

INTRODUCTION

EARLY DAYS

For as long as I can remember, my parents never missed an opportunity to accuse each other's family of being the one who had been 'touched by the tar brush'.¹ My father would pass comments like, 'it's your mother's side that are the Abos'. My mother would in turn accuse my father of being the 'guilty' one. I learned a number of things from these everyday expressions of domestic tension. One was that 'being Aboriginal' must not be a good thing. Another was that any reference to being Aboriginal was an insult. But I also learnt at an early age that the colour of a person's skin carried meaning — it signified something. For me, knowing we were 'touched by the tar brush' meant we were not white. But in that era, not being recognisably black also meant I was not Aboriginal. This was an early source of anxiety about who I was and how I was to represent myself.

I remember as a young girl being asked if I was Aboriginal and replying that my maternal grandmother was. My answer was based on my lived understanding of Aboriginality as somehow signified by skin colour or 'look'. Nana was 'dark' and therefore could be called Aboriginal. But could I? All I knew was that our family were 'part-Aboriginal'. It was not until I was much older that I was able to establish with certainty the facts of my

1 'Touched by the tar brush' is a racial epithet, which is used to describe someone of 'mixed descent'. For example, in an online discussion about Barack Obama, the then United States Senator from Illinois and a candidate for the Democratic Party's nomination in the 2008 U.S. presidential election the question, was posed '...why does everyone label him "black"? If someone is half "white" and half "black", is he still "black"? A reply posted on the page informed: 'I believe that the technical term is "touched by the tar brush", see <<http://jakchat.com/forums/ubbthreads.php/ubb/showflat/Number/69985>>. The term, and others like 'those with a bit of the splash', is also outlined by Ian Anderson in 'I, the "Hybrid" Aborigine: Film and Representation' (1997) as derogatory terms used in Australia to describe mixed descent Aboriginal people.

mother's ancestry from a long line of Aboriginal women who originate from South Australia. In the interim years, the way our Aboriginality was *not* discussed at home had as much effect on the anxiety I felt about my ambiguous status, as the way it was used as a tool of insult.

But it was not just domestic tensions at home around the meaning of skin colour that produced confusion about what it meant for me to be 'part-Aboriginal'. My childhood, growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, was overlaid by a range of commentaries about what being Aboriginal signified out in the world beyond our home, infiltrating my self-awareness. I cannot recall any positive message about being Aboriginal. For example, through schools, the media and everyday interactions I was faced with frequent assertions that 'Aboriginal people' were a passive lot who just wanted to look after the land. I learnt that 'they' lived in the bush and were dirty. I remember the images we were bombarded with of semi-naked children with fly-infested noses. For the most part, I was positioned to see Aboriginal people as wanting and in need of help.

In my childhood mind, one exception to this negativity was the TV show *Boney*² where so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal people were portrayed as mystical 'beings' and were to be feared as sorcerers. Little did I know at this time that the main Aboriginal character of the show was a white person covered in black paint. Nevertheless, some of these representations connected with my own experiences and reflected some things that I already knew. 'Pointing the bone' was a common saying in my childhood, as was a fear of the 'Kadachi Man'.³ He wore feather boots, and no one ever heard or saw him coming. If we were ever naughty, it was common for our parents to caution my brother, sisters and I that if we didn't behave the Kadachi Man would get us.

Throughout my childhood, my family moved regularly from town to town, and from state to state. I attended schools in Geelong, Victoria; Oodnadatta, South Australia; Katherine, Northern Territory; and still others throughout the Illawarra in New South Wales. Later, I came to

2 For information about the television series *Boney* see, <<http://www.tv.com/boney/show/4027/summary.html>>.

3 The Kadachi Man is often portrayed as myth by non-Aboriginal people. However, we understood the Kadachi Man to be real and a significant threat if you were bad. To demonstrate the significance of the threat, in a heinous case of sexual assault on two Aboriginal boys in 2003 the Kadachi Man was used to threaten the young Aboriginal victims to remain silenced. See <www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/10/1065676145635.html>.

understand that our regular moves, which my mother called ‘moonlight flits’, were more about having outstayed our welcome. In the middle of the night we would pack our possessions into an old Falcon car, and depart on another ‘journey’. As a young child, over time this developed into an unsettling feeling of not belonging or being welcome anywhere.

When I was seven years old my father took us to New Zealand, which in terms of our regular moves was the mother of all moonlight flits. All I knew about New Zealand was what I had learned at school — that Māori people were scary natives who ate people and, like savages, would kill without cause. Needless to say, my sisters⁴ and I were petrified by the time the plane landed in New Zealand, and really concerned as to whether we would be safe living in grass huts. Although in time I came to understand how and why Indigenous people are portrayed as primitive savages, at the age of seven it was a terrifying experience, such was the power of those unmediated images on my young mind.

Life in New Zealand mirrored our lives in Australia. There were lots of ‘relocations’. Drunken parties were commonplace, as were fights and arguments. We were no strangers to poverty. But as young children we did not understand that we were poor or that we had nothing; that was just the way it was. I do remember my mother making the most out of what we had, which was a lot of empty wooden beer crates. In our lounge room we had beer crates covered in old blankets for seats. In our bedrooms we had mattresses on beer crates, and to store our clothes we had more beer crates. My sisters and I used to entertain ourselves with beer bottle tops, building toy houses, and making up all sorts of games.

After two years of living in New Zealand, my father returned to Australia. I was almost ten. If we thought we had nothing until then, we were mistaken. He left us with no money, no possessions, and soon we were served an eviction notice. As Australians, we were not entitled to government assistance in New Zealand. We lived on handouts from church groups and other organisations, and learned over time that it was good to avoid those to whom we owed money. As we struggled from day to day, I realised that not everyone lived as poorly as we did, and I began to resent that fact. My younger sister and I began rebelling and soon ran into trouble with the police. We eventually earned a reputation for being ‘uncontrollable’. I spent some time in Bollard Girls Home in New

4 I am the middle daughter, and have an older and younger sister.

Zealand, and at the age of fifteen, I was deported to Australia with my younger sister in tow. As part of our punishment the court ordered us to live in Australia with our father and not return to New Zealand for a period of twelve months.

My sister and I were both sent to live in Katherine in the Northern Territory with my father and his new family. I felt we were neither welcomed nor wanted, which inevitably resulted in further rebellious behaviour. I remember getting into trouble just for hanging out too much with the ‘blacks’. Katherine in the 1980s was a racist town. I recall once overhearing a conversation between some men on the street who were commenting that if you ran over a black, you should then reverse over them to ensure they were dead as it would mean less paper work. That way, they also contended, the death could more easily be contributed to the victim being drunk. In those days most people also kept shotguns with salt pellets to shoot at the blacks if they came onto their property. At night, it was common for the local white teenagers to drive their Mini-Moke vehicles through the blacks’ camp yelling abuse, just for a laugh.

It was not long before I was sent to Wollongong to live with my Aunty. I loved Wollongong because my Nana also lived there. But by now I had many issues and had become a very angry person. Still, I loved being near my Nana and I cherished those times with her. Nana’s house was the only place I recognised as a home. She was the only stable element in my life growing up. I returned to live with my mother in New Zealand after I’d turned sixteen. Nana died not long after that.

Through my schooling in New Zealand I learnt about Māori people and their culture in a similar way to how I was taught about Aboriginal people in Australia. In all my Social Studies classes, both Māori and Aboriginal were people who had lived in the past. I learned that Māori were warriors and that their warrior status was the difference between them and Aboriginal people in Australia — Māori fought for their land, Aboriginal Australians did not. I was also taught that Māori were defeated.

Social Studies also began to uncover some of the mystery of my own ambiguous status. I learned about blood quantum as a measure of differences between ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘part-Māori’ and so forth. In New Zealand, ‘half-caste’ people were positioned both outside of being Māori and outside of being white, just as we were in Australia. Those of us who were ‘touched by the tar brush’ seemed to be quarantined, perceived as not being of any place or any group. These ideas filled my head. I came to

believe that as a ‘half-caste’ or less, a person was not entitled to be considered Māori, or in my case, Aboriginal in Australia. I recall watching a television show which showed Māori protesting, and someone commented that ‘they’ (Māori) were as white as ‘us’, ‘they cannot be Indigenous’.

COMING HOME

I returned to Australia again in my early thirties, now with a family of my own. It was 1998, and Pauline Hanson was gaining ascendancy with her provocative views on the ‘privileges’ of being Aboriginal in contemporary Australian society. Aboriginal protesters were prominent in the media and I remember the same types of remarks being made about Aboriginal protesters as those made about Māori protesters. Many comments made reference to the lightness of most Aboriginal people’s skin colour. I recall some commentators’ use of wedge politics to emphasise the differences between remote and urban Aboriginal people. The suggestion was that ‘the real Aboriginal people’ were the ones still on the land and these urban ‘white’ Aboriginal people were somehow fraudulently passing as ‘Aboriginal’ to receive benefits denied to other Australians.

Although I had grown up in changing times for Aboriginal people, I had been consistently schooled in entrenched colonial (although evolving) media images and representations of what it meant to be an Aboriginal or Indigenous person. Throughout my younger years, my mind was kept busy, returning me to the issue of ‘colour’ and ‘looks’ as the markers of Aboriginal identity. My lack of such distinct physical markers was fundamental to my ambiguous status. Now, as an adult, I became interested in exploring the firmly planted, but rarely discussed, family assertion of being ‘touched by the tar brush’. I spoke with my relatives, including an old great-aunt, my Nana’s sister, who has since passed away. I was told stories of Nana’s mother, who was commonly referred to as Kit. Another aunt confirmed that indeed Nana Kit was Aboriginal but added that such things were not really spoken of in the family.

So, despite open confirmation of this knowledge, not all the family accepted that they were of Aboriginal descent. Even today, there are members of our extended family who still see Aboriginality as singularly a factor of colour or looks, and therefore don’t see themselves as being Aboriginal, or don’t feel confident with publicly identifying as Aboriginal. My cousin commented I was lucky that my hair and eyes are dark because that made it easier for me to identify as Aboriginal. I understand this as I

was also conditioned to think that Aboriginality was something that was only afforded to those who were dark-skinned or 'looked' Aboriginal. I also understand that in many ways my generation had it far easier than my Nana's or aunties' difficult circumstances, when it came to identifying, accepting and acknowledging our Aboriginal lineage. Historical circumstances had conditioned previous generations of our family to avoid the attention of the authorities.

I recognised that my search for information needed to extend past the family level. I needed to understand how and why I was understood as not being Aboriginal enough. I wanted to know how and why historical legacies continued to assign such weighted meaning to black/white lines in the everyday, given the history of dispossession and the subsequent administration of Aboriginal lives in Australia. I wanted to know why so many of us were suspended in the land of not belonging.

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

In my frequently dislocated youth, my education had been somewhat limited, so the opportunity to study at university in the 1990s was a time of great excitement for me. But I lacked confidence about my abilities. What I did not realise at the time was that I came to university studies with a wealth of knowledge and experience that seemed to fit directly into the historical as well as the theoretical knowledge of the social science disciplines. I soon enrolled, as a mature age student, in a Bachelor of Arts degree with majors in Sociology and Aboriginal Studies. I went on to complete the degree with Distinction, and followed it with first-class Honours.

University opened up a new world for me. I now understood what being 'touched by the tar brush' meant. I now knew that 'being' Aboriginal was more than just the colour of one's skin. I was fortunate enough to learn about Australia's history in a time and in a way that was inclusive of many voices, including Aboriginal ones. I met other Aboriginal people who, like me, had spent most of their lives living outside of both worlds — not quite white, not quite black — but who also did not know why. For the first time in my life I didn't feel alone; instead, I felt reassured of my place. I soon developed enough confidence to combine my experiential knowledge with the knowledge of the social sciences in the academy to contest many of the ideas I had been given. It was a highly liberating experience for me to peel back the layers of knowledge.

I soon came to realise that understanding the social production of Aboriginal identities through the social sciences is quite different from understanding and resolving one's personal Aboriginal identity in the everyday world. But I found the personal empowerment that came from engaging with the way that Western systems of thought and their institutional apparatuses have organised thinking and practices around who counted as Aboriginal and who did not, was soon to be severely tested.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND THE OFFICIAL CRITERIA

Early in my studies I thought it would be the right thing to do to present myself to the local Aboriginal organisations and make some contacts throughout the Aboriginal community. Like many people who learn of — or confirm — their Aboriginal heritage later in life, and whose family connections are located elsewhere, I wanted to connect and contribute to what I imagined was my 'local community' or 'the Aboriginal community' where I was born and now lived in the Illawarra. However, I quickly learned that this was not going to be a straightforward process. Identifying as Aboriginal involves far more than knowing or claiming to be a descendant of Aboriginal families. It demands much more than an understanding of how the imposed identity categories of the past have been overturned to allow Aboriginal people to determine what it means to be Aboriginal. After what I had been through, I did not expect to be questioned about my family, and where we hailed from, in order to validate my claim to Aboriginality. It was little surprise to discover the numerous non-Aboriginal mechanisms of questioning the legitimacy of a person's claimed Aboriginal status. But in my excitement to at last be free (albeit self-consciously) to express my suppressed Aboriginal identity, I had not contemplated the existence of an Aboriginal apparatus to arbitrate the legitimacy of my claim.

I soon learned of the official criteria that must be met for an individual to be accepted as Aboriginal in Australia. The public authentication of Aboriginality requires fulfilment of a three-part assessment which has been widely accepted by governments since the 1970s (Boladeras 2002). A person can be accepted if the candidate in question is 'a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives or has lived' (Gardiner-Garden 2002–03, p. 4). Proof of the last requirement requires a supporting letter from an Aboriginal council or organisation. Formal Confirmation of Aboriginality

is important to have in order to work in identified positions⁵ and to access services designed specifically for Aboriginal people within and beyond Aboriginal organisations. It is not a trivial or sentimental certificate; it is a quasi-legal document. I discuss the Confirmation of Aboriginality in more detail in Chapter 9.

I discovered that compliance with the three-pronged definition does not always fit the multitude of experiences, relocations and policy prescriptions that we as Aboriginal people have had to face under colonial conditions. While most who seek a formal Confirmation of Aboriginality document already identify, and already know or have traced their family lineages, the issue of being recognised and accepted ‘by the community in which he (she) lives’ can provide a stumbling block. In some cases, establishing community acceptance can be fraught for those without kin connections, a history of residence in a local area, the visible physical markers of Aboriginality or a particular colonial experience. This is especially so if those who oversee verification of the processes and documents either do not know an applicant or for whatever reason are not kindly disposed towards them.

However, the issue of community acceptance is not just fraught in the Confirmation of Aboriginality process. It can introduce tensions that are difficult to resolve, even when a Confirmation of Aboriginality has been formally obtained. I have two separate Confirmation of Aboriginality documents, for instance, yet I am not exempt from accusations of being a fraud. I have been telephoned and emailed and accused directly of not being Aboriginal because of a disagreement: ‘Listen to you with your fuckin’ Māori accent. You are not Aboriginal!’ yelled one accuser over the phone. I have also been summoned to present myself and my complete genealogy, once again, to ‘the community’ to provide further proof of my Aboriginality.

These tensions are very complex and historically embedded, and are difficult to publicly discuss in a rational manner due to their emotive nature. They resist easy or unsubstantiated description and invite more serious analysis. Nevertheless, in local settings, some who have cultural or historical claims to ‘the place’ or who have a shared historical experience

5 An identified position is one in which Aboriginality is deemed by the prospective employer as a necessary attribute to fulfil the duties involved. Often the position requires an intimate knowledge of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and history at the local level.

of Aboriginal community life, wherever that may have been, often resent the presence of outsiders or 'newcomers', especially those who for a range of reasons lived outside of Aboriginal communities in previous generations. As a result, I have observed that identification with a geographical place and/or a particular colonial experience counts towards local acceptance, while the inter-generational experience of 'non-belonging' and ambiguous identity counts against it.

Today, Aboriginal organisations are tasked with both requiring and confirming Aboriginal identity for work, for any committee membership, and for access to a range of services and support. Aboriginal organisations are also usually locally embedded, invested and oriented, even while also configured in sets of relations with the wider pan-Aboriginal collective community and its relations with non-Aboriginal Australia. Theoretically, the Confirmation of Aboriginality process is a nationally instituted mechanism and should allow individuals or families from a cultural group originating anywhere across Australia to be recognised as Aboriginal wherever they live, as long as the veracity of lineage, connections, histories and recognition can be satisfied in the confirmation process. In practice, interpretation of what is meant by 'community' recognition of an individual is subject to varied and variable interpretation at the local level, over time, and with little regard for any official process.

My story is not an uncommon one. Although I was born in Wollongong, my Aboriginal ancestry is from South Australia; I mostly grew up elsewhere and only returned to Wollongong as an adult. For me, the criteria 'accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives' is open to question on the grounds that 'I am not from here'. Some official interpretations of community recognition accommodate proof of lineage and historical circumstances as criteria for acceptance back into the fold of what is now understood to be a pan-Aboriginal Australian community. Others interpret community recognition more literally as meaning that a local community consensus confers acceptance by more subjective and local assessment criteria. In this case, community acceptance is not just a matter of family history and the desire to identify and reconnect. It also comes to be about insider/outsider tensions, about personal perceptions, about how the 'newcomer' thinks and behaves, and about the degree to which an individual or family accepts and conforms to local values and practices.

For those who insist on these local criteria, it is easier to question an 'outsider' Aboriginal person who is not from 'their' community and who

has not been socialised via the local community historical experience or is not a member of local kin networks. So even with a Confirmation of Aboriginality I can continually be called into question; I can be abused, slandered and libelled, albeit on the basis of my accent rather than colour. My colour now seems sufficient to confirm Māori heritage, even though I have none. It is important to underline that this questioning is not confined to the local context or local matters. Questions of my identity ripple out into other communities far afield, as networks of gossip are sent to 'out' me, putting my professional status, career and livelihood at risk. On the personal level, my history of dislocation and un-belonging continues to impact as I am made to pay yet again for my family history — a family history wrought in the difficult circumstances of colonial encounters. Under this regime, my identity status is still able to be suspended. And I have not yet even begun to deal with the attitudes of non-Aboriginal people towards the accepted signifiers of Aboriginality.

A NOT SO UNCOMMON STORY

As I became aware of how 'my story' is repeated in many places across Australia, I began to wonder about the cost to the wider Aboriginal community. My experience sensitised and attuned me to both the processes and practices around the Confirmation of Aboriginality, and to the public regulation of Aboriginal identity by Aboriginal people 'in the community'. I observed these in a myriad of enactments by some people in relation to others, as I participated in community organisations and workplaces over time. I came to understand that the practice of questioning Aboriginal identity was not confined to the Confirmation of Aboriginality process. No one was immune — not people who have spent their entire lives in an Aboriginal community, or those who have been working in identified positions for years. The 'community acceptance' criteria seemed to provide licence for any individual to challenge — and be challenged — at any moment in time, for any reason.

Over time, I wondered if there would be fewer grounds for challenges if the 'community' held more confidence in the Confirmation of Aboriginality process — a process which appears to lack consistency. For example, I worked for a while in an organisation where Aboriginal people would routinely come to seek a Confirmation of Aboriginality document. One client's attempt was met with a particular kind of refusal: 'She has lived white all her life so she may as well continue.' Another's was dismissed

because the approver did not know the applicant whilst growing up. It was a huge shock to me when I first witnessed the basis for such decisions — decisions that impact on lives in both emotional and material ways. But I soon learned that not only was this common but also an accepted practice in other organisations as well. I recall attending a local meeting of another major organisation where someone's application to become a member was discussed. The coordinator held up a photo and announced that you could tell the person in the picture was definitely Koori⁶ by the way they looked. As a result of 'looking' Aboriginal, the person was accepted as a member. Not expecting this to be part of an official process, or the extent of the process, I was reminded of my cousin's comment about my dark eyes and hair.

Amidst the many manifestations of identity questioning that I had witnessed, I was drawn back to the way various physical markers of Aboriginality are still highly significant in deciding who counts as Aboriginal and who can be subject to ongoing challenges. But I noticed as well that language and behaviour are also significant. For example, an Aboriginal CEO, also a university graduate, was accused of not 'sounding like a Koori', a comment that questioned his identity and by inference his legitimacy in the role. Others are accused of not behaving or thinking Aboriginal, even if they look Aboriginal. The term 'coconut' — brown on the outside and white on the inside — is a standard accusation against an Aboriginal person, used derogatively in attempts to surveil behaviour and thinking and to regulate what being Aboriginal means.

And so over time I observed how the question of an individual's identity was not always about concern for the veracity of identity claims per se. In the context of community organisations, people who have long been accepted as Aboriginal can suddenly be placed under a cloud of suspicion by disgruntled community members. This has become a well-practised manipulative strategy for those with a grievance. It creates doubt about someone's authenticity as an Aboriginal Australian and questions their legitimacy to serve the community in a particular role or claim a perceived benefit.

These examples demonstrate the arbitrariness of subjective assessments for being granted a Confirmation of Aboriginality. Inconsistent

6 Koori is a term used by many to refer to Aboriginal people from either New South Wales or Victoria.

practices around confirming who counts as Aboriginal make it easy for some and difficult for others to reclaim identities, which are their inherent right. They also lay the grounds for challenges, many of which use identity questions to express personal or factional grievances with various aspects of decision-making within Aboriginal organisations. The community practices enacted beyond the official Confirmation of Aboriginality process leave few Aboriginal identities secure and many devalued. Questions of identity are shamefully manipulated at great personal cost to many.

I could argue that these practices deny some of the particular personal histories of being an Aboriginal Australian. But I would also have to concede that they can be understood as an assertion of Aboriginal identity that has always been grounded in place and particular kin networks and relations. They can also be understood as an assertion of Aboriginal identity that is grounded in the assumed shared colonial/historical experience from which the political collective has mounted resistance. However, the diversity of this shared experience is not always fully comprehended at local and regional levels, and this ignorance leads to assumptions, speculation and ultimately gossip about individuals' claims to Aboriginal identity.

Sadly, in the process, new lines of inclusion and exclusion operate and arbitrate 'who counts' and 'who does not count' as Aboriginal. Aboriginal Australians whose lives were shaped by the arbitrariness of colonial categories to serve policies of protection and assimilation still in many cases cannot return from their exile. The formerly colonised now enact on their own what has historically been enacted on them by their colonisers. Who determines 'who counts' today affects each subsequent generation of Aboriginal descendants, as it has done in the past. The 'community' as the final arbitrators of identity wield great influence on the status of Aboriginal individuals and their families — and in some places this influence does not appear to be mediated by consistent, transparent or accountable processes.

THIS BOOK

Increasingly, Aboriginal people are speaking openly about their experiences of being confronted by accusations, dismissals and abuse from their own people when trying to formally confirm their Aboriginality or carry out their roles. Speaking publicly carries risk of attack and further trauma

and exclusion. Also entering these discussions are questions around what constitutes valid expressions of Aboriginal identity in contemporary times, given what we now know of colonial history, the politics of self-determination and the extent of urban experience. Not to mention what the reach of social communication technologies into Aboriginal communities means for identity issues.

It is the emergence of these discussions that intersects with my own experiences, those of others, and my intellectual interests that have led to this book. Armed with a range of perceptions of what it means to be Aboriginal, and in the face of Aboriginal community sensibilities, community judgments, and the ever-present risk of public censure, individuals find and express their Aboriginal identities in a wide range of ways. For example, I pursued my family history and I studied Indigenous academic subjects, history and the sociology disciplines to understand the ‘what and how’ of colonial and historical practices. I then went to work for the Aboriginal community with a commitment to contribute to improved services. While I now know what being ‘Aboriginal’ means to me and for me, I cannot know what it means for everyone and nor do I claim to.

Over time, I became particularly interested in the ways people publicly signal to others that they are indeed Aboriginal, when their physical appearance or experience does not make this obvious. I observed that the expressions of Aboriginal identity are multifarious, but also noticed what appeared to be patterns and pathways for people who are in the process of discovering or reconnecting to their heritage. I am now drawn to explore what motivates and rationalises the desire to signal Aboriginality as opposed to just ‘knowing’ one is Aboriginal or to just ‘being’ Aboriginal. This focus emerges from a lifetime of confronting the significance of looking like, sounding like, behaving like or thinking like an Aboriginal person as criteria for recognition or non-recognition as an Aboriginal person.

This book is born from my interest to explore in more detail reversions and conversions to the accepted and acceptable markers and behaviours that enable people to ‘sign themselves in’ and be ‘recognisable’ as Aboriginal community members today. My interest in these issues led me to commence and successfully complete a Doctor of Philosophy. This book is one of the outcomes of my doctoral research. My interest in this journey of contemporary Indigenous life experience was not so much concerned

with what might emerge to demonstrate, or be recognised as, or count as a sign of a legitimate Aboriginal contemporary identity. Rather, my interest was to explore how the primary and now pan-Aboriginal collective will to survive as a distinct people also carries secondary, often negative, effects for many Aboriginal individuals.

These more recently reconfigured Aboriginal modes of inclusion/exclusion — purportedly to protect, preserve and strengthen what it means to be Aboriginal in Australia today — are an important site for deeper investigation and analysis. I contend that both the processes and patterns of behaviours associated with identifying and being accepted as Aboriginal are as much a problem as they purport to be a solution to re-assert a collective and self-defined Aboriginal identity today. Questions of Aboriginal identity are serious ones in the wake of the colonial era and interesting ones in the global era. Therefore, the point of my exploration was not to solve the ‘problem’ but to understand the basis of our current thinking and how it shapes the practices around identity.

My aim has been to sketch the historical contingencies on which current Aboriginal identity discourses are conditioned, so as to have a better understanding of some of the assumptions in which current ‘everyday’ arguments and counter-arguments are rooted. I had little idea when I started this process, just how deeply these historical contingencies are implicated in the current struggle over questions of ‘who is’ and ‘what counts’ as Aboriginal. Indeed, my appreciation of both the meaning of the diversity of Aboriginal experience and my knowledge of the history of Aboriginal experience has grown immeasurably in the process. This enables me to better appreciate the varying investments in questions of Aboriginal identity at different sites and in different contexts.

My own personal struggles around identity, my frustrations and ‘impatience’ have all been mediated through this process, enabling me to put a ‘critical’ measure of distance between my own experiences and my role as a researcher whose textual production will eventually form part of the discursive matrix. The continuing goal — for me and for you, the reader — is to contribute to the ongoing conversation about identity in Aboriginal Australia and beyond.