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Complexities of Displaced Indigenous Identities: A Fifty Year Journey Home, to Two Homes

Lou Netana-Glover

Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, North Ryde 2109, Australia; lou.glover@mq.edu.au

Abstract: In colonised territories all over the world, *place*-based identity has been interrupted by invading *displacement* cultures. Indigenous identities have become more complex in response to and because of racist and genocidal government policies that have displaced Indigenous peoples. This paper is a personal account of the identity journey of the author, that demonstrates how macrocosmic colonial themes of racism, protectionism, truth suppression, settler control of Indigenous relationships, and Indigenous resistance and survivance responses can play out through an individual's journey. The brown skinned author started life being told that she was (a white) Australian; she was told of her father's Aboriginality in her 20s, only to learn at age 50 of her mother's affair and that her biological father is Māori. The author's journey demonstrates the way in which Indigenous identities in the colonial era are context driven, and subject to affect by infinite relational variables such as who has the power to control narrative, and other colonial interventions that occur when a displacement culture invades place-based cultures.

Keywords: identity; Indigenous; Aboriginal; Māori; Australia; whiteness; displacement; racism; whakapapa; DNA

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1. Introduction

In 2019, while on Cadigal-Wangal Country (Known as Inner West Sydney), after months of waiting for my DNA results, they finally arrived. Ancestral DNA test company marketing suggests that a major market for DNA testing is people who are looking into their family history for an ethnicity estimate, whatever that means for them. Ethnicity was part of my inquiry, but finding relatives, immediate relatives, was my main reason. I was about to turn 50 years old and had just been told by my white maternal Aunty that my dad was not my father. Dad and I took a DNA paternity test that confirmed this. My mother claimed a minimal memory of events, so I had no option but to take an ancestry focused DNA test (my parents divorced many years ago). I submitted the sample and waited for my results. When they arrived, I took my laptop out into the sunshine and trees, and pressed the results link. A dramatic, television game show-esque music effect followed, with Polynesian style drums and a slide-guitar, accompanied by colourful graphics that informed me in text that my ethnicity estimate was *57.1% Polynesian!*

"I'm not white!" I enthusiastically yelled to my partner. This was not coming from an anti-white stance; it was the relief of being able to put one of my biggest fears to rest—that I was a white girl who had been telling myself a story, that I was Aboriginal.

I grew up as the brown skinned, black-haired child of two white parents of Irish, Scottish and English 'Australian' descent. As a child in the 1970s at my paternal grandmother's house in Western Sydney, I heard my grandmother and Aunty talk of my grandfather's supposed Aboriginality. One day particularly stands out in my memory, when local Aboriginal people who were walking past my grandmother's house had claimed to my Aunty that we were cousins. We did not forge connections with those people, but the conversations I heard had significance for me because of the mystery of my physical features that were darker than everyone else in my family.

2. Complex Modern Contexts of 'Australian' Indigenous Identity

Identity is described as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). Before colonisation, Indigenous identities had always been rooted in place and the original people *of* place. Blood and adoptive relations are part of an Indigenous worldview, and belonging to place is certainly not restricted to human beings (Weaver 2001, p. 242; Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 2010, p. 196). In colonised territories all over the world, place-based identity has been interrupted by invading displacement cultures. Sociology and cultural studies scholars, such as Stuart Hall, David Harvey and Bronwyn Carlson have theorised extensively on the impact of settler-colonial-capitalist modernity on identity. Hall and Harvey note that identity in late modernity is characterised by "discontinuity, fragmentation, rupture and dislocation" (Hall et al. 1992, p. 279). Carlson has written most comprehensively of the resultant *politics of identity* in the Aboriginal Australian context. Modern Indigenous identity remains based upon genealogies and relationships from original people of place, but it has also grown to incorporate the effects of racist and genocidal government policies that—in the name of protection—displaced and controlled Aboriginal lives via assimilation and child theft, thereby disrupting familial connections (Carlson 2016; Read 1998; Terszak 2015). This government institutionalisation encouraged and/or reinforced racism in the settler public, and the two still feed off each other to this day, reproducing racism (Dodson 2003, pp. 32–34).

This paper is about my personal identity journey, where racism was a catalyst for me in investigating my ancestry, to look for an identity that suited me more than that of a white Australian. It presents a microcosmic unfolding of the macrocosmic colonial era themes of racism, protectionism, truth suppression, settler control of Indigenous relationships, and Indigenous resistance and survivance responses. It also demonstrates how individual circumstances, relationships and reactions to conditions provide for myriad complex Indigenous identities that cannot be simplified or homogenised on a national or international public scale (Carlson 2016, pp. 143–45). I currently enjoy feeling an inner sense of completion about my identity, but "a specific identity cannot be definitively pinned down in advance of the discourse in which it finds itself effected" (D'Cruz in Carlson 2016, p. 145). I know that my inner sense of identity will often be at odds with settler narratives of identity because there has always been a disjuncture between top-down settler narratives about people of place, and Indigenous realities of place from on the ground.

I must clarify a few written language protocols operating in this paper. I will use inverted commas for the word 'Australia' when it pertains to Indigenous people or place, as in Indigenous 'Australians'. When I do not use inverted commas, I am referring to Australia the colonial construct, or the imagined community (Anderson [1983] 2002, p. 6). I understand that many Indigenous people identify as Australian, and I respect that is their choice. My choice to refrain from colonising anyone else through language is expressed by using inverted commas to refer to Indigenous 'Australians'. I capitalise the words 'Country' and 'Ancestors' to pay respect to Country as sentience, and to exalt our Ancestors. I use the words 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably, depending on which seems appropriate in each context. Further, 'Blak' spelt without the 'c' is an Indigenous spelling protocol that emerged from the 1990s and was first generated by Destiny Deacon. "(R)eclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression" (Munro 2020).

3. Racism as Catalyst

My physical features have attracted racism from outside my home from an early age. A paternal Aunty recounted a story from when I was a toddler on an outing with her. Passers-by yelled "look at the Aborigine, look at the Aborigine!" (Glover 1999), as if pointing out a sideshow attraction. Being called a coon (Racist term for Aboriginal person in Australia.) in primary school did not have a coherently deep effect on me because I did not know what it meant; however, the energy behind the words hurt my six-year-old

feelings, and started giving me the sense that I was some form of 'other' (Said 1995). Despite my appearance as a brown-skinned 'other', my (attempted) enculturation was as a white Australian. It is no wonder that dichotomy has always intrigued me. When I would ask my mother why I was different, she would soothe me with the words "you are Australian, fourth or fifth generation Australian". To be Australian in the 1970s meant being white (Tranter and Donoghue 2015, p. 237; Ward 1958).

I was in my early twenties in the early 1990s when my paternal grandmother told me of my grandfather's Aboriginality. This made sense to me because of my appearance and the sense of being 'other' that I had held within myself since I started attending school. I had also been acknowledged as Aboriginal by Aboriginal people in my early adulthood in Sydney. By the mid 1990s, with the encouragement of my Aboriginal friends—who were sure that I would find my people eventually—I embarked on the journey of identifying as an Aboriginal person. Even though my father did not identify with this identity, he supported me in every way he could.

Those who learn of their Aboriginal ancestry and then embrace their Aboriginal identity when they are adults can often face accusations of being white but pretending to be Aboriginal. Furthermore, they may face accusations that they have no right to claim to be Aboriginal, as they have not had what is often referred to as a lived experience (Huggins 2003, p. 63). In my adult years, since being accepted as Aboriginal and identifying as such, I had never received such an accusation from Indigenous people, that I know of. The only negative comment that I have received directly was from a white woman, a producer, whom had made a career producing Aboriginal films, and had been given a skin name from the Northern Territory. She had just viewed *Black Sheep* (Glover 1999), the documentary I had made about the racism and homophobia that is inherent in Australian cultural conditioning, of which I became aware of when I came out as a lesbian and then learned of my hidden Aboriginality. This woman acknowledged that my journey must have been confusing, then later asked sarcastically, "what are you passing yourself off as now?". Aboriginal reception to the film (and hence my subjective journey) was very different. *Black Sheep* won a Tudawali Indigenous Film Award in the year 2000 for 'Best Concept in a Documentary'.

Aboriginal people are generous, they know the way that colonialism has wreaked havoc on relationships and families. They know some people are working out who they are. Hence, I was accepted easily. My physical features are clearly not white. A lifetime of being questioned about where I was from had compounded the sense of uncertainty and displacement that I carried within me. For much of my life I was lost and could not account for my physical features.

4. Building Identity

Carlson's study elucidated, the late identifier identity journey has a trajectory of being "firstly 'self-realised' and secondly to be recognised and legitimised by others as Aboriginal" (Carlson 2016, p. 214). Despite acceptance in the 1990s pan-Aboriginal space, where I was accepted as a displaced Aboriginal person, I did not feel secure in myself until the 2010s. This was when I was embedded in local Walbunja-Yuin community, and received words from Elders such as "you are a part of our mob", or "we've adopted you". Before this point, I had worked at transforming my cultural identity. I learned cultural ways of being, doing and thinking. I learnt so much from my Aboriginal mentors over the years. Even though my appearance and the racism it attracted had sparked my identity journey, I very quickly learnt that physical appearance is very minor on the scale of what constitutes Aboriginal identity. Descendance from and connection to people and place was of greater significance. This knowledge both expanded my understandings and fuelled the deep insecurity and fear that I carried inside of being an identity thief. Fear of being perceived as such resonated for me, despite the fact that when introducing myself, I habitually articulated my uncertain status.

Stating where one is from is an introductory protocol for Indigenous people, it places us to Country which gives us our identity. This information may be unrecoverable for people who have been disconnected from their Aboriginal communities, or have unrecoverable familial narratives of belonging and connection due to colonisation (Carlson 2016; Tailfeathers 2020). These people are sometimes unfairly demoted by the "identity privileged", who have managed to maintain connection throughout the settler colonial period that we are living through (Huggins 2003, p. 65). Such a 'demotion' was not my general experience, which caused me to feel guilty because I was aware that displaced fair-skinned Aboriginal people often had hard times finding acceptance. My appearance was cause for othering in the white world, yet acceptance in the Aboriginal world.

I would introduce myself as not knowing where I was from, and in later years, as belonging to Walbunja-Yuin peoples but not by descent, explaining that I did not know where my Aboriginal descent was from. For many years, I would not put myself in situations where I had to introduce myself. I feared that I was not walking with integrity, despite being as honest as I could be with the information that I had about who I was. A lack of leads on our Aboriginal family history had contributed to my experience of bouts of depression. I sought guidance from Aboriginal friends and Elders. I was invited to community and family events, and was again mentored by various Aboriginal people. Over time, my Indigenous networks grew, and I found/was given my place. I may not have a blood relationship to Yuin Country, but I do enjoy the privilege of deep interaction with Country and the feeling of being totally at home.

The journey of learning Aboriginal culture was sometimes akin to returning to a childhood state. I accepted that my status was very junior, especially in the early years, when I would be laughed or 'growled' (Indigenous slang for 'chastised') by senior Aboriginal people for ignorant words or actions on my part. I was embarrassed, but I had to accept that I was learning, and I wanted to learn. Over the years I unlearned my unconscious settler conditioning to re-enculturate to Indigeneity and an Indigenous worldview. It was easy for me to learn Aboriginal histories, tribal formations and relationality principles. It took slightly more (emotional) labour to observe and remove the racism that is inherent in settler community learnt speech patterns, that normalise whiteness as the default for 'people', or Australians. Ambellin and Blaze Kwaymullina describe the Indigenous worldview of the universe as a sentient "pattern comprised of other patterns". All life exists in relationship to everything else. Everything is alive and knowledge exists in relationships (p. 196). De-centring my 'self' took longer to achieve, and it was dependent on how much time I spent around other Indigenous people. Yet, I had always related to everything as alive.

5. Truth Telling

The event in March 2019, when my maternal Aunty had told me that I had been misled about my biological father, was preceded by an argument on social media between that same Aunty and myself about race relations and DNA testing. I had posted a report on social media about the Australian right-wing politicians Mark Latham and Pauline Hanson, asserting that DNA testing be implemented for people claiming Aboriginal identity (Pearson 2019). The argument states that people are rorting the government system of Aboriginal targeted 'benefits', so DNA testing would 'prove' who was and was not Aboriginal. The argument for DNA testing contains within it claims that 'white' controlled science could determine Aboriginal identity, and also seeks to exclude people on the basis of blood quantum. Blood quantum is not a determinant of Aboriginality in Australia (Bond et al. 2014). I commented on the thread that the science was incomplete because there were not enough DNA samples collected from every distinct nation for tribal connections to be established (Watt and Kowal 2018; Fryer 2019). Apart from this fact, even if the science was complete, government determinations of Aboriginal identity would exclude Aboriginal nations from having autonomy in claiming who their people are, and who belongs to them. It also discounts cultural factors such as adoption. After a white ally

berated my Aunty online for her right-wing views, I took the conversation with my Aunty to a private message and apologised for my friend's harshness. My Aunty asked if I had ever thought about having a DNA test. I said that I did not believe that it could give me the answers I seek about where my Aboriginal ancestry was from. She explicitly told me that she thought I looked Islander, that I had a right to know my true heritage and that we should have this conversation on the phone.

"I know you love your Dad Lou, but he is not your father". I was both in shock and feeling like things made sense at the same time. Another identity search had commenced. I became a detective, interviewing family members about recollections of the time. This new news to me was an open secret amongst Mum's family for all of my life, but no one had answers for me. They had not told me because they thought that it was my mother's responsibility. My Aunty had a life-threatening medical condition at the time, and she did not want to take this secret to her grave (thankfully she has since recovered). She also informed me that DNA testing links people up with their relative matches. After speaking out against these tests as markers of Indigenous identity, I now had to turn to DNA testing, in an attempt to find out who I was.

My results gave me thousands of matches in Aotearoa (known as New Zealand), and a second cousin was the closest match. To identify my father, I needed a first cousin match. I started a systematic investigation of the available data. I wrote to second cousins, trying to piece things together. I expected it could take years, and accepted that I may never find my father. The previous acceptance that I may never find my Aboriginal Country had worked to groom me to accept potential disappointment, or endless searching on my new quest. Fortunately for me, a first cousin took a test after me within two months. After I was notified of our match, I wrote to him. He did not reply within a couple of days, so I searched in his social media contacts for another relative. I found his sister, my cousin. We organised a phone call. The first message that I heard from my Māori family were through this cousin, they said "we want you to know that you are from a big loving family and we are so happy you exist". These words fulfilled my wildest dreams of reconnection. After the trauma of mine and Dad's heartbreak at not being blood related, and being lied to for five decades, I was experiencing the ultimate reconnection scenario that displaced people in search of their roots could ask for—to be reunited with open arms. Again, my dad had supported me the whole way. Indeed, his care is so deep that he had a great sense of urgency about me finding my Māori dad, as he was concerned about his age and wanted me to find him alive. This experience has brought us even closer.

I am descended from a strong Māori family. My Māori dad passed away in the early 1970s. I look a lot like him. I hold myself like him and we share other similarities. This was conveyed to me when I went 'home' to Aotearoa, to meet my whanau, who happened to have a family reunion organised just before the borders closed down during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. At the reunion, I heard stories of my father and our whanau that helped me to understand most of my ways of being. I saw myself reflected in my relatives for the first time. I relished meeting whanau and seeing my father's sisters and brother in joyful shock at my resemblance to my dad, their brother, who died too young in Sydney in 1972. Time compressed with the emotion of reconnection. We felt and imagined the joy of our heavenly whanau seeing us reunited. Fifty years of separation dissolved. Our deep connections were instantly expressed—'My Niece', 'Cuz', 'Aunty', 'Nephew', 'Uncle'. I found *my* big Indigenous family that I had been looking for, and I cannot help but believe that my learned Aboriginal worldview contributed to being able to instantly recognise my position, and feel the depth of love and connection in our whanau:

> "In an Aboriginal worldview, time—to the extent that it exists at all—is neither linear nor absolute. There are patterns and systems of energy that create and transform, from the ageing process of the human body to the growth and decay of the broader universe. But these processes are not 'measured' or even framed in a strictly temporal sense, and certainly not in a linear sense".
>
> (Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 2010, p. 199)

Meeting my Māori whanau at age 50 could have contained culturally incompatible moments of awkwardness, it did not. This is a gift from my teachers from Yuin, Gadigal, Dharawal, Dharug, Yaegl, Wurundjeri, and Idinji Country, to name a few. I easily remembered my whanau relational connections because I had been in the practice of mapping Aboriginal families in my search of my Aboriginal identity, and out of respect for Aboriginal lineages.

Investigating blood memory is beyond the scope of this paper, but I am curious as to the extent that my Māori family genetics assisted my learning of Aboriginal culture and informed my family values. I longed to find *my* big blak family—to see myself in it and belong to it. It turned out they were just slightly further away than from where I was looking. However, where I live on Yuin Country places me at a longitudinal parallel with my grandfather's Ngā Puhi people, around 2200 kilometres from me.

6. Complex Identities and Shared Survivance

Aboriginal people gave me what has turned out to be both a place holder identity and an enduring cultural identity, that does not fit settler-colonial government or settler general public definitions or ideas of Aboriginality. The current Australian Government definition is "(a)n Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives" (Gardiner-Garden 2002). I may still satisfy the colonial governments terms, as my mother's family tree has some missing branches. I care not whether the government accepts me, it has only ever been the acceptance by Aboriginal people that has informed my identity. My Aboriginal political and social identity does not just vanish with learning that I am Māori. Indeed, it is strengthened.

When I first found out that I did not know who my father was, my Aboriginal kin offered the strongest and most understanding support. The first (Dharawal) Elder that I told said, "well you are still tidda (Aboriginal English for 'sister') to me, you live and breathe it". An Idinji tidda would not accept my news until months later, when I showed a photograph of my Māori biological father, and she saw our similarities.

I feel *more* Indigenous knowing that I have had the experience of my Indigenous relationships being controlled by settler interests through the continued suppression of truth in a sustained way for fifty years. My identity was hidden from me, to cover for the affair of a young white wife (my mother). I understand how that came about, but there were points in time whereby the power to suppress the truth could have transformed into truth telling, and given me some peace about my uncertainty. When I chose to identify as Aboriginal provided such a moment. My mother recently gave what I believe was a heartfelt apology, she said that she could have told me at times, but she wanted to *protect* me. The resonance of that statement, with the historical government control of Indigenous people under the name of *protection*, served to reinforce my sense of Indigeneity, in terms of identifying with being controlled by settler interests.

Regardless, I am grateful for the journey I have had so far. I may still mourn a childhood without playing with my Māori cousins, or being a cherished grandchild of my Nana-Ma and Nana-Pa, or being held by my Māori dad. I did get a loving dad of solid moral fibre in 'Australia'. I have had a unique journey of unity in resistance and survivance. "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence" (Vizenor 2009). My resistance to the settler 'Australian' identity imposed on me was given life in the Aboriginal resistance to the colonial dictation of identity.

I whakapapa (Māori word for genealogy, and associated concepts.) to Ngā Puhi and Tainui Māori, and I have a cultural belonging with Walbunja-Yuin original peoples of 'Australia'. I have Anglo-settler and other heritages as well, but my subjectivities are very much Indigenous. The complexity of Indigenous identities in the colonial era is context driven and subject to affect by infinite relational variables such as who has the power to control narrative, and other colonial interventions that occur when a displacement culture invades place-based cultures. With place as context for identity, continued imposition by

colonial forces has given rise to complex identities, born of the disruption that has occurred with the attempted annihilation of Indigenous peoples. I am lucky to have made my way home to my people, and to be held in the strong Indigenous identity of the place commonly referred to as Australia.

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