The divide and conquer mentality infiltrated policies and upheld harmful stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The contemporary politics of Indigeneity: current realities

Today, many organisations, government and community controlled alike, require individuals to satisfy three criteria to be confirmed and recognised as an Aboriginal and or

Torres Strait Islander person: you must (1) be of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander descent, (2) identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and (3) be accepted as such by a community that you or your family currently live or formerly lived (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022b). In many cases, people who are unable to meet the criteria for obtaining CoA documentation are people whose families have been impacted by the practice of forced child removals or those whose ancestors made the impossibly difficult decision to obtain an Exemption Certificate so that their children might be fed, housed and perhaps have an opportunity for a better life. It is ironic that we are currently grappling with determining who *is* Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander to enable access to health, education and welfare services when Exemption required Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to hold documentation to prove that they were *not* Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to enable access to these services (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022a):

I grew up off Country, brought to my birth location by grandparents needing to find work post-war to provide for their children. My mother was only young during this transition—she too grew up off Country and raised a family of her own. A common feature of our childhood was the summer holiday drive back home to Country and family. My identity lies in those times of reconnection, getting to know special places, understanding who was connected to who and listening to old stories of the way things used to be. I come from this place . . . this Mob [a vernacular term identifying a group of Aboriginal people in Australia associated by family, community, Country and culture] . . . it's me. Having to explain this to others is hard, particularly when you do not fit a stereotypical look. I have gladly let go many acquaintances who have openly criticised Aboriginal people . . . “oh, but you don't look Aboriginal” . . . but have shed many a tear when I have heard that “I'm not black enough” from other black fullas in a variety of contexts—applying for identified positions, trying to vote in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) elections and enrolling for conference workshops. It chips away at your confidence and self-belief. A move to mandated identity checks within institutions will be extremely damaging, not only to those seeking to enter, but to the institution itself. If that were me, having to front-up to an officious window to present my family and community experience for rubber stamping by someone I had never met before, I would scrunch up my application form and walk out just like that ATSIC election day decades ago. (Author D)

An array of evidence exists documenting the ways that colonisation has disempowered our capacities to connect with our Mob—family, community, Country and culture (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997; Menzies, 2019; Read, 1998). Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may never have had opportunities to make connections to previous generations of family. Despite this, proposed changes to CoA requirements resort to the same colonising measures that were constructed to diminish the family, kinship and cultural connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the past two centuries:

Some years ago, I was at work and a staff member came into my office to tell me that she was talking to an Aboriginal man in the community space, and that this man had told her that I was not Aboriginal. He went on to tell her that I was adopted by my black mother and shouldn't be in the position I held. When called on to “please explain,” I realised I had never met this man, and he had never seen me—he was passing on information from someone in the community that didn't like me. When I asked him why he thought he had the right to do this, he told me that it was his right, and that unless I carried my papers with me—not just identity papers, but also birth certificate to prove my mother in fact gave birth to me, then he would not accept me as Aboriginal. (Author A)

The oppressed become the oppressors

There are many ways to disempower a people. Take their land, govern their identities, make speaking their language illegal, remove their children and pit people against one another, among many other strategies. In the case of the latter, Paulo Freire's (2005) *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* refers to the ways that oppressed groups can strike out “horizontally” toward their fellows as an indirect attack on their oppressors to relieve the pain of oppression. Freire explained that when the oppressed observe the lifestyle and freedom enjoyed by the oppressor, they can take on the behaviours of the oppressor in an attempt to elevate themselves from under oppression. Freire's analysis is useful for understanding the impacts of CoA requirements on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities.

For the past few decades, CoA requirements in education, government and non-government institutions, have required individuals to provide one of two types of documented evidence. They must either obtain CoA documentation from an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander organisation, such as an Aboriginal Land Council in New South Wales, or, if that is not possible, provide a statutory declaration. Changes to CoA policies, both proposed and already implemented in some institutions, mean that statutory declarations will no longer be accepted as evidence of CoA, despite the fact that making false statutory declarations is a criminal offence (Australian Government, 2024). Individuals must now obtain documented CoA from an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander organisation. In this way, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people are pit against each other, especially when individuals in those organisations can, and do, become self-appointed *identity gatekeepers*. This reality creates the conditions for what Freire (2005) described as “horizontal violence” (p. 62), or what is now more recently referred to as lateral violence (Whyman et al., 2021).

Lateral violence has been described as involving “gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, social exclusion, family feuding, organisational conflict and physical violence” (Gooda, 2011, para. 14). Whyman et al. (2021) define lateral violence as “an expression of feelings of powerlessness, bought on through the oppression Aboriginal peoples experienced via settler-colonization” (p. 15). In their research that interviewed 17 Aboriginal men and

women in Naarm, the original name of Melbourne, Australia, they found CoA processes to be one of the major causes of lateral violence in the communities of their participants, referred to as *knowledge holders*:

Knowledge holders reported that the historical colonization, control and oppression of Aboriginal people created lateral violence within Aboriginal communities through dehumanizing practices, divide and conquer tactics to create division, and the creation of competition through inadequate resourcing of communities. Inadequate resourcing creates competition, reinforced through the use of Confirmation of Aboriginality Certificates, which knowledge holders recognized are government tools to create division among Aboriginal communities. (Whyman et al., 2021, pp. 13–14)

Similarly, in their research with Aboriginal peoples in Adelaide, Clark et al. (2016) found that proof of identity politics was a major contributing factor in the occurrence of lateral violence within the Aboriginal communities they studied. Colonial processes of oppression and control have been the root cause of lateral violence in Aboriginal communities since the very first day of the colony on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelands (Gooda, 2011; Whyman et al., 2021):

I didn't grow up in my community—I lived off-Country and still do. But I have found my Mob, my ancestral home, my culture and lore that has been generously shared with me. I humbly learn from my elders and knowledge holders, some of whom are younger than me in age. I also learn from my First Nations work colleagues and mentors who are an important part of my work community. It makes my workplace feel safe and nurturing and allows me to be most productive at work. And I am fortunate not to have experienced any lateral violence in my current workplace compared to some others. And one of the reasons I feel safe and held by my Indigenous colleagues is that they also feel grounded and solid in their identity. This has never been challenged by our peers or our organisation until recently when a new policy of identification surfaced. (Author F)

A new identity policy direction: perpetuating the real Aborigine syndrome

There are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose families have been resilient enough and fortunate enough to have been able to maintain their connections to Country, kin and culture despite oppressive government policy and practice. When those people are in positions of power and they choose to challenge, attack, deny, and or reject the identity of others, they use their culture as weaponry (Gould & Kuboyama, 2021). Weaponising culture involves interrogations, personal attacks, gaslighting and accusing individuals of lying about their identity to gain Indigenous-specific benefits or opportunities. Often, as experienced by the authors, the more notable your achievements, the more likely your identity is at risk of criticism and sabotage, much like the cultural phenomenon of the tall poppy syndrome (Gorringe et al., 2011):

My identity came under public attack the moment I moved into Aboriginal leadership roles. I have had phone messages left on my work message bank, proposing physical threatening visits from local community who believed I was not “enough” Aboriginal. The message told me they would come to my office and show me how they thought of me—as not enough. At the same time, I faced several similar attacks on my identity on public social media platforms. I told my employer that I felt threatened in my workplace and was advised to lodge a report at the local Police station. The whole thing was so traumatic. The next round of identity attack came to my workplace through an anonymous “tip off,” made to an Aboriginal organisation. It is just relentless, hurtful and sad. We are meant to lift each other up as high as we possibly can, not pull each other down. Lateral violence and identity attacks go against so much of who we are and how we live together as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. (Author E)

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within our own organisations use colonising systems and procedures to comply with requirements for proving our identity, they frequently deny and exclude people who have been most severely impacted by historical colonial injustices. In this way, they are supporting the ongoing oppression of their own peoples. As Tasmanian Aboriginal writer and activist Jim Everett once expressed, this is akin to “abandoning our wounded on the battlefield of colonialism” (Personal communications, April 8, 2008):

Recently at a social event, I was approached and asked for advice on how someone may connect with their Aboriginality, family, and culture. Despite following the correct protocols, ensuring that culturally safe pathways of respectful conversation were followed, and sharing personal experiences that have assisted me to continue my identity journey through positive approaches, I was quickly shut up and told “yes . . . but it is just not the same. I'm white, this was generations ago, we only just found out. It will never be the same as being black, living traditionally out in the bush, the real thing, you know? I would never be accepted as properly Aboriginal.

Walking home after this experience, I could only think about how these prejudiced challenges would have varied if it occurred in a different context. What if I did have darker skin and lived in a rural setting on Country? To this I did not dwell on too long. I knew that no matter what, the questions, criticism, and harm would be present. I could only sit and think, “will Aboriginality and identity be truly understood and respected in my lifetime?” Unfortunately, I struggled to arrive at an answer to this question.

As Uncle Jack Charles, one of the best-known Elders in Australia, recently said, “It's too difficult to be an Aboriginal. Have a look at what I'm struggling through right now, hitting 79 in September and I'm still being bedevilled and perplexed. I have been re-traumatised with this very questioning of who I am” (ABC Radio Melbourne, 2022, para. 15–16). Vale Uncle Jack. (Author C)

No one should have the power to deny people the right to self-identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. In several institutions, CoA policy changes are endowing some Aboriginal and Torres Strait individuals and organisations with the power to judge and determine an

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's CoA, without having any cultural connection or previous knowledge of the person or applicant. We are all for concentrating power and control within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations when it comes to provision of services to our communities. However, the scope of services should not extend to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations becoming the absolute arbiters of who is, and who is not, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

No one person or organisation holds the diverse knowledge of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Australia. The perverse consequence of requiring very specific types of CoA documentation is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fall back into a system of control. However, under these circumstances, control does not only sit with the white "Aboriginal protector," but it also sits with our own people who task themselves, or accept the task, of controlling and defining our identities. In this sense, we ultimately undermine our collective sovereignty through making judgements about who is, and who is not, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander:

I was recently on a working trip in Canada, working on a collaboration with other First Nations colleagues. I spoke about the impacts of the stolen and hidden generations and how I see my identity as a journey. One colleague said to me "so how much Aboriginal are you?" which is a question I have been asked many times in my life being fair skinned. I said "I'm ALL Aboriginal" another colleague in the room smiled and said "oh my god I love that! You are so right we are head-to-toe Aboriginal." Afterwards we had a long talk about identity, and they spoke about their own identity as an Anishinaabae [a First Nations language term for culturally related First Nations peoples from the Great Lakes region of Canada and the USA], First Nations Canadian. We spoke about the collective damage it does to our wellbeing, spirit and self, having to *constantly* justify ourselves not only to non-Indigenous people but also Mob. It hurts, we hurt each other all the time. (Author G)

To those who advocate for changes to CoA policies and procedures, we beg the following questions. What *problem* requires a change to CoA policies and procedures? We have been exposed to the largely anonymous sensationalist claims that there is the increasing problem of non-Indigenous people abusing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified services or taking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified scholarships or employment positions within our institutions (Anonymous, 2022; McCaskill & Johnstone, 2022). However, we have not been able to locate any documented evidence of this. If individuals are making false claims in statutory declarations, where is the evidence? Why abandon statutory declarations; why not persecute those who make false declarations through the legal system? Why fix a system when there is no evidence that it is broken?

Conclusion: a statement from our hearts

As strong proud Aboriginal people, we are incensed that we must prove our identities to our institutions, our

employers, our friends and worst of all, to our own people. Being deemed Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander or not through an outdated, racially motivated and culturally unsafe model must be challenged. If it is not challenged, future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have been impacted by colonial policies, and or who share mixed ancestry, will be denied their rights to connect with who they, their families and communities really are. If the recent moves to disqualify statutory declarations as evidence for CoA are not challenged, the new model will have the potential to denounce, deny and reject the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples just as powerfully—and perhaps even more powerfully—than the policies of the past. It is critical that the process of CoA documentation is viewed for what it is—a perpetuation of colonial administrative control over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. It has the potential to exclude generations of us and the scope to reduce our diverse identities to simple homogeneous categories. As diverse Peoples, we have never been homogeneous.

All of this comes down to one word, reclamation. Reclamation of our identities is never complete when there has been dislocation and dispossession experienced by so many of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sisters and Brothers. So, what can we do when the circle of knowledge around our identity can never be complete and yet our identity remains under constant scrutiny? We need to keep sharing our stories, we need to stand strong in our identities in solidarity with others who share our experiences. We need to come to terms with the fact that the ongoing impacts of colonial policies position the process of connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities as a continuum of reclamation, requiring an ongoing journey for our Mob, as individuals, families and communities.

When considering where you stand on this subject, it is important that you consider Australia's true history, that you think about what the possible effects might be on people and their culture, and then think about these issues without being influenced by the loudest, unsubstantiated, negative discourses. We need to develop multiple avenues for a more positive, inclusive and compassionate process of figuring out how we respect and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity in contemporary Australia. Collectively, we must do better in respecting, supporting and celebrating the great diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities. Let Us not recolonise Us.

Authors' note

Emma Walke is a Nyangbul Bundjalung woman from North Coast NSW, and Head of Indigenous Health, University of Sydney Medical School, and the Academic Lead of Aboriginal Health at the University Centre for Rural Health Lismore. She holds an MPhil by research, exploring use of aids for medication adherence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Emma has extensive experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement, predominantly in the health and community sectors.

Marcelle Louise Townsend-Cross (PhD) is a mixed heritage First Nations woman of Biripi, Worimi and Irish descent. She is an educator and researcher who currently holds the position of Senior Lecturer (Teaching and Research) at the University Centre for Rural Health for the University of Sydney. For over 20 years, she has worked in higher education developing and delivering Indigenous Australian Studies subjects and degree courses at various universities. Her Indigenous Australian heritage inspires her dual research focus on the history and contemporary manifestations and impacts of colonialism in Australia and on teaching and learning for social justice and social change.

Jasper Garay (Darkinjung, Ngarigo) (MPhil) is a Lecturer at The University of Sydney, working in the Sydney School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health. He is the Course Coordinator of the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion and provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing education across numerous degrees in the Faculty of Medicine and Health. His research focuses on improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing and mental health outcomes. Currently enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy (Medicine and Health), he is exploring how Virtual Reality can be utilised to enhance Social and Emotional Wellbeing and increase cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Veronica Matthews (PhD) is from the Quandamooka community, Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island). She is an Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow at the University Centre for Rural Health, University of Sydney and Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at James Cook University. Veronica currently leads the Centre for Research Excellence in Strengthening Systems for Indigenous Health Care Equity (CRE-STRIDE), an Indigenous-led, multi-jurisdictional network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous health service providers, policy-makers and researchers working to strengthen PHC systems through continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes.

Michelle Dickson (PhD) is a Darkinjung and Ngarigo Aboriginal Australian academic and Director of The Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, a research flagship centre in the Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney. She lives and works on Gadigal land (Sydney, New South Wales, Australia). Michelle, an Associate Professor, has worked in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing service delivery and health professions education for over 30 years. She was formerly Deputy Head of School of the Sydney School of Public Health and previous Academic Programme Director of the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion. In 2021, the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) awarded her for contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Public Health. She focuses on privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing in education, research, health and wellness. Her research partnerships include First Nations researchers and communities nationally and internationally.

David Edwards (GradDipIndigHealthProm) is a Worimi man who works from University of Sydney's University for Rural Health in Lismore NSW as the Director of the WellMob project, under the national e-Mental Health in Practice project. He has an environmental science and Indigenous health promotion background. David is a member of the Dept of Health's National Digital Mental Health Advisory Group along with other national mental health reference groups to advocate for culturally informed practice for First Nations Australians. He is also a voluntary trainer for the Core of Life pregnancy and child birth education programme for young people.

Candace Angelo (MPhil, GradDipIndigHealthProm, GradDipChildFamHealth, GradCertEduc, BNurs) is a Yuin woman with over 20 years of experience in health and education with a career spanning the breadths of Clinical Nursing, Education, governance and leadership in mainstream service delivery. Her passion lies in capacity building, empowering and nurturing a resilient health and wellbeing professional workforce. She holds an MPhil by research entitled "The lived experience of mentoring in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing Workforce in New South Wales, Australia."

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Marcelle Louise Townsend-Cross  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2972-7249>

Jasper Garay  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0328-0266>

Candace Angelo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5539-069X>

Glossary

- Anishinaabe a First Nations language term for culturally related First Nations peoples from the Great Lakes region of Canada and the USA
- Koori a First Nations language term for First Nations peoples from southern New South Wales and Victoria, Australia

References

- ABC Radio Melbourne. (2022, July 1). Uncle Jack Charles asked to prove Aboriginality to receive stolen generations reparations. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-01/uncle-jack-charles-asked-to-prove-aboriginality/101200382>
- Anderson, L., Gatwiri, K., & Townsend-Cross, M. (2019). Battling the "headwinds": The experiences of minoritised academics in the neoliberal Australian university. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33, 939–953. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1693068>
- Anderson, W. (2002). *The cultivation of whiteness: Science, health and racial destiny in Australia*. Melbourne University Press.
- Anonymous. (2022). *Dark Emu exposed: And the assault on Australian history*. <https://www.dark-emu-exposed.org/>
- Anthony, T., Jordan, K., Walsh, T., Markham, F., & Williams, M. (2021). *30 years on: Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody recommendations remain unimplemented* (Working paper no. 140/2021). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. <https://doi.org/10.25911/22AJ-0608>
- Australian Government. (2024). *About Commonwealth statutory declarations*. Attorney-General's Department. <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/statutory-declarations/about-commonwealth-statutory-declarations#what-happens-if-you-make-a-false-statement>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2022a). *Exemption: The high price of freedom*. AIATSIS Explore. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/exemption-high-price-freedom>
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2022b). *Proof of Aboriginality*. AIATSIS Explore. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/proof-aboriginality>
- Australian Law Reform Commission. (2022). *Changing policies towards Aboriginal people*. <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/recognition-of-aboriginal-customary-laws-alrc-report-31/3-aboriginal-societies-the-experience-of-contact/changing-policies-towards-aboriginal-people/>
- Barlo, S., Boyd, W., (Bill), E., Pelizzon, A., & Wilson, S. (2020). Yarning as protected space: Principles and protocols. *Alternative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16(2), 90–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120917480>
- Beyond Blue & TNS Australia. (2014). *Discrimination against Indigenous Australians: A snapshot of the views of non-Indigenous people aged 25–44*. Beyond Blue.
- Bourke, E. (1994). Australia's first peoples: Identity and population. In C. Bourke, E. Bourke, & B. Edwards (Eds.), *Aboriginal Australia* (pp. 38–55). University of Queensland Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., Caine, V., & Lessard, S. (2018). Looking backward and forward to the relational ethics of narrative inquiry. In J. Clandinin, V. Caine, S. Lessard, & J. Huber (Eds.), *Engaging in narrative inquiries with children and youth* (pp. 1–14). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545370-14>
- Clark, Y., Augoustinos, M., & Malin, M. (2016). Lateral violence within the Aboriginal community in Adelaide: It affects our identity and wellbeing. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing*, 1(1), 43–52.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). *National agreement on closing the gap*. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap>
- Cunneen, C., & Tauri, J. M. (2019). Indigenous peoples, criminology, and criminal justice. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 2, 359–381. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-011518-024630>
- de Plevitz, L., & Croft, L. (2003). Aboriginality under the microscope: The biological descent test in Australian law. *QUT Law Review*, 3(1), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.5204/qutlr.v3i1.121>
- Ellinghaus, K. (2022). *What was exemption*. Aboriginal Exemption. <https://aboriginalexemption.com.au/what.html>
- Ford, E. (2020). Tell me your story: Narrative inquiry in LIS research. *College and Research Libraries*, 81(2), 235–247. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.2.235>
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th Anniv.). Continuum.
- Gilbert, K. (1973). *Because a white man'll never do it*. Angus and Robertson.
- Gooda, M. (2011). *Lateral violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities* [Social justice report]. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
- Gorringe, S., Ross, J., & Fforde, C. (2011). “Will the real Aborigine please stand up”: Strategies for breaking the stereotypes and changing the conversation. *AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper*, 28(28), 1–18.
- Gould, A., & Kuboyama, K. (2021). Weaponizing traditions: Threads of resistance and oppression. *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 43(2), 172–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2020.1829256>
- McCaskill, N. (Producer), & Johnstone, H. (Associate Producer). (2022). Indigenous identity (Season 2022, Episode 34) [TV series episode]. *Insight*. <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/watch/2077661251926>
- McCorquodale, J. (1997). Aboriginal identity: Legislative, judicial and administrative definitions. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2(2), 24–35.
- Menzies, K. (2019). Forcible separation and assimilation as trauma: The historical and socio-political experiences of Australian Aboriginal people. *Social Work and Society*, 17(1), 1–18.
- Moran, A. (2005). White Australia, settler nationalism and Aboriginal assimilation. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 51(2), 168–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2005.00369.x>
- Read, P. (1998). The return of the stolen generation. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 22(59), 8–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443059809387421>
- Roy, R., & Uekusa, S. (2020). Collaborative autoethnography: “Self-reflection” as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 20(4), 383–392. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054>
- Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2020). *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2020*. Productivity Commission, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Wang, C. C., & Geale, S. K. (2015). The power of story: Narrative inquiry as a methodology in nursing research. *International Journal of Nursing Sciences*, 2(2), 195–198.
- Whyman, T., Murrup-Stewart, C., Young, M., Carter, A., & Jobson, L. (2021). ‘Lateral violence stems from the colonial system’: Settler-colonialism and lateral violence in Aboriginal Australians. *Postcolonial Studies*, 26(2), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2021.2009213>
- Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>