

Indigenising the Curriculum; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Heritage

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Kamilaroi Totem: Kaputhin the Eagle. [Wedgetail Eagle by Ron Knight CC BY 2.0]

It hit me like a bomb. We are [Indigenising the curriculum](#), and that's that. I have to attend Indigenous cultural awareness training. But I have Aboriginal heritage from my maternal grandmothers. I've just never identified as Aboriginal. Until now.

youngest son carried the tradition on). I've heard all the family stories and I've spent many hours researching my family's history. The records of my paternal side provided a level of scrutiny, putting to bed many false rumours about certain ancestors. Yet there were actual records to consult.

On my maternal grandmothers' side, there was a distinct absence of birth records, even after Federation. But there were lots of myths. A few years ago, I responded to a researcher who was looking into myths in family history - I had discovered plenty over the years. As part of an ethereal plan, the researcher contacted me to discuss my family "myths" just after the Indigenising the Curriculum project impacted upon me.

It brought up so much stuff. Growing up in Far North Queensland and being the only white kid in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander football team for several years was not much fun. On the field there was a strong sense of team spirit, but off-field interactions were quite different. All the stuff of politics and discrimination was played out then - and all this before Pauline Hanson. It was confusing and I had no idea of the plight of Australia's Indigenous Peoples at the time. I was only a child. Like most aspects of globalisation and cross-cultural interaction, however, family tends to break down any inherited political boundaries.

My brother-in-law, my "Thowie" (thow pronounced tow as in wow - as per the tradition for brothers-in-law, we call each other Thowie and not by our first names), is a Torres Strait Islander, and my niece and nephew are Torres Strait Islanders and part of my family. Family comes first, so their heritage is something I feel obliged to defend. In 2008 I was asked to deliver a [National Sorry Day speech](#) at the University of Canberra, and it struck me then the stupidity of racist politics. I am not one of them or one of you, I am one of us.

I was initially upset by the Indigenising the Curriculum project. It felt contrived, part of the greater Neo-colonial project, cultural appropriation at best. But as a scholar

I consulted with a number of my Indigenous colleagues and decided that the angst was less important than the intention, so I attended the Indigenising the Curriculum project briefing, and then I completed the [National Museum's Teaching Indigenous History](#) course. I am yet to complete the Cultural Awareness training but I am booked in.

Now I am 50 and I have three grandchildren. My grandchildren don't know that they have Aboriginal heritage and my two sons don't know much about it either. When I met my long lost maternal great-grandmother in the late 1970s, she claimed she was [Cherokee Indian](#). That myth stuck so well that I find it difficult to point out the truth to other family members - who am I, after all, to tell another what their identity ought to be based on? It's not about identity politics. It's none of my business.

But why Cherokee Indian? I suppose it explained her skin colour. And delving into my great-grandmother's past (I had to obtain my grandmother's permission to access the records at [Aboriginal Affairs](#) in NSW), I found nothing. No birth record. And the marriage and death records were confusing.

A few years ago, I purchased the death and marriage certificates of my maternal grandmothers and was able to piece together a lineage back to an Aboriginal woman named "Kelly" (my 4 x great grandmother). She married an ex-convict and they had children. The ex-convict later had his ticket-of-leave withdrawn for neglecting his "half-caste" children. I was able to follow the maternal lineage down to my great-grandmother, but there were some mysteries that remain.

I can be sure that my 3 x great grandmother is [Kamilaroi](#) because her and her descendants are listed as eligible to be part of the [Gomeroi \(an alternative spelling for Kamilaroi\) People Native Title Claim Group](#). But the mystery deepens when I look to my great grandmother (the "Cherokee"). Why Cherokee and not Aboriginal?

There are numerous anomalies. I can be fairly certain that she was born in 1905, but there is no birth certificate. But her death certificate has [Walhallow \(Caroona\)](#)

married. Her own death certificate suggests her father was the foreman at Walhallow, but this is impossible because the dates don't match.

Whenever I talk to my Indigenous friends, they acknowledge the difficulty in finding one's "mob" - there is so much truth to the idea of "[The Stolen Generation](#)", but it goes back to the earliest days of white settlement.

My hypothesis is that my great-grandmother's father was an Aboriginal man. She was born at Walhallow Mission where discrimination remained [a problem](#) as late as the 1960s. But my great-great grandmother seems to have had acquired a sense of [social capital](#) from her extended family (one of her uncles was apparently well-dressed and well-educated). I suspect she created my great-grandmother's false history and assumed identity - Cherokee, a different surname, and at different times two different white fathers - and managed to get out of the mission.

Until her death my great-grandmother claimed she was Cherokee Indian, but the records prove otherwise. I need to go back to my grandmother to obtain her permission to go back to Aboriginal Affairs to go through the records again with my new information. I get upset when I think about my great grandmother and her mother navigating through such institutionalised racism. Regrettably, such stories are not uncommon.

It makes me even more upset when I think about the Indigenous Peoples of this continent and how they have lived in harmony with the ecosystem for thousands of years, only to be relegated to a type of "fauna" by people who continue to destroy the ecosystem for little more than greed in the space of a couple of centuries.

When talking to my colleagues about my issues with identifying as Aboriginal, one said to me that it was much bigger than me and my ego. If I thought it was too much hassle for me, within about 100 years my descendants would lose that very heritage I have re-discovered. I'd never thought of it that way before. If I don't pass on that heritage, it will be lost *again*.

responsibility of departmental secretaries. Generally, stewardship refers to the [intergenerational custodianship](#) of things like natural resources and the environment, and requires policymakers to make decisions that take into account the next generation, typically a 30-year timeframe.

The Indigenous People's of Australia have been stewards of this place for tens of thousands of years. I daresay there is something very special in comprehending that level of responsibility.

Which brings me to the future. To identify as a person of Aboriginal heritage has some baggage attached to it. I have to go against the grain of my family's myths, unhinge myself from the institutional racism that was part of my upbringing, and add a new dimension to my internal sense of self. Or I can simply ignore it and let my Kamilaroi heritage disappear in a couple of generations.



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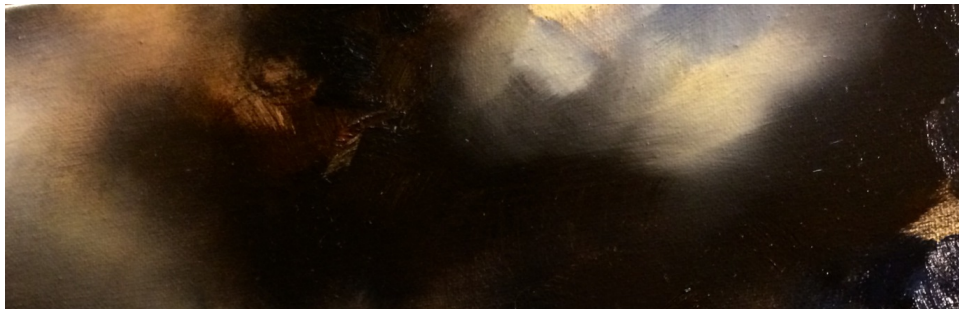


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