Expressions of identity by Aboriginal young peoples' stories about historical trauma and colonisation within the Gamilaroi Nation

Reakeeta Smallwood (iD)

Abstract

On Country, Aboriginal young people yarned with an Aboriginal woman about historical trauma as a result of colonisation. Data analysis was achieved through place-based meaning using a Gamilaroi (an Aboriginal nation located in the north-western plains of New South Wales) practice called winanga-li (to listen, to hear, to know, and to remember). Where this was strengthened by the use of an abductive analysis from a standpoint that is reflective of Country and relationality. Aboriginal young people expressed historical trauma through their understandings of how it has impacted their identity. Young peoples' experiences of identity are varied, fluid, ever-changing, and highly dependent on their experiences within various spaces. These experiences potentially strengthened or unsettled young peoples' identities, creating both strength and disruption socially. This article emphasises young peoples' insights, offering hope and a way forward for future generations guided from within and by connection to Country, culture, Elders, and community.

Introduction

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Indigenous, hereafter referred to as Aboriginal peoples, identity continues to be a widely contested field in Australia and globally (Shay & Sarra, 2021). Despite identity being a well-explored and conceptualised field in several disciplines, it is usually conflated with various political ideologies, grounded in western philosophy and epistemologies (Shay & Sarra, 2021). This highlights that much of *what is known* about identity and the expressions of identity in the social, political and cultural contexts for Aboriginal people is outside of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing (Shay & Sarra, 2021). Further, Brown and Shay (2021) state that the health and education space is saturated with research undertaken by non-Indigenous researchers, often problematising Aboriginal young people, their identities, and their experiences in colonised systems. Rewriting these narratives with Aboriginal young peoples' voices is crucial (Smallwood et al., 2022). To do this, research must be conducted by and with Aboriginal people and their perspectives, their voices, and the researchers' obligation to the sharing of their stories with them. This is crucial (Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999).

Aim

The aim of this article is to share the stories of the 15 Aboriginal young people who were co-researchers in a doctorate study. The study aims to understand the impact of colonisation within the historical trauma space. This article will present one of the three collective stories as part of the doctoral work, about how young people identified historical trauma as expressions through understanding their identities as Aboriginal young people in Australia.

Background

Historical trauma is defined as a collective complex trauma, inflicted on a group of people who share a group identity, being Aboriginal people, who have been impacted by colonisation and, despite this, continue to thrive with

School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author:
Reakeeta Smallwood, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia.
Email: reakeeta.l.smallwood@student.uts.edu.au

continued strength, resistance, and sovereignty of being these countries First Peoples (Menzies, 2019). Despite initial colonial contact occurring just under 250 years ago in Australia, colonisation continues to be an ongoing determinant of health in relation to Aboriginal peoples' health and wellbeing nationally (Menzies, 2019; Paradies, 2016). Within Australia, colonial atrocities included mass genocide, ethnocide, introduction of diseases, and mass removal of Aboriginal peoples from their homelands into missions or reserves (Menzies, 2019). Country being foundational to Aboriginal peoples' identities, spirituality, culture, and lifeways, removal from lands has led to large-scale experiences of people being disconnected from their identities and ways of being (Carlson, 2016; Menzies, 2019). During this period of harsh government intervention, over many generations, thousands of children were removed from their families and placed into mission schools and homes, forcibly assimilated into roles engendered by the colony; often experiencing abuse, trauma, and death (Menzies, 2019). Menzies (2019) argued the practice of child removal referred to as the *Stolen Generation*, has left a lasting traumatic legacy of colonisation and still today, continues to impact Aboriginal people, their identities, their connections, and ways of being. To this author's knowledge, limited Indigenous-led studies have been conducted with, by, and for Aboriginal young people to understand the impact of colonisation from the lens of historical trauma inquiry, including its impact on identity. Understanding historical trauma requires a multi-level approach that considers the individual, family, and community levels (Evans-Campbell, 2008), which are foundational to understanding Aboriginal people's social and emotional wellbeing (Gee et al., 2014). At each of these levels, the presence of protective factors includes a person's connection to their identity, cultural expression, and engagement within their communities as they are defined and imagined (Dudgeon et al., 2002; Smallwood et al., 2021).

Further scholarship within the identity space is emerging, particularly in relation to responding to what seems to be a global mental health crisis among young people, particularly in how policy and governments respond to young people's identities, beyond the limited categorisations of race, sexuality, and gender (Brown & Shay, 2021). Reviewing the complexity of identity with Aboriginal young peoples is balanced on responding to the relational aspects of their identities, which is dependent on the social interactions with others and how they see themselves within these spaces. Positive social interactions strengthen young peoples' personal resilience and self-acceptance (Brown & Shay, 2021). Where social interactions for Aboriginal people is also not just dependent on individual performances, but how socially, interactions can reflect and represent the relationships they hold within their families and communities (Brown & Shay, 2021).

Design, methodology, and analysis

The methodology is positioned within the Indigenous research paradigm that is built and nuanced on relational ways of knowing, being, and doing as an Aboriginal person. Being an Aboriginal person conducting research, coined by Wilson (2008), research *is* ceremony. It follows protocols tethered to context and knowledge, and sharing is not a right, but a privilege (Martin, 2008). By positioning research within this space, tensions are held and let go of, curiosity is embraced, while ensuring the privileging of Aboriginal peoples' voice is crucial (Rigney, 1999). The ceremony has been enacted using an Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007; Wilson, 2008), which has been informed through the relationships I hold with Country and all living things—epistemology, multi-faceted and complex, while being informed by an Aboriginal research agenda to ensure I am accountable to participants and community—axiology (Smith, 2021). In addition, the methodology was informed by Indigenous Storywork and the principles of telling stories in research that align both culturally and ethically to the context of sense-making—ontology (Kovach, 2010).

The intended research questions for the doctorate study were:

- What do Aboriginal young people understand by the term historical trauma?
- How do Aboriginal young people perceive the impact of historical trauma on their lives and the lives of their family or community?
- How do Aboriginal young people recognise collective or individual resilience to help overcome the impact of historical trauma?

The Storywork methodology was further informed by using place-based meaning (Benham, 2007), where the story is reliant on relatedness and time, place, and space in the methodology. This was enabled by the project being gifted the use of a Gamilaroi (an Aboriginal nation located in the north-western plains of New South Wales) word winanga-li (to listen, to hear, to know, and to remember) by Elder Uncle Neville Sampson (Munro et al., 2019). Winanga-li through interpretation of the stories has been both a practice of deep listening and reflexivity to ensure sense-making was reflective and accountable to the amplification of the young peoples' stories, their contexts, and the lived experiences of the researchers, who are the young people and a PhD student (Nicholls, 2009; West et al., 2012).

Given the nature of the Indigenous research design methodology and methods, the research worked closely with local Elders, Aboriginal young people, and community members who were part of the research advisory committee. We would meet to review project aims, methods, analysis, and findings. At the point of storied areas being confirmed, this was shared with no identifiable information included in the sharing process (Kovach, 2010). In addition, ethical approval was sought from both University of Technology Sydney (REF: ETH20-5373) and Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) (REF: 1813/21). Ethical approval did not seek the collection of demographic data such as age or gender, participants during the yarn

were asked if they had any gender preferences and if their chosen pseudonym was reflective of the young persons' gender at the time of interview. All participants consented to this process.

To aid interpretation, the yarns were familiarised by listening and re-listening to audio files, then coded the transcripts using NVivo v12. After coding using a bricolage approach of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022), the transcripts were re-read and audio files were re-listened to, and once familiarity was achieved, analysis and stories were formed using an abductive analytical approach to build sense-making to answer the proposed research questions (Figure 1). This is explained by Earl Rinehart (2021) as an active and interpretive process, where researchers undertake activities to build meaning from which the research data are engaged; this is done through organisation, labelling, challenging, writing up, and contemplating ideas in reflection to the study and the wider field of inquiry. It was important to include ongoing critical reflection of my own lived experiences that have informed the temporal sense-making enacted in this study represented through inverted text in Figure 1. Importantly, as an Aboriginal woman living in this community since birth, from ontological and axiological perspectives, I have obligations to this project that have been formed as part of the relationships I continue to hold with community, Country, and culture.
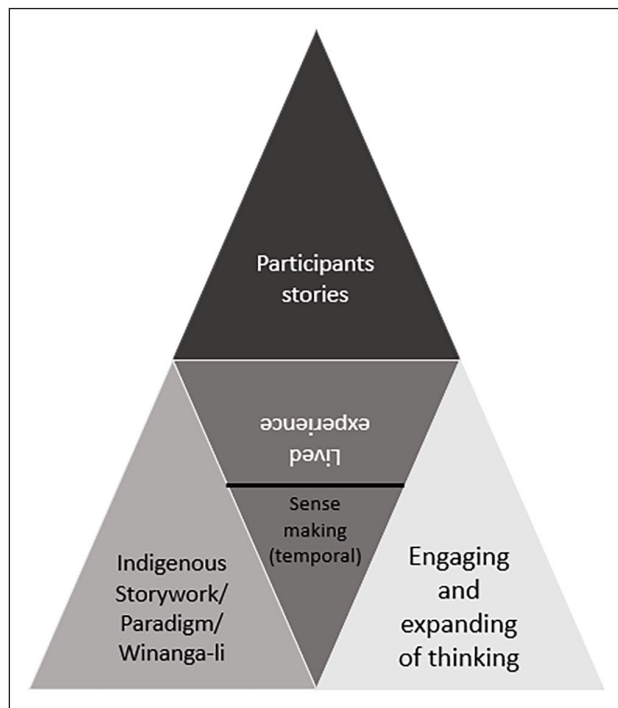

Figure 1. Abductive analysis and data interpretation.
Winanga-li = to hear, to listen, to know, and to remember.

Aboriginal young people and participation in the study

The participants were invited to participate as co-researchers in this study from the rural site that is within the Gamilaroi Nation and mostly identified as Gamilaroi. The term *researchers* used here to honour the ongoing relationships each young person has to this study and the intended outcomes. As part of the young peoples' consent process, they were given the opportunity to have ongoing updates on the study's progress, outcomes, and knowledge translation activities in the community and the academy, including the development of this article.

The young people all identified as Aboriginal and were aged between 18 and 23 years. Recruitment used a purposive and snowballing approach between January 2020 and December 2020. Participants who wished to engage in the study were sent information regarding the study and were asked to contact the researcher if they had questions or if they intended to participate. At this time, if participants agreed to participate in the study, they were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time and were given options regarding follow-up support. Participants also consented to having their transcript returned to check, so they had an opportunity to remove, expand, or clarify what was said in the interview.

Data collection

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an ethical variation was granted to permit the use of videoconference and teleconference methods to continue to collect participant yarns throughout the lockdown times. All interviews occurred using a teleconference or videoconference system chosen by the young people, either by Zoom or phone at a place of their choosing. As the researcher, I was often at home in my office space.

The project employed yarning as a method of data collection, with key questions developed as a guide by the Research Advisory Committee (Carlin et al., 2019). Yarning is a culturally legitimate method of data collection that is non-linear and led by those engaged within the yarn (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010). The yarns were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external provider with whom a confidentiality agreement was enacted. During data collection, field notes were collated and used to aid in the process of analysis, and often this would be through use of poetics or art-based techniques that later informed the cycles of analysis. After analysis, the Aboriginal young people and community were presented the results in Table 1 and were given the opportunity to reflect, question, or interrogate findings presented from analysis of the yarns. This process of member checking is a commonly employed approach used with participants and communities as part of Indigenous-led research (Kovach, 2010).

Table 1. Storied and sub-storied areas.

Storied areas	Disrupted identity	Conflicting identities	Questioning your identity	Blooming identities
Sub-storied areas	Historical fear (from colonial intervention) of identifying	Gatekeeping of identity by others	Questioning what it means to be Aboriginal	Drawing strength from trauma
	The tension of identifying	Living in the middle	Searching to affirm your identity	Empowering others
	Disconnection		Hitting imposter syndrome	Accepting identities

Results

From the analysis, four storied areas and 11 sub-storied areas emerged specifically relating to the expression of identity in understanding historical trauma as a result of colonisation (Table 1). Quotes from the participants using pseudonyms are included.

Disrupted identity

Historical fear of identifying. Young people in the study recognised that colonisation and the subsequent interventions such as the removal of children and assimilation practices had an integral role in how Aboriginal people identify today and what it means to identify. This was experienced by the young people themselves, by their families, or by their peers. Linking identity to historical trauma was brought forward through the yarns as young people made sense of identity and how it has been shaped by both public and private interventions. For example, public through the removal of children of fairer complexion, known as the Stolen Generation, or private, where families who were able to pass as non-Aboriginal did so, out of fear of removal or intervention from colonial practices. They see this as a trickle-down effect of colonisation where the fear of identifying at times surpassed the desire to publicly identify as Aboriginal. James articulates "There was— people who are black, like visibly black, stopped identifying, because it was just easier to be white, because they were getting killed and treated like animals. It was—you know what I mean?"

These experiences shaped how these young people navigated their everyday lives and how they identified. Essie, Simon, and Faith all experienced discovering they were Aboriginal in their adolescence. Faith explains for her, this was an identity crisis, where she felt it impacted her wellbeing:

> I very strongly think that it significantly affects our overall wellbeing. I personally very much think so. I didn't actually find out that I was Aboriginal until I was 12, 13. So I went through a bit of an identity crisis about 13, 14 and I had no idea what was going on. It took me probably two or three years to wrap my head around.

Essie shared her experience of the ingrained fear passed from her nan's experience of her children being taken:

> As I said I went most of my life—not most of my life—until high school without acknowledging being Indigenous because my nan thought it was to be shamed upon because her mum

was like, we are Italian. We can't be Indigenous. You'll get taken away if you're Indigenous. Had that ingrained in my nan's head. I wasn't raised with all the community based and the connection to land and all that. I feel like I did miss out. But I have this unique look on it if that makes sense.

Marcia and Brooke highlight that because of this historical disruption, a shame of what it means to identify is entangled with emotions that shake or unnerve people emotionally "disconnected or unsettled in any sort of way then that creates—yeah, it just rattles things and then they get handed down to you" (Marcia). Marcia has seen people who have been questioned or threatened regarding their identity which has put their wellbeing at risk, particularly when people's identities are rejected or threatened by other people's opinions "Because if people tell someone that they don't belong, that immediately unsettles you and it's not—that's harder to move past." Brooke identified that due to the nature of the Stolen Generation, not having a connection to the community and Country can affect the mental health of people who are lost and unsure of how they identify. She articulates the tension of both connected and disconnected mob, "I think people who don't have connection to community though feel it a lot worse than say I would or others who have strong ties with their community" (Brooke).

Disconnection. The experience of disconnection was spoken about by the young people as something of a loss, of not having enough connection, or community to strengthen their identity. Young people feel the tension of being brought up believing they are not Aboriginal, then later finding out they are Aboriginal. Reconnecting is challenging for young people, particularly in making sense of how they identify and what it meant to identify. In Simon's story, he recounts finding out his identity after his nan died, the pain of losing his nan was exemplified through the experience of disconnection and loss of identity for himself; where it caused ripples in his family relationships with his father, aunty, and uncles who do not claim their identity out of shame. Highlighting the ongoing experience of disconnection and its impact on his life, Simon said:

> My nan never mentioned it all. She only left letters when she passed. Really big divide in our family because me and my sister feel like it's something not to be ashamed of, whereas the rest of the family chooses not to acknowledge it at all and just play on. . . if I had more connection or if she was still alive.

For Simon, and for many of the young people who have identified later in their adolescent years, the tangible

experiences of disconnection are further politicised and emphasised in the process of obtaining acceptance through confirmation of Aboriginality at the Local Aboriginal Land's Council level. This confirmation process requires community acceptance of identity, in addition to self-identification and evidence to support this for validation of family ties to a specific community and place. Simon links this disconnection to his experience of not being able to obtain confirmation of Aboriginality "personally trying to join and land council and then you realise that you can't really be accepted into a community where you don't know. Then that's where self-validation comes in. Then that whole business comes through."

Michelle shared her way of identifying through her mum and the experience of disconnection by never really knowing her ancestors or Country:

Michelle: Well, my family, we've got no proof or no actual documentation proof—well, me and mum don't, to prove where we come from and stuff like that. We don't have, you know, it's a lot of work to go back and find that cultural line.

Reakeeta: So, what does that mean for you?

Michelle: Well, it means that part of our family, like we don't know where they are, where they ended up. You know, we don't completely know the extent of where we completely came from.

Tension of identifying.   The tension of identifying was experienced by the young people in this story as having a historical narrative of what identity means to them and how this has shaped the way in which they identify today. Rachel expressed the tension of her family, where her father and herself identify, but her father's brothers and sister refuse to identify out of what she believes is the ingrained shame around identifying as Aboriginal and of the complexity of understanding identity and what she believed to why they do not identify; "they are just ashamed. Not only do they have all this trauma from other generations but it's like they also have this lack of identity, or they think it's wrong to be who they are. I don't really understand" (Rachel).

Pearl adds to this complexity, by reflecting on how this disruption to identity has shaped the way people exist. If they were not taught the generational reason to identify, then how does one grasp or regain this understanding:

That definitely influences how they're going to be, how they're going to identify. If they don't know their family, they don't know where they come from. How are you supposed to grasp that cultural connection and sense of belonging? You kind of have to start again, in a way. (Pearl)

Within Pearl's account, the tension of identifying is articulated through her understanding of parental beliefs on whether their child should identify or not, often out of real or perceived fear of not belonging "I've spoken to people that have only recently started identifying as Aboriginal, because their parents told them not to, because it—they would be excluded, that they wouldn't fit it." Pearl, in her

sense-making, believed this has been influenced by the historical actions and consequences for people identifying as Aboriginal such as the removal of Aboriginal children from classrooms at non-Aboriginal parents' request. "I think before 1973, I think, if you had an Aboriginal student in your classroom, and a white student or white family said that they didn't want that Aboriginal student there, that Aboriginal student was removed from education" (Pearl).

Conflicting identities

Gatekeeping of identity by others. Young people in this study sense there is a tension to live across two spaces and this is reflected in how they identify. This tension grows from others' expectations of how they identify and attitudes towards their choice to identify as Aboriginal. Simon shared a tension from working with people who disrupted his Aboriginal identity:

saying that you're claiming and then, oh yeah, how—you're supposed to be Caucasian. You're supposed to be white. I don't know why you're defending people. It's not like you're that Aboriginal yourself. I think people only want to change when they want, so I've let them know how it makes me feel.

Rachel shared an experience of her identity and how she felt not being black enough to enter into a black space, which raises this concept of gatekeeping of Aboriginal identity of others, including gatekeeping of oneself and one's own expectations on whether to identify, and this was influenced by the colour of skin:

I feel like going in I was like oh god, I don't really look Aboriginal, I'm going to go into this mob and they're all very clearly Aboriginal. They're just going to be like why the [expletive] are you here?

Marcia shared the tension of young people living in an Aboriginal community and being accepted and embracing this acceptance, for example, students living in arranged communities at universities with other Aboriginal people. Where then she explained for some of her peers, they would return home and their identity of being Aboriginal was not accepted or embraced by their family. Marcia raised a pertinent point "That's like all sorts of people's identity, like people who are LGBTQI. It would be hard to be so comfortable in that and then to not be accepted by your family. I think it's a similar sort of idea."

Living in the middle. Young people spoke of living in the middle and walking two worlds, one being Aboriginal and one being non-Aboriginal. Within these two worlds, they were expected to live in the middle to contend with the expectations placed on them as actors in society. This experience was identified as risky for the young people in terms of misrecognition of the wider dominant society, and possible repercussions if they chose to identify. Participants highlighted that most people do not recognise or understand the dual roles Aboriginal people enact in their everyday lives and the tension this presents for young people throughout their personal and professional lives.

Linda shared her experience where she identifies in a black space with her community, her family, and her workplace, and where her culture and identity are embraced. Within her white friend group, being fair skinned she is not recognised as a *physical* black person, and she experiences the tension of hearing racial comments and slurs:

> When you're out with a group of friends, you're kind of in the middle and have to navigate which way you are. But also hearing a lot of racial comments and stuff, because people say it without thinking because you're not a physical black person in the room. Yeah and I kind of see it as like I have a white life and a black life. (Linda)

Pearl raised this dual world as a jeopardy for young people because they are having to navigate complex spaces, where they are being raised black, and to understand what that means to be Aboriginal, whereas at school, she sensed the expectations to be white and how this raised questions and upsetting experiences for herself and peers:

> We're moulded to be white. These kids don't identify with this westernised way of being. They just want to be out on Country. They want to be learning their cultural connections, their identities, but they're not allowed to. Legally, they're not allowed to. So, the loss of culture, over the last 200 years, has probably left—and myself included—us feeling quite lost, us feeling quite—what's happening? Where do we identify? Where do we fit? Because on one hand, it's just like, oh, we're part of the oldest living culture in the world, but we have to be white. We can't just be fully this anymore, which is quite upsetting.

Questioning your identity

Questioning what it means to be Aboriginal. Questioning identity was experienced through young people hearing stories of removal of children or their families living from place to place to avoid removal. They bring forward stories of this disruption and this trauma, of the experience of dysfunctional parenting, substance abuse and the questioning of historical and present-day consequences of loss of culture and the link to their cultural wellbeing. Young people in this study raised questions about what if culture was not suppressed, what if families were able to pass generational strength opposed to lies? "Yeah, I think having to suppress our culture and our identity and then being brought up on lies and not with strength" (Marcia).

Young people in this study emphasised the importance for families to generationally pass down Aboriginal culture and identity. Marcia raised questions about the disruption of culture and identity, speaking to how her grandparents were forced to move off the mission and be disconnected from their culture and identity:

> I think that if we had been able to maintain our culture and our identity, probably those issues wouldn't have happened because we wouldn't have been forced off the Mission and we wouldn't—my grandparents wouldn't have been forced to move around, and then it would mean that when they were adults, they would have been able to be part of our community.

Pearl raised further that she was concerned about how the questioning of identity can impact wellbeing and how young people, if not given the tools or strength, could internalise the way they may be positioned as outsiders or as a deficit to others:

> We're from different—if you're going to say this stuff to me— they try to get into that mind space of defending themselves, then that can perpetuate an act-out kind of thing. I think it's just a hard way to think.

Pearl draws attention to the experience of young people growing up in areas where young people experienced stigma, labels, and racism based not only on their race or skin tone but also because of their location within a town. Reakeeta asked Pearl if she felt her postcode defined her, Pearl responded:

> Yeah, it really influences identity, and feeling confident in yourself and your wellbeing in general, really. So, when you're questioning yourself, you're questioning your identity, you're questioning perhaps your colour of your skin and your postcode you're not—yeah, I don't know how you would be strong in wellbeing.

Like Pearl and others, the young people in this study experienced judgement from living in place that is often stigmatised and problematised in the media, that add to public perceptions of a location in towns. Often media saturates these locations with narratives of high disadvantage, substance abuse, and high rates of violence. Despite this negative experience expressed by Pearl, some of the young people in this study experienced living in these communities and how it strengthened their sense of belonging and connection.

Positioning of self against others is spoken about as a huge divide in what it means to be Aboriginal and how Aboriginal young people experience the tension of casual racism and questioning of their identity. Acceptance of Aboriginality is important to a young persons' wellbeing and Pearl particularly sees non-acceptance as a risk to young people if they are not supported in their identity and cultural wellbeing

> Especially when you don't have anyone behind you saying no, no, no, it's okay. You're Aboriginal, you're not—you need to be proud of yourselves, because a lot of kids don't have someone behind them, telling them to be proud.

Searching to affirm your identity. Young people's stories brought forward the constant need to respond to questions about how they identify and the proof they need to identify. They expressed these experiences as an everyday burden of being Aboriginal that at times is inarticulable and answerable to only feelings of the stress and pressure to affirm identity. James experienced this in his life at different points in time, which he feels as a heaviness when he is doing his own research to identify his family roots and the challenges that bring to invest time and energy into this process:

It's emotionally draining and emotionally straining. It's having to continually answer the same questions from non-Indigenous people. Well, you don't look Aboriginal. Yeah, that's because my family was raped. That's because they were all herded onto missions. How often do you want me to keep explaining to you the same story? Just go and get educated. I'm sick and tired of explaining it to you.

Aboriginal young people in this study spoke about the constant pressure to defend and explain their identity. Young people further articulated that the uncertainty around their identity raised questions about how they access cultural knowledge or if there are certain hierarchies they must navigate around, particularly if they have experienced identifying as Aboriginal without passed-on cultural connections to Country and practices. Pearl raised this as a tension of how she exists in the higher education system, where she had to conform to white pedagogies while accessing cultural knowledge and connection:

While I'm studying in a white world. I'm just like—I'm still trying to conform to this way of being, and in my spare time I'm like, okay, how can I know my cultural connections, my family? What does this mean? What does that mean? Am I allowed to know that? Am I not allowed to know that? Can I speak up about this stuff?

Hitting imposter syndrome. Young people experienced the political tensions of their identity and how this relates to their success in their careers and professional life. James described this experience as "hitting imposter syndrome" when he completed university and took on professional roles. He struggled with concern about whether his worth and success were fabricated due to his Aboriginal identity. James added further:

I just got picked because I killed it in the interview or—but I'm not—I didn't feel like I'm good enough to be there and the honest truth was that I have worked hard and earned that opportunity and, what, I killed it. I killed it when I was over there, but I was battling the entire time with feeling so inadequate.

James' experience spoke to the noticeable tension many Aboriginal young people in this study felt about the tension of identifying within spaces where they are questioned or challenged about their legitimacy of success in relation to their Aboriginality. James in his example exemplifies the internalising effect this questioning can lead to, and how it may result in feeling like an imposter.

Young people further questioned their identity in the position of systems of getting educated, for example, university, where Anita questioned:

When I was at uni, I can't do this, I'm not smart enough for this. I'm not supposed to be here. I was just this little black girl with all these people at a university. I didn't even know what university was, I thought it was like high school and it was not.

Anita shared this experience of the expectation to fail due to the stigma of Aboriginality and its impact on the success of Aboriginal people:

Further education may get better but there's always this stigma around—from—I don't know from the past that Aboriginal people can't further their education There's this whole stigma around, you're not going to go anywhere, you're probably just going to stay in your town, have no job.

In addition, Anita shared experiences of other younger people in school where teachers had low expectations and would make comments such as "Oh you're coming to class today?" This comment and many other similar experiences demonstrate the detrimental effect of casual racism, racial stereotypes, and the stigma of expectations to fail due to Aboriginality. When Anita expanded on this idea of identity, stigma, and the experience of historical trauma, she feels this is how the passing of transgenerational trauma occurs and continues in the community. This was raised as a particular concern by the young people's experiences personally or through witnessing such behaviours by educators to their peers. The expectation of failure or lack of success can impact young people's self-worth, leading to imposter syndrome.

Blooming identities

Drawing strength from trauma. Young people in this study recognised the trauma from the loss of family and cultural connection, causing subsequent loss of identity. Recognition this loss, young people drew strength and pride from their ability to identify. Essie acknowledged this loss of identity:

Because it has caused a loss of identity in my family and that is what makes me—because identity is so important to me. I have to be who I am, and I have to be proud of who I am . . . it completely got lost until my mum went digging basically. . . I knew before—I just knew. I was like, there's something wrong. . . [I feel] being Indigenous and having that connection I feel like you just know.

Essie further drew on her ability to understand her emotions and her understanding that before her identity was discovered, she inherently was drawn to Aboriginal culture and identity. This is a complex feeling to articulate and it originates from ingrained ancestral knowledge, cultural connection, and strength. James described the feeling as being called by his ancestors to a place of deep connection "My ancestors were the original kings of Yula and this place, this mystical place that I've never been, that it's calling me, it's my Country."

This concept of place is further defined by young people as the tethering one has to community and identity. When young people have experienced a disruption of place and spend time in more than one community, their sense of community and place expands into a non-traditional, complex system with Elders and community in scattered and disparate locations:

It's not like we've always been in one place forever in that traditional understanding of Country and community, so it just means my family story is a bit more spread out and it's a bit more complex to understand. But I think, then, I can draw a strength from that. . . we're here and there and I've got Elders in this community and that community. (Marcia)

Empowering others. This sense of community and identity is not only about the individual experiences of young people, but also about empowering others to feel connected and be part of a collective Aboriginal identity. Despite the importance of identification of specific Aboriginal nations, the emphasis of place is not crucial for the acceptance of an Aboriginal identity:

> Yeah. It's just like, identifying as Aboriginal even. It doesn't matter if you come from Worimi [an Aboriginal nation situated on the east coast of New South Wales] or Wiradjuri [the largest Aboriginal nation in central New South Wales] or Gamilaraay [an Aboriginal nation located in the north-western plains of New South Wales]. It's all—you're all one. You're all in it together. Your brothers and your sisters. (Pearl)

Young people within this study, particularly Pearl and her motivation to become a teacher, talk about the strength-based approach that teachers must use to mould and facilitate young people's blooming identities. Part of this process, Pearl advocated about empowering others to seek out their truth and understand Aboriginal history and colonisation and its impact on identity:

> I think, as a teacher, it's not just about teaching English and numeracy, it's about empowering these students and finding—I don't know—being more educated on the true history and the true impact of intergenerational trauma.

Marcia further supported the empowerment of others by recognition of the anger and pain felt, but how it is important for people with trauma, especially related to their identity, to *speak their truth*. She perceived that as more Aboriginal young people do this, young people, and community, can support each other through truth-telling, by empowering their collective and individual identities.

Rachel empowered others by seeing a strength in the fact that with a lighter skin tone she can pass as non-Aboriginal because it is important for her to have a voice with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. She particularly drew strength by embracing her culture, calling out racism, and supporting the protests in response to the Black Lives Matter movement in Australia in 2020:

> It definitely helped me be more confident to reach out to more Aboriginal people, get involved in like protests and things like that. . . . Especially since I am more—well, obviously I look white. So, it's so important to me to have a voice. (Rachel)

Accepting identities. As part of reclaiming and understanding identity, young people speak about sharing stories of hurt from historical and intergenerational trauma and acceptance of hurt, by themselves and others. Rachel and Marcia shared common experiences of the unified call to name the hurt they experienced, by embracing it as part of the lived experience of being an Aboriginal person in Australia. Marcia shares:

> Yeah, I think people, through the trauma too . . . which isn't—like it started and that's how it is but I mean at least we can be united in the hurt, and I think we can understand each other a bit better. It makes us a bit more accepting.

Rachel identified that young people are wanting to reclaim their culture, where young people are coming together and reaching out about being proud to be Aboriginal:

> I think people my age definitely want to get that culture back. They see like no, that's [expletive]. Why should I be judged on that? That's so ridiculous. I see a lot of young people coming together and reaching out, proud to be Aboriginal or proud to have family that is Aboriginal.

Although Rachel feels she does not need to seek acceptance from other people, she feels that as part of the acceptance of herself and her identity, is the validation and acceptance of others about their identity:

> Not that it should take other people to say that, but I think it being more accepted means that people can accept themselves. People kind of understanding the injustice that's happened finally is letting people stand up and say well, I am Aboriginal. This is just who I am. This is fine.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the impact of colonisation from the perspective of Aboriginal young people. One of the findings exemplified the impact colonisation has had on Aboriginal young peoples' identities, and their connection to understanding what it means to be Aboriginal in contemporary Australia, and one's navigation through a highly politicised *identity* space for Aboriginal people (Carlson, 2016). Young people in this study navigated some complex spaces, confronting not only how they identified by what it meant to identify personally, professionally, and in their communities (Carlson, 2016). Crucial to these collective stories was how young people articulated their identity, not just in the pain, loss, and disconnection of identity, but further how they saw these expressions as a way forward and a way to draw strength from trauma. This drawing of strength was articulated by a sense of belonging and a young persons' way to self-identify within this hurt with a community of others, who have expressed the same hurt, loss, and disconnection of collective trauma. This expression of collective people self-identifying within a community has been highlighted as an integral protective factor for young Aboriginal people and their wellbeing (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). Further, this collective experience of trauma, due to colonisation, has been identified as a core concept that has strengthened the academic work surrounding historical trauma and this field of inquiry (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Kirmayer et al., 2014).

Belonging and identity can be further explored at the cultural interface, like Carlson (2016), who identified within her study, that participants navigated the push and pull of being Aboriginal and what it means to be Aboriginal in varying spaces, and how each participant *expressed* this in varying ways through their life, work, and community. This includes how they dressed, spoke, and acted in various spaces to identify, as living, and breathing Aboriginal (Carlson, 2016). The emphasis on push and pull was identified by the young people in this study, where in certain

places such as at work, home with family, with community, or in various places, they expressed their identity in varying ways based on the space in which they were situated; and that within these various spaces, their identities were either strengthened or unsettled. Within the young peoples' stories, there were various expressions of identity, illustrated in Figure 2. The concept for this figure draws on the notion of a waterhole, or a body of water, which is both fluid and dense, with multiple expressions being experienced in multiple places and spaces. Importantly, the expression of identity by young people in this study was dependent on the interactions they have with others and how these interactions shaped young peoples' ways to self-identify, self-accept their identity, and belong within these spaces. Some of the experiences were stories of disconnection and disruption with tangible experiences of not belonging or feeling the very real presence of trauma and loss carried from their families and ancestors to their present-day lives.

Figure 2. Expression of identity by Aboriginal young people (Digital rendering by Kisani Upward).

Miño-Puigcercós et al. (2019) paraphrasing Foucault, "'who we are' is not an individual matter, but a product of forms of external agencies" highlighting that as people we constantly learn, regulate, interact, and grow; through these adaptive experiences, that ultimately "we are transformed with and by others" (p. 136). As evidenced by this study, Aboriginal young people expressed not only the everyday, present agencies that influence our identities, but ones that are held in our histories with our ancestors.

Carlson (2016) highlights that for disconnected people, there is always a pathway back into community, offering hope to the young people in this study who have expressed their and their peers' disconnection from their identities. Aboriginal young people further expressed that their identity was about the relationship to their connections with community, Elders, and Country. Smallwood et al.

(2022), in their recent literature review, further identified that these connections, strengthen young peoples' social and emotional wellbeing. Salmon et al. (2018) identify this as one's connection to their cultural identity and that knowing one's cultural identity is about growing space for the enhancement and strengthening of Aboriginal peoples' social and emotional wellbeing. Culture can be understood as the way to identify through one's connection to community and respect for Elders, and accessing of kinship, family, language, art, ceremony, and Country (Salmon et al., 2018). The variable and multidimensional understanding of culture (Kirmayer et al., 2014), and how culture offers a way for young people to navigate and understand historical trauma, is often expressed in ways that they draw strength, resistance, and connection to their identities and wellbeing.

Conclusion

To this author's knowledge, this is the first study conducted from a Gamilaroi standpoint, which aimed to amplify the voices of Aboriginal young peoples' understandings of historical trauma and how it is understood from the perspective of themselves, their families, and communities. Identifying historical trauma was understood through expressions of identity, and what that means for young people to identify as Aboriginal in a contemporary place we now call Australia. Depending on spaces that young people engaged within, their expression of their Aboriginal identity is varied, fluid and ever-changing, leaving room for growth, hope, culture, and connection.

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ORCID iD

Reakeeta Smallwood https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4586-8925

Glossary

Gamilaraay	an Aboriginal nation located in the north-western plains of New South Wales; also known as Gamilaroi
Gamilaroi	an Aboriginal nation located in the north-western plains of New South Wales; also known as Gamilaraay
winanga-li	to hear, to listen, to know and to remember
Wiradjuri	the largest Aboriginal nation in central New South Wales
Worimi	an Aboriginal nation situated on the east coast of New South Wales

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