Exploring Aboriginal Identity through Self-Portraiture

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Visual Art
July 2017
Abstract

This exegesis examines my practice through my identity as a Kabi Kabi, Wiradjuri, Kuku Ylandji and Pita Pita woman with English, Scottish and Romany Gypsy heritage. It contextualises the development of my practice from 1997 to 2017, which is the period immediately following my graduation from an undergraduate degree until now. The major focus of the exegesis, however, is on works from the last decade, when self-portraiture became a prominent part of my practice, which I explore through a variety of media: photography, performance, painting, drawing, and sculpture.

To contextualise my practice, I also examine contemporary artists who utilise Indigenous frameworks to disrupt the traditions of Western portraiture. My own work uses humour and ideas of performativity as tools to positively intervene into debates about Aboriginal identity. For example, my use of the colour pink can be understood as candy coating a difficult conversation around colonisation. I also reclaim the language of the coloniser through serial portraiture and challenge ideas of Aboriginal femininity. Contributing to identity politics art, I refuse the idea of an essential self through the idea of a performative self-portrait. One of my aims is to reclaim Aboriginal agency and to decolonise the idea of the self.
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**Statement of Originality**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Signed                        Date
Table of Contents:

TABLE OF FIGURES:...........................................................................................................................................5

INTRODUCTION: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY.................................................................9

CHAPTER 1: AGENCY AND THE EUROCENTRIC GAZE ..............................................................17

CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS ARTISTS RECLAIMING WESTERN PORTRAITURE BY UTILISING INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORKS .........................................................................................................................25

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS’ ANTI-PORTRAITURE .................................................................................................................................................................29

CHAPTER 4: MY STUDIO PRACTICE 1997–2017 ...........................................................................35

WORKS CITED .......................................................................................................................................................57

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................................................................64
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Photographer unknown, Peter Loder at Cherbourg, 1952, photograph, State Library of Qld, John Oxley Library</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Photographer unknown, Cherbourg - Men Painted up for Ceremony at Murgon Showgrounds, 1946, photograph, courtesy Alex Bond</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Captain George Grey, , <em>Native of Western Australia</em>,1841, lithograph printed by M. and N. Hanhart Lithographic Printers</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Tracey Moffatt, <em>Other</em>, 2009, film still</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Barthélemy Roger, <em>Nouvelle-Hollande Oui-Ré-Kine [Worogan]</em>, 1802, engraving, Plate XXI, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Norman Tindale, George Sibley - Palm Island, 25 October 1938, photograph, Tindale Genealogical Collection</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Carol McGregor, <em>Boundary Street Series</em>, 2013, digital photograph</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>neither pride nor courage</em>, 2006, drawing on canvas, Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Genevieve Grieves, <em>Warriors</em>, 2006, video still from <em>Picturing the Old People</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Leah King Smith, <em>Untitled No. 11, From Patterns of Connections series 11</em>, 1991, Cibachrome photograph, edition of 25, 101 x 1025cm</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Julie Dowling, <em>Self-portrait: In Our Country</em>, 2002, acrylic, red ochre and oil on canvas 120 x 100cm</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Laurie Nilsen, <em>Dolly</em>, 2008, coloured pencil &amp; silkscreen print on paper, 84 x 60cm</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Lin Onus, <em>Michael &amp; I Are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Minute</em>, 1993, acrylic on linen</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>Tony Albert, <em>No Place 3</em>, 2009, type C photograph, 100 x 100cm</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 16  Christian Thompson, Untitled #2, King Billy series, 2010, C type print, 100 x 100cm

Figure 17  Bianca Beetson, Me me, you and me fantastic plastic emu spirit dreaming, 1997, mixed media and found objects, approx. 170 x 55 x 30cm

Figure 18  Destiny Deacon, Where’s Mickey?, 2002, lamda print from Polaroid original, 100 x 80cm

Figure 19  Bianca Beetson, Mourning Star, 1999, mixed media installation, approx. 1500 x 700 x 500cm

Figure 20  Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yam Story II, c 1994, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 51cm © Emily Kngwarreye/Copyright Agency, 2018

Figure 21  Rover Thomas, Looma - Blue Tongue Lizard Story (from the ‘Kurrr Kurrr Cycle’ series), 1986, ochre on plywood, 608 x 916cm © Rover Thomas/Copyright Agency, 2018

Figure 22  Andy Warhol, Mao (II91), 1972, screen print 914 x 914cm © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc/ARS. Copyright Agency, 2018.

Figure 23  Bianca Beetson, Assimilation, 2009, acrylic on linen, 75 x 55cm

Figure 24  Richard Bell, Life on a Mission, 2009, acrylic on canvas

Figure 25a  Bianca Beetson, It’s Been a Bad Day, Please Don’t Take My Picture, 2010, pen on Arches paper, 79 x 59cm

Figure 25b  Bianca Beetson, It’s Been a Bad Day, Please Don’t Take My Picture (detail), 2010, pen on Arches paper, 79 x 59cm

Figure 26  Bianca Beetson, Letter to my Nana Marie, 2010, acrylic and paint pen on Arches paper, 79 x 59cm

Figure 27  Bianca Beetson, Blak majick woman – Grieve, 2009, digital photo on metallic paper 79 x 62cm

Figure 28  Bianca Beetson, Self Portrait (Darryl on My Mind), 2014, digital photograph

Figure 29  Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind), 1943, oil on Masonite, Gelman Collection, Mexico City

Figure 30a  Bianca Beetson, Always Was Always Will Be... Celebrating 40 Years of the Tent Embassy, 2013, digital photograph
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Artist/Sources</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30b</td>
<td>Bianca Beetson, <em>Always Was Always Will Be...Celebrating 40 Years of the Tent Embassy</em> (detail), 2013, digital photograph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31a</td>
<td>John Taylor, <em>Adrian Burragubba, 2015, Interview Still, ABC News</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31b</td>
<td>Bob Weatherall, *Brisbane Blacks Refused Entry to Stadium, 1982, photograph, courtesy Bob Weatherall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Bianca Beetson, <em>Advanced Australia Fair, 2014, digital image</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Bianca Beetson, <em>Run, Run, Run, Run catch me if you can you can't catch me no you can't catch me cos' I am the Niggerbred man, 2010, digital photograph, 3 x 100 x 100cm</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Fiona Foley, <em>Badtjala Woman, 1994, Type C photograph, 605 x 51 cm</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Bianca Beetson, <em>Blak Majick Woman, 2011, digital photograph on metallic paper, 78 x 78 cm</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respect to my ancestors and forefathers who have passed down their knowledge.

My thesis is titled Exploring Aboriginal Identity through self-portraiture. The questions it addresses are: how to transform the European portrait to accommodate Aboriginal identity, the role of the anti-portrait and the decolonisation of the self through self-portraiture.

As identity is central to my research topic and in keeping with Aboriginal protocols, I believe it is appropriate to commence by introducing myself. My name is Bianca Beetson. I am a woman, a mother, a wife, a daughter, an aunt, a sister, an artist, an activist, a teacher, a leader, a student, a healer, a cook, and a cleaner.

Beyond this extensive list of roles that define who I am, my identity is also partially defined by my ancestral heritage. I am the genetic by-product of my parents. My mother is of Scottish, English, and Irish heritage; a descendant of the Scottish Grant and MacGregor clans. My father is of Aboriginal, Romany Gypsy, and English heritage, who descends from the Kabi Kabi, Wiradjuri, Pita Pita, and Kuku Yalandji peoples. Both my grandmother and great-grandmother lived under the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869 and consequently spent a considerable amount of their lives in government- or church-run institutions, where they were taught to act and think white. This experience has had an intergenerational impact, whereby my father and his brothers and sisters were raised to also act and think white, and had to deny their Aboriginal heritage in order to remain as a family unit and not be forcibly removed by authorities.

My mum and dad met during a time when interracial relationships were not accepted by society and, therefore, there was more pressure imposed upon my
family to hide the Aboriginality in the family. Consequently, my immediate and extended family members were denied their Aboriginal culture.

However, as the progeny of an interracial relationship—or being a cultural hybrid—I often ponder my desire to privilege one cultural identity over another. In addition to this, as a visual artist, I often question why my subject matter is always focused on my identity and, in particular, what it means to be Aboriginal. Part of my interest in identifying strongly with being Aboriginal has stemmed from my personal experience of growing up feeling like a misfit. The frequently uttered statement “Not being black enough to fit in with the black kids and not being white to fit in with the white kids” resonates with my experience. To compound to the confusion of my identity, I was the Aboriginal girl with the Scottish accent, having spent many of my formative years in Scotland.

For many years, I believed I could not identify myself or my art as ‘Aboriginal’, as I had not grown up in an Aboriginal community, I was raised to think and act white, and I possessed only a few of the physical attributes associated with an Aboriginal appearance. I perceived myself as physically being ‘not black enough’ and my art was not aesthetically black enough either. I know I am not alone in this experience; over the years, I have discovered this to be a particularly common experience for urban-based Aboriginal people across Australia, as evidenced in the following quote by Gordon Bennett:

I decided that I was in a very interesting position: my mind and body had been effectively colonized by Western culture, and yet my Aboriginality, which had been historically, socially and personally repressed, was still part of me … I decided that I would attempt to create a space by adopting a strategy of intervention and disturbance in the field of representation through my art. (Bennett cited in Lancashire, 1997)

Like Bennett, having been physically and mentally colonised provoked me to develop a deeper understanding of my Aboriginality; being Aboriginal runs
deeper than just the colour of your skin and the aesthetics of your art. Being Aboriginal is about a way of being and, no matter how you have been raised or how you live, Aboriginal people share this way of being, whether it is through their connection to country, their pattern of thinking, their spirituality, their kinship and family relationships, or their politics. As David Towney affirms, “Aboriginal people are not a skin colour, we are a community and people by history, spirituality, locations, country, thinking, politics, treatment, laws, cultures and most importantly, our stories” (Towney n.d., 27).

If skin colour is no longer a determining factor of Aboriginality, then there are a number of other factors to consider in order to determine ‘who is Aboriginal’. This is one of the challenges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face in today’s society as a consequence of the colonial destruction of Aboriginal society.

The Certificate of Aboriginality is the only form of confirmation of Aboriginal identity that is recognised by the government, education, and community sectors. However, the process required to obtain this certificate is somewhat flawed and further disadvantages those who are already severely affected by the breakdown of the Aboriginal family unit and denied Aboriginal identity. The application process requires Aboriginal people to meet the following criteria: the applicant must be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; they must identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person; and they must be accepted as such by the community in which they live or formerly lived (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2014). Caroline Overington highlights the difficulties involved: “Many Aboriginal people struggle to place themselves on a family tree because they were raised by white people, or because so many of their ancestors refused to acknowledge the Aboriginal blood in their line” (Overington 2012).

This quote echoes my own experience as my father’s generation was compelled to deny their Aboriginality, instead passing themselves off as being of Maori, Indian, Greek, Mexican, or Spanish descent.
Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton describes this ‘passing’ as follows: “There were many Aboriginal people who were so intimidated and did sneak away and pretend to be ‘white’. It was called ‘passing’, a play on words, connoting both ‘passing away’, as in dying, and ‘passing himself off as white’” (Langton 2014).

This practice of ‘passing’ was encouraged by my grandmother to protect my father and his siblings from being removed from their family by authorities, as they were classified as half-caste children. Secondly, it enabled them to escape the racism they faced from being an Aboriginal family in a small country western Queensland town, where immigrants gained more acceptance by mainstream Australia than the Aboriginal people did. This notion of passing continued to be encouraged into my generation; despite knowing of my Aboriginal heritage, I was encouraged not to tell people—it was treated as the family’s ‘dirty little secret’. Although the reasons for withholding this information were motivated by the best intentions, the denial of my identity greatly impacted on my self-esteem and sense of self. Therefore, in my late teens, I began piecing together the Aboriginality I had been denied for most of my life. Piece by piece, I began putting together this jigsaw which is my Aboriginal identity.

In the late 1990s, my dad came out from the Aboriginal closet—he proudly purchased Aboriginal artworks for his walls at home as a statement of pride in his culture. He started to talk about his culture. We both became involved in Native Title claims over our country. This was not without its difficulties. In proving connection to country, a great deal of family history research was undertaken; our family history was ‘sketchy’ to say the least. There was so little documentation of my family; much of it was only available through police records and removal registers, and we could only go back two generations, as we only had tribal names prior to this. I was particularly struck by the lack of pictorial documentation of my family. Despite two generations being located at

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1 Of course this issue of passing is not limited to the Aboriginal experience and the work of international academics and artists in this field should be acknowledged such as Adrian Piper, Valerie Smith, Cheryl I. Harris amongst others.
Cherbourg Mission, it still took at least ten years of research before I found a picture of my great-grandfather Peter Loder (figure 1).

![Photograph of Peter Loder at Cherbourg, 1952](image)

**Figure 1** Photographer unknown, Peter Loder at Cherbourg, 1952

This is the only existing picture we have of any of my great-grandparents on my maternal Aboriginal side. Various government documents stated my great-grandmother, Sarah Loder, possessed tribal initiation scars, which are the only indicator of her identity and status in Aboriginal society. Body scarification was used to visually identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people before the colonisation of Australia. Bob Burruwal, an Aboriginal elder, explains the notion of scarification as follows: “Scarring is like a language inscribed on the body, where each deliberately placed scar tells a story of pain, endurance, identity, status, beauty, courage, sorrow or grief” (Burruwal 2010).
Comparable to scarification (figure 2), body painting is a temporal manner of documenting an Aboriginal person’s identity and is applied for ceremonial purposes only. The body paint designs indicate the societal status of the person, their kinship connections, and the purpose of the ceremony being performed. Connection to country is very important to me, particularly given the context of the disconnection of my family from country due to the forced removal process—my family are part of what is commonly referred to as the Stolen Generation. They were moved from Buderim to Cherbourg.

Figure 3 is an image of men from Cherbourg Aboriginal mission at the Murgon Showgrounds ready to undertake a public ceremony. The image indicates that the men are from many different locations due to the variety of body paint designs, while the shared elements indicate they may be intermarried.
Tom Blake points out that from the 1920s to the 1950s, the Aboriginal population across Queensland strongly believed that being sent to a reserve was a form of punishment despite government authorities claiming it was for their own protection. This ever-present threat to families was diligently enforced by police and/or public servants for the smallest and often a fabricated misdemeanour. Cherbourg at that time was considered “the place that was a ‘dumping ground for the lame, the halt and the incorrigible’ and also became a place of resistance and survival” (Blake 2001).

This notion of a ‘dumping ground’ meant that Aboriginal people from many different clan groups shared one location and ceremonies became shared in order to maintain cultural practices. This photograph (figure 3) is typical of the way Aboriginal people were portrayed in this era; its purpose was often to document the race before—it was believed—it would die out. According to the anthropologist Norman Tindale, breeding colour out would take three generations (McGregor 2002; Carey and McLisky 2009). Alternatively, these
photographs could be seen to document the endurance of the Aboriginal race and the cultural adoptions they undertook to survive.

Queensland Aboriginal photographer and historian Michael Aird states:

Sadly, some photographers have been used to exclude Aboriginal people from their history and identity. Captions such as ‘the last of the tribe’ are examples of how this happened. Some photographs have at times been used to further the causes of Modern Aboriginal factional politics, but in general early photographs play an important role in how Aboriginal families publicly state their genuine connection to country. (Aird 2014, 133)

Since 2010, I have begun to draw on these types of early photographs in my practice, transforming ethnographic images into empowering self-portraits which reference family and connection to country. Veritably, many Aboriginal artists utilise these photographs, as I will discuss later. This exegesis is divided into four chapters that cover key issues relevant to my practice, such as agency, portraiture, and challenging the Eurocentric gaze. While the exhibition will only include works from the period of my candidature, this exegesis includes work from my entire career to date. Contextualising the doctoral work in this way reveals my consistent concerns and the recurrent themes in my practice.
Chapter 1: Agency and the Eurocentric Gaze

My interest in portraiture began in 1994 when I saw the exhibition Portrait of our Elders curated by Michael Aird, for the Queensland Museum, which featured a photograph of my paternal grandmother in Cherbourg. Aird’s project of using photography to reconnect Aboriginal people to family and country underscored the importance of portraiture for a sense of belonging. His approach contested the Eurocentric gaze,\(^2\) by giving agency to Aboriginal people through the identification of the sitters. There is a vast literature on the gaze, for my purposes I focus on the Eurocentric gaze. The Eurocentric gaze denied agency to the Indigenous sitters by treating them as specimens or objects to be anthropologically observed (Garden 2011). Through this exhibition, I became aware of the need to examine portraiture and the history of the depiction of Aboriginal people. Whilst post-colonial theory may be useful for the discussion of other colonised people, I have found Australian source more relevant for practice. Jane Lydon archival approach to photography is the most pertinent source for my project. Her discussion of representation is highly nuanced, acknowledging the fluidity of Aboriginal identity and countering essentialist idea. She states “Intellectual critique of Indigenous representation is often ethnocentric and irrelevant, failing to see that specific political contexts determine the meanings and effects of such representations, and that these, too, are mutable and fluid” (Lydon 2005).

Consequently contesting ethnographic imagery has been important to many Aboriginal artists’ practice. The colonisation of Australia saw ethnographers, anthropologists, and artists documenting Aboriginal people, as observing them going about their everyday life. These observers objectified Aboriginal peoples as they painted and photographed them without interacting with them. They did not take the time to obtain a greater understanding of their cultural practices, spirituality, political reality or their individual personality traits. Furthermore,

\(^2\) The Eurocentric gaze is also referred to as the Western or Imperial gaze in a number of texts. See for example the work of post-colonial critic E. Ann Kaplan amongst many others (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995)
they documented Aboriginal people using Western art aesthetics through a Eurocentric gaze, techniques, and palettes. Aboriginal people were depicted using a range of stereotypes, often depicted as being grotesque or scary. (Jane Lydon)

Elisabeth Findlay gives a succinct summary of some of these nineteenth-century stereotypes in her article about early portraits of Aborigines in New South Wales:

The portraits of the Aborigines of New South Wales produced at the turn of the nineteenth century defy neat categorisation. They occupy an equivocal position, falling between the pre-settlement notion of the idealised ‘noble savage’ and the mid-nineteenth century ‘comic savage’ and/or colonised indigene. The images do not fit into the hagiography of the ideal indigene that flowed from Cook’s voyage, or into the category of recrimination that emerged with the grotesque caricaturing of Aborigines in the 1840s. They cannot even be comfortably paired with the later nineteenth-century return to sympathetic imagery in which the Aborigines are unmistakably depicted as colonial subjects. (Findlay 2014, 152)

As Findlay notes, the ‘noble savage’ was a popular pre-invasion stereotype. It resulted in a romanticised portrayal of the Aboriginal warriors as black, curly-haired men, who wore head bands and a lap-lap, and they were often posed in spear-wielding attack mode, as demonstrated in the picture below by Captain George Grey from 1841 (figure 4).
Many examples of this genre have influenced Indigenous contemporary artists, such as Archie Moore, Adam Hill, Gordon Bennett, Richard Bell, Tony Albert, Destiny Deacon and Sandra Hill.

Another common stereotype is the ‘exotic other’, which saw Aboriginal people depicted in a way that made them appear to be desirable. They were either depicted from an idealised lifestyle perspective, or from a sexualised desire, which was enticing the colonial males to taste the forbidden fruit of the Aboriginal woman. This concept of the exotic other is critiqued in Tracy Moffatt’s film Other (figure 5). In this film Moffatt examines the locality Western power structures associated with notions of Edwards Said’s theories of Orientalism, which includes the ‘exotic other’. (moosavinia, Niazi and Ghaforian 2011) Whilst evoking notions of the Western consumption of the ‘other’ without contributing to it.
In addition to the ‘exotic other’ and the ‘noble savage’, there was the ‘feminine delicacy’ (see figure 6), which objectified Aboriginal people, with a sexual emphasis placed on the women. Anita Heiss suggests:

They [the colonisers] saw Aboriginal women as objects, and treated them differently to Aboriginal men, viewing them as ‘feminine delicacy’. Such views of Aboriginal women often reflected more about the European men themselves, than their chosen subjects. The creation of such female images also shows the destructive nature of colonisation when European art, made for a European audience, perpetuated denigrating attitudes to Aboriginal women. (Heiss n.d.)
Fiona Foley’s *Badjala Woman* (1994) plays with this genre of imagery, and I discuss this work in greater detail later in the exegesis.

More contemporary examples of the depiction of Aboriginal people through a Eurocentric gaze are the highly controversial images taken of Aboriginal people from various missions throughout Australia. Norman Tindale was said to have taken a scientific approach through his photographic recording of Aboriginal people. He documented individual Aboriginal people as a part of the research he undertook in the development of Australia’s Racial Assimilation Policy of 1937 (Australians Together n.d.). Members of the Aboriginal community have implied that Tindale photographed Aboriginal people as a dying race, which further aimed to document the effects of the racial assimilation policy (Aird, Ah Kee, and Coleman 2012). In the documentary *Stolen Generation* directed by Darlene Johnson, elders argue that Tindale wrote his theory of race in Australia, based around this notion (Johnson 2000).

There is a controversy surrounding Tindale’s research in the Aboriginal community, with Aboriginal academics strongly criticising his research.
processes (Aird, Ah Kee, and Coleman 2012). Tindale documented Aboriginal people purely as scientific subjects, removing all sense of individuality and personality by photographing them mug-shot style next to their mission identification number; thus, he was reinforcing the non-humanness assigned to Aboriginal people of this era. Up until the 1950s, Aboriginal people were not categorised as being human; rather, they were classified as fauna and flora by the government (Sutton 2014). They were rounded up from their traditional lands like the settlers’ sheep and cows and relocated to the margins.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/george-sibley-portrait/4257516

**Figure 7** Norman Tindale, George Sibley – Palm Island, 25 October 1938

Tindale’s portraits of Aboriginal people such as George Sibley (figure 7) still evoke a mixed response from Aboriginal people. For some people, seeing these images was the first time they had seen images of their Aboriginal ancestors and so see them positively, while others are concerned with the dehumanising means by which the portraits were taken. Historians Julie Finlayson and Ann Curthoys explain the positive reception of these images:

In some areas of settled Australia, the genealogies collected by Anthropologist Norman Tindale are considered immensely important to Aboriginal communities. Many communities have only recently had access to the data he collected as part of the Harvard Adelaide University Expeditions, and during other field research projects. For Aboriginal people removed from their Traditional homelands in Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales and elsewhere, Tindale’s genealogies now represent primary historical sources describing details of their genealogies providing a touchstone to their classical traditions.

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3 There are two schools of thought about this classification, see article below: http://clubtroppo.com.au/2013/06/03/were-indigenous-people-regulated-by-the-flora-fauna-act/
Not surprisingly, Aboriginal people in the diaspora are turning enthusiastically to Tindale’s research and maps for information about the distribution of indigenous groups and their associations with country. (Finlayson and Curthoys, 1997, 3)

I will return to Tindale’s portraits when I consider the work of contemporary artist Vernon Ah Kee. The marginalisation of Aboriginal people by the colonial settlers is also evident in the pictorial identification of Aboriginal people as outcasts or fringe dwellers.

The forced removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands resulted in Aboriginal people living on the fringes of major cities and towns. As they were no longer able to hunt traditionally, they needed to come into town to access food and supplies. For example, in Brisbane, the Police Towns Act of 1839 stated that Aboriginal people were not allowed to enter the town during certain hours, with boundary streets being the limits outside these hours. As Matthew Condon explains, “Aboriginal people were exiled beyond the boundary lines after 4pm six days a week and completely on Sundays. Troopers rode the perimeter cracking stock-whips” (Condon 2010). Contemporary artists who examine the history of boundary streets include those such as Carol McGregor (figure 8). McGregor’s work shows how contemporary Aboriginal artists highlight historical places of contention and exclusion. Place, identity, and belonging are key themes of her practice as well as my own.
Figure 8 Carol McGregor, *Boundary Street Series*, 2013
Chapter 2: Contemporary Australian Indigenous Artists
Reclaiming Western Portraiture by Utilising Indigenous Frameworks

The focus of this chapter will be on how contemporary Aboriginal artists are reclaiming Western portraiture by applying Indigenous frameworks to it. Indigenous approaches to knowledge are now a vital part of the academy, theorist such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Tuhiwai Smith 1999) have been vital to my project and in particular her idea of decolonising the self has informed my approach to portraiture.

There is a vast amount of literature on portraiture. In the last several decades, several writers have addressed issues surrounding the function of portraiture, its definition and how a portrait can be understood in terms of its broader social setting. In 1987 Richard Brilliant edited a special issue of Art Journal, which was entitled ‘Portraits: The Limitations of Likeness’. (Brilliant 2014) My practice also interrogates the traditional centrality of likeness through masquerade and performance.

Brilliant continued this line of reasoning in his 1991 book Portraiture. (Brilliant, Portraiture 1991) More recently, Shearer West wrote a book also entitled Portraiture. (West 2004) All these publications contain a considerable amount of valuable information on how we can approach a portrait and they explain that since the Renaissance the portrait has been underpinned by notions of the physiognomy, that is the idea that the outward appearance of a person offers insights into an individual's character.

The importance of 'likeness', however, has been challenged by authors such as Harry Berger who in Fiction of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance (Berger 2000) contends that every portrait is a ‘fiction’ or an ‘act of posing’ in which the patron, sitter, artist and audience have all played a part in the final shape and message of the portrait. In my practice I frequently occupy all of these roles.
Like Berger, I ask the viewer to go beyond reading too much into likeness. He encourages the viewer to see what the sitter had ‘in mind’ – what their intention was – when they sat for their portrait. Cynthia Freeland in Portraits and Persons (Freeland 2010) explores definitions of portraits and tests the validity of notions of capturing the inner life or mental state of the sitter. These challenges to physiognomic theories of the portraiture, mean that the definition of the portrait has moved beyond being a likeness of person and has expanded to be much more concerned with notions of identity.

In my practice I am redefining notions of Western portraiture by creating a new set of rules which go beyond straight identification of the individual, and instead look at the individual's identity in a broader context. They are overturning the negative Eurocentric way in which Aboriginal people were depicted by the colonial painters and photographers.

Portraiture articulates the visibility of Aboriginal people and validates their contemporary existence. It accentuates the fact we are not extinct as a race, as the Australian government had previously intended.

Figure 9 Vernon Ah Kee, neither pride nor courage, 2006

Vernon Ah Kee has sourced photographs of his family from the Tindale collection (figure 9) to produce poignant works that capture the personalities behind the scientific images. Ah Kee writes,
I’m expanding the idea of what it means to be Aboriginal and what it means to be human. A lot of the problems this country has with Aboriginal people is that it struggles to see Aboriginal people as fully human. (Ah Kee cited in (Caines 2011, 1)

In giving the people in the picture an identity (beyond a mission number), Ah Kee is humanising them. He removes the mission numbers from the anthropological labels in the original photographs (see figure 7) and replaces them with the names of their country. Ah Kee asserts,

[I want to] remove ideas of the noble savage and the exotic other, ‘cause I want these people to be people, and to be deep-thinking, intelligent, emotive, complex and all the things that other people are allowed to be except for black fellas. (Ah Kee cited in McKenny 2008)

Similar to Ah Kee’s work, artist Genevieve Grieves’s video installation *Picturing the Old People* (figure 10) draws on historical studio photographs of Aboriginal people and transforms them by reanimating them. Grieves brings to life the old staged studio photos of Aboriginal people. Her work captures the personality, sense of humour, and everyday reality of what was happening behind the camera. Like Ah Kee, Grieves restores a sense of humanness to the subjects of the pictures.


**Figure 10** Genevieve Grieves, *Warriors*, 2006, from *Picturing the Old People*

As Michael Connor writes,

The films are the imagined antics staged as studio renderings—Aboriginal participants were encouraged to engage in performances to
make them appear "more Aboriginal". The pieces are based on the actual photographs from the archives which were studied by Grieves.

She identified particular motifs which ran through many of these photographs, such as romanticized images of the ‘noble savage’ to the allure of the ‘exotic woman’. She created five video portraits modelled after these archetypal motifs, in which the subjects occasionally come to life to enact their suppressed desires. In the video entitled Warrior, a man in a bowler hat shows his Indigenous subject the correct way to hold a spear. The recreated action comes off as slightly slapstick, but many ostensibly empirical ethnographic photos of the time were equally artificial. (Connor 2008)

Leah King Smith’s series ‘Patterns of Connections’ (figure 11) repositions nineteenth-century photographs of Aboriginal people taken by Europeans by overlaying colour images of the Victorian landscape. These deeply moving images repatriate these previously objectified ancestors back to country.

Figure 11 Leah King Smith, Untitled No. 11, From Patterns of Connections series 11, 1991
Unlike Ah Kee, King Smith and Grieves, Badimaya artist Julie Dowling puts herself into the picture in an attempt to connect with her Aboriginal heritage. Dowling’s work, while using classical portraiture conventions, reflects her personal struggles as a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman and her cultural dispossession. Dowling’s works are described by Chris McAuliffe as follows:

Addressing the complexities of history, memory, politics and trauma adds significantly to the power of her work. Dowling strives to ‘present the unpresentable’; to make past experience concrete in the present, to allow us to see inner life beneath the surface of appearance, to grasp something of another person’s culture and experience however different from our own. (McAullife 2007, 52)


**Figure 12** Julie Dowling, *Self-portrait: In Our Country*, 2002

Julie Dowling’s *Self-portrait: in our country* (figure 12) is about reassigning culture, history, and heritage to her own image. She is telling the story of her own cultural dispossession and reconnection through the medium of portraiture. She uses her body as a canvas in order to reconnect herself to family and country. The surreal image and the placement of her hands on her ancestors places the image in an indeterminate place and time, implying the dreamtime.

All of the artists discussed in this chapter have one thing in common: they are all focussed on humanising the Aboriginal subject and assigning family, history and culture back to the people in the images. The figures all look out at us, reclaiming the gaze and contesting objectification. In the next chapter, I
consider contemporary Indigenous Australian artist’s strategies for anti-portraiture.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Indigenous Australian Artists’ Anti-Portraiture

Andrew Sayers, the late Director of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Australia, suggested that the Western rules and conventions of portraiture emphasise individuality. In the opening exhibition of the new NPG titled *Open Air*, curated by Sayers, he demonstrated a much more inclusive approach to portraiture. For example, he included Pukumani poles from the Tiwi Islands. In the foreword to the catalogue, he acknowledged the importance of Indigenous traditions:

National portrait galleries have been traditionally predicated on the idea that identity can be equated with individuality. In Australia, however, we have Indigenous traditions in which identity is actually lodged somewhere else – in relationships and in people’s relationships to land. (Sayers cited in McFarlane 2009, 83)
As the quote above indicates Indigenous identity is not formed in isolation it is relational, dynamic and closely tied to country. This shift to think more broadly about identity is echoed by anthropologist Howard Morphy. He proposes a conception of portraiture that is useful for thinking about Aboriginal art in a historical context.

As soon as you start getting the definition of portrait widened to the extent that you can have someone's genome as a representation of them, then you're in a world where what portraits are to do with is identity. And Aboriginal art is centrally concerned with the identity of people. (Morphy cited in Martin 2006)

Clearly, Aboriginal artists look beyond the self to consider kinship relationships and connection to country, as both Morphy and Sayers acknowledge. Lauren Martin sees the representation of Indigenous identity as also anti-portraiture:

Yet after 30 years of radical reappraisal of indigenous art, the innovative National Portrait Gallery is, ironically, one of the last to embrace traditional indigenous paintings. These mark a critical challenge to convention: the traditions of Australia's indigenous people are almost anti-portraiture. (Martin 2006)

Anti-portraiture could be understood as broadening the tradition of portraiture by challenging its conventions. Certainly, Indigenous portraiture in contemporary art moves beyond a narrow concentration on the self. The notion of anti-portraiture from an Indigenous perspective, that Martin identifies has allowed me to open out the definition of what is deemed a portrait. Her interview with Morphy make clear how Aboriginal ideas of identity are fluid and disruptive of western ideas.

Some examples of the way that Aboriginal artists represent this Indigenous approach to identity can be seen in the work of Laurie Nilsen and Lin Onus, in whose work the totem is substituted for the person.
In Nilsen’s work *Dolly* (figure 13), he depicts the connection of Aboriginal people to their animal totem; the emu is Nilsen’s family totem. In his Emu series, Nilsen depicts his family members as emus, using the characteristics of the emus to depict the personality of the family member. In addition to this, it could be argued Nilsen inadvertently refers to the time in history when Aboriginal people were not considered human and were classed as fauna and flora (Sutton 2014). Nilsen’s portraits of emus are used to highlight the connections and similarities of the animal kingdom and the human world. He also uses this subject matter to talk about broader political issues, such as the destruction of the environment by the hand of man and the inaccuracies in mapped Aboriginal land boundaries.
Like Nilsen’s Emu, Onus’s work *Michael & I Are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Minute* (figure 14) depicts the human subject in their animal totem form; Lin Onus as the Dingo and Michael Eather as the Stingray. Onus visually captures the interconnectedness of Aboriginal culture, and in this case depicts a cultural interconnectivity which borrows heavily from Japanese artist Hokusai’s *The Wave* (1832).

https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/no-place-091-web.jpg

**Figure 15** Tony Albert, *No Place 3*, 2009

Another way that Aboriginal artists use the genre of anti-portraiture can be seen in the work of Tony Albert *No Place 3* (figure 15). Here, the individuality of the sitter is masked or concealed. This image also relates to the
aforementioned notion of passing—the Aboriginal subject’s identity is hidden under a *lucha libre* Mexican wrestling mask. This makes the viewer believe the subject is of Mexican descent, whereas closer inspection reveals how Albert has actually employed loaded Aboriginal symbolism to signify the true identity of the subject. Bruce McLean further discusses the notion of disguise or hiding identity in Albert’s work:

> Each of these *luchadores* wears a mask to alter their identity. Each individual has a unique identity formed by their upbringing and experience, but once they adorn the *mascara*, they become their mask. Here, each mask is in the simple red, yellow and black tricolour of the Aboriginal flag, the first and most obvious allure for Albert. In the world of *luchalibre*, *mascaras* themselves reveal patterns derived from traditional masks made by the Aztecs. These continue the centuries-old traditional practice of abstract representations of an animal god or spirit being. These seemingly playful masks share much with Aboriginal—and [particularly rainforest—culture. Body and shield designs from this area are representative of an animal or spirit god or spirit being and have been abstracted through millennia of reinterpretation and individualisation of the ‘totemic’ design. (McLean 2010, 72)

If traditional portraiture is about the identification of the subject, this work could be considered anti-portraiture, as it is about the non-identification of the subject. In other words, the viewer has to search for clues to identity and their access to the individual is withheld.

Another Indigenous artist working in this vein is Christian Thompson (figure 16.). In his self-portraits, he works with masks, masquerade, disguise, and self-transformation, with his gender and identity becoming fluid and elusive.
Figure 16 Christian Thompson, *Untitled #2, King Billy series*, 2010
Chapter 4: My Studio Practice 1997–2017

This chapter will explore my work and its relationship to my research topic, which is exploring Aboriginal identity through self-portraiture. My early work represented a time when I was piecing together my Aboriginal Identity; the work focused more on broad notions of Aboriginality, while desperately attempting to not breach protocol. I did this by adopting a universal symbology with a particular focus on the colour pink in varying hues and utilising factory-manufactured materials.

The colour pink referenced the notion of the artificiality of Western society and also the candy coating of Australia’s frontier history. The work also made reference to skin and in particular my skin and my conflict of calling myself an Aboriginal while being a fair-skinned city dweller. Furthermore, the work created new dialogues of what it meant to be an Aboriginal in the 1990s. Indigenous writer Anita Heiss encapsulates the conflict I was feeling in her own words: "I get my kangaroo from Coles! … I don't collect berries; I collect jewellery from Tiffany! I don't wear ochre; I wear Revlon!" (Heiss cited in Overington 2012).

Further to this use of pink, I wrapped objects in fake fur, thus inferring that something is hidden beneath the surface. This metaphorically links back to Australia’s hidden frontier history and the pink fur coating also references the candy-coated history of Australia taught in Australian educational institutions.
Me, me, you and me Fantastic plastic emu spirit dreaming (figure 17) explores traditional ceremonial dress and body ornamentation and attempted to reconceptualise these traditional practices in a contemporary context. My approach is to take traditional body adornment and reimagine it in humorous and engaging ways. In this way, my work echoes that of Destiny Deacon which also uses humour as a tool for examining identity (see figure 18).
Having grown up essentially disconnected from my Aboriginal heritage, I decided to create a new ceremonial dress that reimagines what it means to be Aboriginal. This ceremonial outfit incorporates a crash helmet to protect me from all the abuse that had been hurled at me, a gas mask and goggles, wings, and a Madonna-inspired tutu with sink plungers. The body paint designs refer to the traditional body paint design of the Kabi Kabi people and the pink colour symbolised the candy coating necessary for sweetening the blow. The wings and the flippers offered me means to fly away from danger or swim if need be. The work, while quite phantasmagoric, depicts the bizarreness of the world in which I exist, coupled with an impending sense of doom and alienation. Therefore, this ceremonial dress becomes a battle dress for the modern day Indigenous warrior woman.
In *Mourning Star* (figure 19), I referenced Northern Territory Morning Star and burial poles for which permission was obtained from several Papunya elders, including Michael Nelson Tjakamarra. The central purpose of the work was to represent my metaphoric death, which involved a transformation and my deep personal mourning for my former selves. This can be understood as anti-portraiture as my identity is represented in a fragmented fashion: each pole stands in for a part of myself. While the work looked like sugar and smelt like coconut, the use of salt in the production referenced the salination of Indigenous land. After completing this work, I did not create any new work for a short period of time and in retrospect this work has come to represent the end of my career as an installation artist.

As my career developed further, there was more pressure to create work that was less temporary and more saleable, and therefore I began to shift my practice away from installation, soft sculpture and textiles towards painting. During this change in media, I continued to use pink as my signature. My painting was influenced stylistically by the artists I was exposed to through my
involvement in the Campfire Group (a Brisbane-based artist collective). For example I was mentored by Lin Onus, Laurie Nilsen, Rick Roser, Jennifer Herd, Michael Eather. Onus, Nilsen and Roser most directly influenced me during this time through encouraging me to simplify my work and to introduce layering and masking techniques, which I still use in my photography.

Another artist who influenced my practice during this time was Emily Kngwarreye, especially her body paint designs and ‘Wild Flower’ series (see figure 20), which are noteworthy for her use of pinks and pastels. This vindicated my use of the colour pink within the broader context of Aboriginal art. Whilst there may have been other Indigenous artists using pink at this time, Kngwarreye influenced me the most.

![Figure 20 Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yam Story II, c. 1994](image)

The simplicity of Kngwarreye’s work was also highly influential, as was that of the minimal aerial landscapes works of Rover Thomas (see figure 21). Thomas’s work taught me to look at landscape differently; his minimal and stylised aerial interpretations of the sacred sites on country instilled in me a
better understanding of the way to interpret and create a simplified symbolic visual language of country.

Figure 21 Rover Thomas, *Looma - Blue Tongue Lizard Story* (from the 'Kurirr Kurirr Cycle' series), 1986

However, not all my influences at the time were Indigenous, as I was walking with a foot in both worlds. The work of Pop artist Andy Warhol greatly informed my work, as it explored popular culture through glitter-coated portrait paintings of celebrities, toilets, symbols, and self-portraits and the question of their position in the realm fine art or kitsch.
The next progression of my works saw the introduction of the use of text, which was encouraged through my involvement in the proppaNOW Aboriginal artist collective, which I was invited to join in 2006. Working alongside artists such as Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell, and Tony Albert, who all utilise text as an important part of their work, influenced my own approach to using text in my work. I incorporate text for two main reasons: either personal/reflective or political. The lure of using text over visual imagery lies in the notion of using the language of the coloniser to speak directly to the coloniser. There is a degree of absurdity in the notion of Aboriginal artists using written language in their art practice, as Aboriginal people traditionally did not have a written language. This is further reiterated in William S. Burroughs’ quote, where he proclaims, “Language is a virus from out of space” (Burroughs 1962), which can be interpreted as meaning that people can be alienated by language. Being dyslexic, I have always experienced a different relationship with the written word, interpreting and using words in almost an alien way and often feeling disconnected and alienated by the written word.
Assimilation (figure 23) is a self-portrait that employs heavily loaded words. The artist’s statement for this work that accompanied it when it was exhibited in the proppaNOW exhibition There Goes the Neighbourhood (2009) simply said, “It’s all about skin, the skin I am in, thick and thin, the need to win, to shed my skin, to be free from sin. If you face the truth, there is no proof the skin I am in is the skin of sin.” This simple and concise statement mimic poetry again, which asks the viewer to unpack the layers of meaning, yet another feature of my art practice.

Richard Bell uses text in a more confrontational manner. He critiques colonial thinking and perspectives by refusing the label of the noble savage in his work Life on a Mission (figure 24).
Bell claims he is not an artist but an activist, giving his artwork the quality of a protest sign. Despite the very modern look of this painting, the squares in the background are reminiscent of the Kamilaroi dendroglyph carved tree. Therefore, text is combined with traditional motif.

Sometimes my use of text is not immediately obvious, as seen in *It’s Been a Bad Day, Please Don’t Take My Picture* (Figures 25a and 25b).
While the two portraits pictured above initially appear to be the same image, they are not. One is made up of language words from my grandmother’s country (Kabi Kabi language) and the second image is an angry response to the world. It talks about this notion of speaking the ‘mother tongue’ and the adoption or the coloniser’s language.

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4 See Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask, 1952
existence that urban Aboriginal people experience in contemporary society. Both of the portraits are very personal and private reflections.

Figure 26 Bianca Beetson, Letter to My Nana Marie, 2010

After viewing an episode of the SBS First Australians series (Perkins 2008) where they showed historical images of Aboriginal women in staged studio photographs dressed in their white clothes of assimilation, I wrote this letter of thanks and reflection to my deceased grandmother (figure 26). The bleeding bodylines design in the background is representative of the washing away of my cultural heritage. In this letter, I make reference to my grandmother’s humiliation, the suffering she experienced growing up in Cherbourg and the unthinkable acts she must have been subject to as a domestic on the stations. I also thanked her for what she did to break the cycle.
My most recent works which I have completed for my doctoral research have been focused on the genre of portraiture. As identity has been the common thread that has run through my work, naturally this would no doubt lead to the exploration of one’s physical image through portraiture and in particular self-portraiture.

My ‘Blak Majick Woman’ series (2011–ongoing) draws on early photographs, transforming ethnographic images into empowering self-portraits. I utilise my portraits to record moments of personal significance in my life, as demonstrated in my work *Blak Majick Woman – Grieve* (figure 27), which I created after the funeral of my grandmother. My gaze is downwards and outwards but veiled by flowers. The image is a composite of two photographs, one of which is a self-portrait with funeral ochre and the other is of the flowers from grandmother’s coffin.

![Figure 27](image)

**Figure 27** Bianca Beetson, *Blak Majick Woman – Grieve*, 2009

On 1 January 2014, I commenced a 365-day portraiture project, whereby I took a photographic self-portrait every day and uploaded it to social media. The intention of this project was not only to ensure I was completing new works but also to expand on my previous research and address issues of the
aforementioned notions of ‘passing’, sexual politics, otherness, assimilation, visibility, and authenticity.

One of the first images I made was *Self-Portrait (Darryl on My Mind)* (figure 28). A nod to Kahlo’s painting *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)* (figure 29), this portrait was made with a similar purpose. Taken when my husband was travelling in Spain alone and not communicating with the family, the photograph is about mourning my tumultuous relationship with him and trying to make myself appear more attractive as Frieda did for Diego. He was constantly in my thoughts and making me crazy.
I also use my portraiture as a statement of survival. Every time I take a photo of myself, it is an everyday reminder to tell myself to remember the survival of my people. Despite the Australian government’s attempts at racial genocide, I am the evidence the Aboriginal race is still alive and strong: I am the new Blak!

This quote by Julie Dowling reinforces this notion. She states:

The reason I paint portraits is to break down barriers between individuals. When a person views a portrait, she or he is forced to acknowledge the image of another human being. These images reflect the subject’s flaws, their fears, their history, their beauty, their inner-emotion and their existence. (Dowling 1996)

Likewise, this is one of the central aims of my portraiture work.
In 2012, I became an applicant for the Kabi Kabi First Nations Native Title Claim. As an artist, key works which demonstrate connection to country will be used in court as evidence to prove continued connection to country. My involvement in Aboriginal land rights and native title process have influenced areas of my art practice. *Always Was and Always Will Be*… (Figures 30a and 30b) is about the acknowledgement of the freedom fighters who paved the way for the new generation of Aboriginal leaders. This work combines text and portraiture: the entire image is in fact made up of text but using digital media.
The deliberate use of text associated with the video game *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games) (figure 31 a) makes reference to the Aboriginal protest t-shirt Grand Theft Australia designed by Aboriginal artist and anti Adani activist Adrian McEvoy Burragubba. (NEWS 2015)


**Figure 31a** John Taylor, *Adrian Burragubba, 2015, Interview Still, ABC News.*

In his blog, Kieron Wilson analyses this image further:

> It not just a portrait but also a commentary on the land of Australia. Beetson is analysing the knowledge of ownership from a postcolonial perspective. In *Grand Theft Auto* the player is the protagonist who has been betrayed in some way by the antagonist. As if she were a character in *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games) portrayed on splash pages and posters, Beetson portrays herself as the protagonist, betrayed by the grand theft of her land. (Wilson 2014)


**Figure 31b** Bob Weatherall, *Brisbane Blacks Refused Entry to Stadium, 1982*

This image of the Brisbane Black panther movement in 1982 (figure 31) was one of the visual references for this work, as I emulated the fashion and style of that era.
As an assimilated fair-skinned black woman parodying Captain Cook in *Advanced Australia Fair* (figure 32), I am exploring forbidden fruit in some way through these three images by depicting Australia’s patriarchal father in a comedic light. The triptych discusses dark underlying issues which have impacted Aboriginal people since colonisation. Supporting *Advanced Australia Fair* are three soundtracks: me singing the Australian national anthem “Advance Australia Fair” to the theme of the popular 1960s TV show *Gilligan’s Island*; a child chanting “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi! Oi! Oi!”; and me reciting the children’s folklore song *Captain Cook Chased a Chook* by June Factor. Lisa Chandler describes this work as encapsulating “Aboriginal Black/Blak humour which is often used ‘to discuss difficult issues which might be of a historical or culturally sensitive nature.’ Through the ‘assimilation’ of herself and Cook she places both simultaneously in a position of power and ridicule” (Chandler 2104). *Advanced Australia Fair* addresses issues of the White Australia Policy, the assimilation policy, the myth of *terra nullius* and land rights/ownership, and the impact of introduced species. It also touches on the twenty-first-century Australian phenomena of ‘boganism’ disguised as patriotism. This was clearly apparent through the Cronulla riots, which brought back the issues of land ownership. Only Aboriginal people truly understood the irony of the Cronulla riots. The work *CantChant* (2007) by Vernon Ah Kee clearly references the cultural turf wars which played out on the beach in Cronulla.
Another work which speaks to this issue of skin colour and authenticity is my work *Run, Run, Run, Run catch me if you can you can’t catch me no you can’t catch me cos’ I am the Niggerbred man* (figure 33).

![Figure 33 Bianca Beetson, Run, Run, Run, Run catch me if you can you can’t catch me no you can’t catch me cos I am the Niggerbred man, 2010](image)

This work addresses issues of the anthropological categorisation of Aboriginal people based on skin colour. Until recently, Aboriginal people were discriminated against and categorised on the basis of their skin colour and percentage of whiteness; the terminology used by anthropologist Norman Tindale included ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’, and ‘quadroon’ (Mcgregor 2009). *Run, Run, Run, Run catch me if you can you can’t catch me no you can’t catch me cos I am the Niggerbred man* aims to give a positive spin on the negative categorisation of Aboriginal people. The work was made at the time of the ongoing negative media attention created by Andrew Bolt in regard to Aboriginal identity based on skin colour. The three photographs of gingerbread men make light of the debate.

My series ‘Black Majick Woman’ references historical representations of Aboriginal women in order to reclaim the gaze. The works address issues of Aboriginality, spirituality, and sexuality. The *Blak Majick Woman* work (figure 35) was influenced by the ‘Badtjala Woman’ series of work by Fiona Foley.
Foley’s *Badtjala Woman* (figure 34) refers to an early anthropological image, and the artist recasts herself in that anonymous role. The shell necklace and averted gaze are borrowed from the archival image, yet Foley defies objectification, as she puts it, “with an unspoken eloquence of spunk” (Foley cited in Genocchio 2001, 68).
In my work, like Foley, I retrace my ancestors’ footsteps metaphorically and demonstrate the beauty of the Aboriginal woman without the sexualised male gaze being applied to the work.

Additionally, this series of works scrutinises my identity as a contemporary Aboriginal woman juxtaposed with the role women traditionally played. It investigates the notions of magic, love, nurture, healing and lore. Furthermore, it revisits the intrinsic links between culture, history and ancestry by positioning them within a contemporary context. In addition to this, the work explores my connection to skin in a physical and metaphysical manner. It references images of old portraits taken of Aboriginal people.

![Figure 36 Bianca Beetson, Self-Portrait – Woman on a Mission, 2014](image)

The work *Self-Portrait – Woman on a Mission* (figure 36) takes the notion of feminine identity to the other extreme. From the highly sexualised naked native woman of the ‘black majick woman’ to the habit-wearing nun, both of these images are addressing the spiritual nature of the Aboriginal woman. However, this work explores the impact of Christianity on Aboriginal culture. It also
explores this notion of hiding our identity and culture, and passing ourselves as something we are not.

The prominent contemporary artist Cindy Sherman has also been an important influence on my practice, and the following statement by her reiterates the way in which we can manipulate and control the way we are seen in the world through self-portraiture:

We’re all products of what we want to project to the world. Even people who don’t spend any time, or think they don’t, on preparing themselves for the world out there—I think ultimately they have for their whole lives, groomed themselves to be a certain way, to present a face to the world. (Sherman cited in QAGOMA 2016)

Here Sherman underscores the inescapability of societal grooming which effects women more commonly. She also highlights the freedom, choice and agency that sits alongside the pressure to conform.

In my case, the societal rules and expectations bear upon both femininity and Aboriginal femininity. I inhabit two worlds that are sometimes in conflict and this informs my approach to self-portraiture. My practice often explodes these stereotypical restrictions through parody and mass production of images of the self. The vast number of self-portraits bombards the viewer with more representations than they can digest.

In addition, I have wanted to reclaim and revise earlier examples of Aboriginal performativity such as Archibald Meston’s Aboriginal performers from 1892–1893 (depicted in figure 3). Meston is a highly controversial figure in Queensland history; he was an Aboriginal protector who exploited Aboriginal performers both here and overseas (Aird, Mapar & Memmott 2015) More than likely, the photograph of the dance ceremony at Cherbourg included in the introduction of this exegesis is one of Meston’s performance troupes. My work aims to honour that tradition of performing Aboriginality. These performances by Meston’s troupe may have drawn on Aboriginal traditions but were a complete invention of the time because the participants were drawn from
different clans. Despite the constrained circumstances of the performers, I want to imagine them as having creative agency and being able to reinvent Aboriginal performance. Likewise, by refusing a singular identity in my work, I reject essentialist notions of Aboriginality. I become an agent of representation rather than the represented.

Performativity has of course been a key approach to identity in feminist theory and the work of women artists such as Cindy Sherman, mentioned above. For example, feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s idea of gender as performance emphasises the importance of action and agency; the priority of the deed over the doer. As Butler explains: “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler 1990, 142). It is through deeds and actions that stereotypical ideas of identity can be challenged. Similarly, as this exegesis has shown, my practice seeks to bring together Aboriginal sensibilities and contemporary thinking about identity.
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