Half – Living between two worlds

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Abstract

*Half – Living between two worlds* is a practice-led inquiry into the term ‘half-caste’. Through an investigation of personal and intergenerational lived experiences the research aspires to interrogate the authorship of stereotypical perceptions of Aboriginality. Connecting to dance, song and community the research seeks to emphasise the diversity of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples in the 21st century.
This is to certify that
i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Animateuring (Research)
ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used
iii) the thesis is 16, 256 words in length, exclusive of figures, tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed _______________________________ Date ___/___/______
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With Respect
With respect to Australian’s original owners the Yolngu, Palawa, Anangu, Koori, Nyoongar, Goori, Wongi, Yamatji, Ngarda, Marlba, Bama, Nunga and the many more not listed who read this, please be advised that this document contains historical words and descriptions of Aboriginal peoples that are offensive. It is by no means a reflection of my view or opinion; rather it is a tool to capture the labels continuously placed upon our peoples.

I also use of the word ‘Aboriginal’ as an interim term awaiting the debate that offers our own reasoning of identity.

I encourage readers to seek their own answers in reference to terms they may not yet know which are found within this dissertation.
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Introduction

Motivations/Incentive/Values of this project
This study aspires to be a vehicle of change; a change in which Aboriginal peoples are heard, seen and find respect and dignity. It seeks to bring attention to the diversities of experience and appearances that are contained within Aboriginal Australia today.

It is said that we are a young population in that our youth, (21 years or younger) contribute to half our overall population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). I use this work as a tool with which to somehow provide protection through awareness for the generations that follow. Generations who will otherwise continue to be faced with the many issues touched on throughout this study.

Life experiences have led to many blatant challenges to my own Aboriginality. They have piled up to become one of the main motivating factors behind this study. These encounters have been reflected upon and are now used to find the words to safeguard my nieces, nephews and anyone who is confronted with the prying eyes of the unmarked authenticity police. It is difficult to distance myself from the topic at hand when it is so personal; I struggle to be objective.

I also seek to find more truth in History’s pages about Aboriginal peoples. The history of Aboriginal Australia has for generations been told through external eyes, those of settlers with their own agendas and mostly from an anthropological lens and handed back to society as the truth. As a young girl reading content referring to natives killed by the explorers, I felt a growing sense of confusion. I asked my teacher why Aboriginal people were referred to as natives but she had no reply. This created a ripple effect that highlighted the increasing difficulties in obtaining information about the experiences of Aboriginal peoples, by Aboriginal peoples.

This research is in part a re-engagement with history as told by others. It is also experiential and through my re-telling and re-presenting it is interpretive and performative. I use a combination of creative making, performance practices and writing as many performance ethnographers do, ‘to invoke change and have a positive effect on the lived conditions of self and others’ (Alexander 2005: 412). This centring
of research within the performance practice is referred by some as practice led or practice centred research (Mäkelä 2011).

In this study I begin a personal process of redressing the absence of Aboriginal voices by adding to the many Indigenous perspectives that are now telling about experiences from our lives. Language is the most important medium in which to solidify that voice to paper, to art, to creating but it is also the means by which prejudice and misunderstanding are materialised. A key example of this is the term ‘half-caste’, a label that has been imposed upon me purely by observation. Through this study I learn its history and what it has meant for people to be assigned this title. This term has persisted but its historical ramifications are less well known. I wonder if people were to know its origins and the impact it has had on people’s lives would they continue to use it in their everyday vocabulary?

**Personal Story**

I am a Goori woman of the Githabul and Gidabul tribe of the Bundjalung nation. I have always identified as such. Speaking Goori language in my house was very scarce, words were present but not as much to claim English as my second language. I grew up with cultural dance being something talked about that the elders used to do, off in the distance, never practiced and had stopped when my great-grandparents passed away. Hunting consisted of shooting roos from the car and catching fish with a line. Stories came from bible verses, childhood yarns of my great grandfather’s lives as sugar cane farmers and of the reserve where my great grandparents, aunties and uncles used to live.

I was born in 1975; five years after the Australian Government “stopped” the practice of removing children from their families. I went to school with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal children and completed my year 10 certificate before venturing off seeking a career in dance.

It was at the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) that I was exposed to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. NAISDA offered me the opportunity to learn various styles of dance and the many elements that make up the performing arts. In my first year, what defined
NAISDA for me was learning Yolngu culture from Yirrkala. The most important and significant teachings came from Janet Munyarryun. Janet was giving of her culture and wanted many people to learn it, but it had conditions of respect and acknowledgement, meaning you did not perform her dances without her permission or presence.

Within my first year of study, the first, second and third year students travelled to Yirrkala to dance for the community. This was a significant moment in truly understanding cultural responsibilities. This process had a ripple effect, in that with Janet teaching us her Yolngu culture, we were immediately brought into the fold. The onus was placed on us to dance the dances right and respectfully, while knowing that although we had learnt the dances they weren’t ours to reteach or perform alone.

The importance to then dance Yolngu dances, on Yolngu country is indescribable. It is only through doing this that ceremony comes to life. Janet’s generosity in sharing culture with her students as we sat on the floor, in the sand, on the hill while she spoke was immense. Being her student fostered much gratitude and respect.

That respect came to be the standard within which I conducted myself when learning other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. I applied this to my remaining years at NAISDA when learning Tiwi (Bathurst) Islands, Saibai Island, Turkey Creek and Badu Island cultures.

It was here as a 19 year old that I got to be immersed in cultural dance, language and song. I truly began to understand the multifaceted layers of Aboriginal Australia reflected in the many different languages being spoken, the different coloured ochres being painted on the body and the different footwork contained within each Aboriginal country when dancing.

Being given the opportunity to share and participate in these dances began a process of realisation where I witnessed Indigenous cultures closer to their original forms prior to colonisation. It was here that I began to imagine what my dances would have been like, how the songs would sound and how my tongue would feel speaking my language, every day. It was within this thought process that two things arose; one, the
clarification of cultural individuality within the generalised term of Aboriginal, and
two, a resurgence of my Bundjalung culture.

It was also at NAISDA where real history lessons were contextualised from an Aborigi
nal perspective and taught to its Indigenous students. Stories of Pemulwuy,
Trucanini and Bennelong were told to a class full of peoples from different Aboriginal and Tor
res Strait Islander lands. In that moment stories and lived experiences start to unravel the discrepancies of history as told in books. The common (at the time) derogatory references to natives, savages, blacks and niggers no longer exist in the presence of the Bundjalung, Dharug, Daingatti and Wiradjuri.

After my graduation from NAISDA I danced and taught in various communities throu
ghout Australia, travelled overseas and eventually returned to study a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Arts Management at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA).

I eventually found myself living in Alice Springs (2007) and it is there that all my experiences of being labelled and continuously being challenged about my Aboriginality hit its peak. For as long as I can remember my brown skin has been met with ‘half-caste’ labelling and comments like ‘what part Aboriginal are you’ and ‘which one of your parents is white?’ As a young person the passing remarks had no weight to them but as an adult they became statements of disdain with no witticism attached. But back then in Central Australia the sentiment from others was that no matter what my lived experience, I was not a real Aborigine. Because I did not know how to start a fire without a match, fully speak my language, knew very little of my dances and songs and had never camped outside under the stars, I couldn’t call myself Aboriginal. I was either too light, didn’t look Aboriginal enough or just sounded too white to be black.

Such judgments further manifested while working with an Aboriginal youth organisation to conduct a dance workshop. During the workshop a young Arrernte girl referred to another Arrernte girl as ‘not being a real Aboriginal’ and that she was just a ‘half-caste’ who had no language. Shock!
This stirred in me much anger but created an overwhelming desire to ascertain how the terminology that was used in the past as a means to separate our peoples was now present in the mouth of this 13-year-old girl.

In 2010, to investigate this realisation, I undertook Postgraduate study in Performance Creation (Choreography) at the VCA. It was here that I created my original work ‘Half-caste’.

Although I was delving into the term ‘half-caste’ and my own experiences, I was only scratching the surface of something so deep. That work in progress exposed much of the intrigue that formulated the content now shared in these pages, on stage and in conversations.

My current study continued to highlight people’s insistent judgmental views that perpetuate the task of continually legitimising one’s identity. When these views are presented from both Aboriginal peoples and Western societies, where does one’s identity reside?

**Comprehending Identity**

There are many strands to one’s identity. But identity’s complexities lie in not just being, as we are seen, but in understanding from within how we feel and wish to identify.

My attempts at grasping the quantitative dimensions of identity are found in varying definitions:

‘Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group’ (Rummens 1993).

‘However, the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others primarily with parents and other individuals during one’s biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived’ (Saunderson 2003).
‘Explorations of ‘identity’ demonstrate how difficult a concept it is to pin down. Since identity is a virtual thing, it is impossible to define it empirically. Discussions of identity use the term with different meanings, from fundamental and abiding sameness, to fluidity, contingency, negotiated and so on’ (Brubaker 2000).

The issue of Aboriginal identity arose only with naming the original people ‘Aborigines’ at the point of invasion. Clearly, there weren’t any Aborigines before invasion, there were only peoples defined by nations, clans, skin groups, language groups and moieties. Our identities as ‘Aborigines’ were therefore given to us by the colonisers (Heiss 2006).

For me, my identity is tied to my family. My family is tied to a sense of place; a place that is held within my Bundjalung country. My Bundjalung country is tied to my great, great, great, great-grandparents; grandparents that tie me to my ancestors; ancestors that tie me to culture; a culture that is the oldest in the world. This is where my Aboriginality resides. It resides in lived experiences, in that feeling of being part of a bigger community and in doing things that contribute to the community of Australia’s original Peoples.

My Bundjalung culture will always be tied to something that exists within people and a practice that is not tangible. For now, I may not fully sing, dance or speak it but I have the knowledge and skills to add to its foundations. And because of this my skin colour does not get any darker the more I learn or lighter the less I don’t, it remains the same.

The unfolding of a practice
The idea of intention and motivation really can’t be separated from my sense of responsibility, beliefs and values in regard to culture. I have had many discussions about the intention of my work and the responsibility encapsulated with creating works that ‘relate to’ or ‘speak of’ an issue faced by Aboriginal peoples. There is an unspoken responsibility present that you don’t move forward unless you bring the community with you. This conjecture exists not through a physical gesture but a
knowing that weighs in as an obligated responsibility. No one grants it to you, it is just there. It is not an individual’s journey but a people’s journey. This feeling has been generated for years by culture but now history has made it a necessity for our survival.

It was with a sense of bringing an indigenous lens to the social situation of his ancestors that motivated Eric Clark to examine the importance and implications of tent fighting to Aboriginal fighters and their communities. He examined the racial tensions inside and outside the tent in an era from the 1930’s to the 60’s and through his videography and writing he provides insights into the lives of his father a Gunditjamara man – a tent fighter - and extended families in Gippsland. The need to bring these stories to light to preserve the original voices and meanings was crucial to Clark. ‘Keeping faith with the experience of tent fighting means using an approach that supports the telling, but also presenting in a way that communicates the richness of the story, the experience’ (2009: 12). Remembering, respecting and retelling seems to be at the forefront of Clarke’s project.

This consciousness is an important element that continues to inform my work, as I acknowledge it can never just be about random content, it has to be a part of bringing us forward. This feeling is present in many Indigenous peoples of past and present generations reflected in their music, poetry, literature, dance, theatre, sports and livelihood. For me, at times, I question the responsibility and wish that I could do things that separate me from my community, to leave the obligation by the wayside. But I never do. When I put my voice to something it must have strength and the hope of advancement for future generations. Dulingbara/Yagara writer, Jeanie Bell, best sums this up.

‘It [identity] gives you an opportunity to write, to look at your own position and how you feel about yourself and where you see yourself in relation to history, and your community in terms of the bigger picture. But it also reaffirms who you are, and it’s a statement to the world of, ‘This is who I am and I’m proud of who I am’ (Heiss 2006).
I ground this in the knowledge of considering myself an ambassador for my Bundjalung people. The work I create has to do with keeping Aboriginality alive by maintenance, by being, by research, by practice, to continue the evolution of what culture and identity are and can be. I choose to do this to connect to remnants of Culture’s past, in an attempt to continue the tradition of cultural evolution today, because today will one day be 50, 100, 200 years old.

The unseen matters that are not present within this paper

I have carefully constructed this thesis to be mindful and respectful of my family, my community and Aboriginal nations and at all times following cultural protocols. These inform the choosing of songs, artwork, words and images compiled in this research. But my final endorsement comes from my parents.

Although I have been fortunate enough to visit and learn many other Aboriginal cultures within Australia, I do not have the permission to share what I have learned. I am bound to respect and honour cultural protocols of the peoples that have shared their cultures with me. Their cultural knowledge is not mine to distribute so therefore will not be placed on any of these pages. Knowledge is transferred only through being present in communities and building trust through relationships. Many living Aboriginal cultures remain within Australia but what the public see is only a tiny indication of what is the entirety of cultural knowledge. This is shared and experienced only for its keepers, their peoples and those they trust.

The protocols of preserving and honouring such knowledge have been an important constraining factor, as has been managing personal privacy and disclosure. For these reasons it is not possible for this paper to provide details to all the questions, resolutions and realisations of this personal journey.

However the performance and visual/sound media elements that are part of my practice have a capacity to impact beyond language. Detailing the potentials of the performative Pineau (1995: 46) notes ‘a deep kinaesthetic attunement that allows us to attend to experiential phenomena in an embodied rather than intellectualized way.’
Outline of approaches evident in the research

My biggest challenge within this study has been finding ways to vent the anger and sorrow that I found in the pages of the available literature I was reading. Much of this reflects an intrigue with a so-called ‘exotic’ and ‘never seen before’ race. As I reviewed it in its diversity and enormity I discovered many disturbing stories. I continued to struggle with the notion that being different to European ideals equalled ‘unhuman’. The disposition and historical practices upholding that ‘white’ people be superior to all other human beings continued to infuriate me. Linda Tuhiwai Smith speaks of the pain of indigenous people’s remembering. ‘While collectively indigenous communities can talk through the history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in the stories about what happened after the event’ (Smith 1999: 146).

Various methodologies are used to contain the found information and discoveries. They are featured as –

- Embodiment in and through community and studio practices (practice based)
- History/storytelling and the unearthing of personal experience (autobiography)
- Broader cultural exploration motivated by injustice and the need for social change (action research)

These methods have been the means by which to transfer knowledge and information with dance, dance making within a contemporary framework presented from an Aboriginal perspective or *koorography* (as I will refer to it) with performance as one of the primary tools. Originally to uncover my practice and find structures to communicate their existence I did not apply these methods as templates but rather as fluid frames. What I have discovered resembles some of these more widely recognised approaches.

My days at NAISDA also exposed me to Martha Graham, an influential choreographer whose works broke dance boundaries.

*She was not afraid to mix her politics with dance. At this time that was rather unheard of since dance was still, for the most part, associated with the formal*
classical style. Many of her important works had something to say about modern culture or even history and she relied on expression rather than plot to tell a story and express her meaning (Smith 2011)

When one considers that some of her earliest pieces were called Immigrant, Vision of Apocalypse, Revolt, and Lamentation, it is clear that she was not merely creating art for art’s sake. These were all heavy topics, especially at the time and her performances were more about functioning as social critiques rather than simply as pieces of art to be appealing to the eye (The Activist Writer 2010).

Social change through movement had been unnoticeable for me until it became a conscious intention. This realisation has been strengthened through various employment opportunities that took me away from my community and placed me in other Aboriginal and white communities. The most significant opportunity to witness social change in action has been working with Australian arts and social change company Big hART.

Big hART partners with artists and communities to run projects that empower communities to change through the arts. We employ the arts because we know it's the most effective way to engage participants from every walk of life and also be heard at the level of government policy.

We help communities learn skills in a variety of art forms: film, theatre, music, text, and new media, to name a few. We organise workshops 'on the ground' to build our ideas with community participants, helping them to tell their own stories. At the same time, Big hART builds relationships with media, arts organisations, and the three tiers of government to ensure that those stories are getting heard.

At the heart of the company’s approach is a simple idea: “It’s much harder to hurt someone if you know their story.” By placing story at the core of the work, participants begin from a position of strength. Everyone has the unique gift of their life experience to share. Big hART projects are based around an
Being on the ground and participating in two of their projects, Ngapartji Ngapartji and Yijala Yala, I have grown to appreciate the value and effect of an underlying intention to communicate issues through telling life stories. This has brought concern for social change further into my practice and informs my approach in all that I create today.

In the process of writing I have endeavoured to value the voices of others as well as my own. To give ‘voice’ context I have drawn on relevant published works, historical accounts and media records. Doing this through the three main phases of writing has allowed these references to be in a dynamic engagement with my text, rather than as a separate ‘survey of the literature’ as some academic traditions might prefer. As much of my survey unfolded over time within the writing process, this structure more truly reflects my process.

Ways of doing

Through the duration of my study I have shared time with many peoples. Firstly in Jangmum (Casino, NSW) where my family live, and in Ieramagardu (Roebourne, WA) where I worked with Yindjibarndi and Ngarluma Elders and children, in Narrm (Melbourne, VIC) working with professional dancers from different cultural backgrounds while spending a significant amount of time reflecting.

My writing is centred on my experience and ‘told’ from my perspective. There is something autobiographical about this. Stacey Holman-Jones (2005) uses the term autoethnography. ‘Autoethnography is a form of self-reflection and writing that explores the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings’ (Maréchal 2010).

In many ways this is reflected in my approach as much of this project is grounded in creative practice sourced from what is drawn on in conversation, dance and every day community.

The research incorporates a degree of activism reflected in a concern to make a difference - to emphasis preceding injustice. The researcher’s action derives from lived experience. Kincheloe & McLaren note increasingly today we find forms of a
‘performative autoethnography’ that ‘highlights immediacy and involvement’ (2005: 315). In this study my embodied presentations and writing facilitate the telling of Aboriginal stories and experiences.

It is collaborative in that as outlined earlier in the introduction, I am bound to honour and respect those who are working with me. I work collectively. I participate in larger projects to heighten Aboriginal presence.

The methods that I used throughout the study were not prescribed at the outset, rather they emerged over time; each ‘next’ step happened out of reflection, conversation, and necessity – and this approach to inquiry is often referred to as emergent.

Two pivotal influences that have generated significant creative process have been Ansel Adams and Fred Archer’s *The Photographic Zone System* and Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s *Five Stages of Grief* model; each offering a different purpose.

The element most relevant to my study is the grayscale meter that makes up *The Zones*. These are eleven (11) shades that begin with black (0) and incrementally increase to white (X) (Lieber 2006).

![Figure 1: The Photographic Zone System (www.photography.tutsplus.com)](image)

I use the grayscale as a means to capture the diversity that comes from just looking at my own family and their many varying shades of skin. It is also used as a vehicle to capture the terminology of ‘black and white’ that exist between two worlds, when referring to skin tone.

It continued to be a guide when devising ideas for all elements of the study. Personal black and white images were used to create movement in the studio to generate kooriography. Words were scripted emphasising racial vernacular. Costumes were
designed using only the colours in the scale. Lighting highlighted the black, white and grey in the costumes and the grayscale is present in the words chosen to write this thesis.

From my postgraduate study I started placing my work within a ‘Five Stages of Grief’ structure as created by Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. She pioneered methods in the support and counselling of personal trauma, grief and grieving, associated with death and dying. Her ideas, notably the ‘Five Stages of Grief’ model (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), are also transferable to personal change and emotional upset resulting from factors other than death and dying (Chapman 2006).

This was a means with which to gather the emotions that were coming up throughout the unearthing of experience and validating it with a place on my own ‘change model’. This ‘change model’ achievable through action, was constructed in a way to look at the past and challenge it, in the hope that it creates a new way of being. As the study progressed the emotional and psychological impacts of its content made self-care very important.

The chronological stages and phases over the duration of this study can be briefly summarised as:

1. Literary survey including review of historical accounts and relevant theory (Ongoing throughout the study).

2. Studio work/working on country including conversations, moved dialogues, gathering of memorabilia, objects, other documentation and personal items.

3. **HA LF** - A 40-minute dance performance presented to a live audience from 4th-8th December 2012. Housed in Studio 221 at the VCA, it consisted of three solo pieces (i) *I, dentity* performed by myself, (ii) *Loss* performed by Jennifer Williams, and (iii) *segregation* performed by Rheannan Port.
4. Reflection upon the processes and performative materials - a period of distillation and crystallization of core themes and threads emerging through the study.

5. **half and half** - A photographic, film and live performance installation housed in the Elisabeth Murdoch Building at the VCA. It took place from 20th-22nd March 2013. This installation concentrated on perception by creating two worlds - one in black and white, and the second in colour. Placed throughout the gallery were photographs of seven generations of my family. It also showcased two short danced films **Culture** and **Diversity** with a new solo titled **Painting the World**.

6. **Half - Living between two worlds** - Thesis writing: A dialogue with others through writing. This has been a creative process in itself and involved reflecting and focussing upon the content that was unearthed and then sharing it with the purpose of being insightful.

The final construction of this paper is in the form of a three-part timeline: Past, Present and Future. The Past attempts to find the authorship of the label ‘half-caste’ and interrogates History as a perpetrator of injustice to Aboriginal peoples while examining its/his impact. The Present offers a moment to acknowledge the intergenerational ‘cycles’ that are reflected in everyday life. The Future considers the practices I use now as frameworks for moving forward and for envisioning next steps. In this sense the Future, through reflection is an opportunity to see how we as original owners continue to generate our longevity. Each section additionally locates the performative and other installed elements developed throughout the study.

**Half - Living between two worlds** has been a moment to capture content over a concentrated time period. It is by no means a conclusive study of the topic but an opportunity to glance back at history and participate in the design of a different future. The lived experiences of this study continue well after the ink dries on the page.
Past: Early white version of history

The majority of Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists (Perkins 2008).

It is here that I will hold my tongue and let ‘History’ speak.

In the first decades of settlement Aboriginal people were grouped by reference to their place of habitation, in subsequent years, as settlement resulted in more dispossession and intermixing, a raft of other definitions came into use (McCorquodale 1986).

The most common involved reference to ‘Blood-quantum’. Blood-quantum classifications that entered legislation in New South Wales in 1839, South Australia in 1844, Victoria in 1864, Queensland in 1865, Western Australia in 1874 and Tasmania in 1912 to regulated all forms of inclusion and exclusion (to and from benefits, rights, places etc.) was by reference to degrees of Aboriginal blood (Gardiner-Garden 2003).

Terms full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste, quadroon, quintroon, octoroon and hexadecaroon accompanied the statutes. The legislation produced capricious and inconsistent results based, in practice, on nothing more than an observation of skin colour (Gardiner-Garden 2003).

In 1935 a fair-skinned Australian of part-indigenous descent was ejected from a hotel for being an Aboriginal. He returned to his home on the mission station to find himself refused entry because he was not an Aboriginal. He tried to remove his children but was told he could not because they were Aboriginal. He walked to the next town where he was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve. During the Second World War he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal. He went interstate and joined up as a non-Aboriginal. After the war he could not acquire a passport without permission because he was Aboriginal. He received exemption from the Aborigines Protection Act and was told that he could no
longer visit his relations on the reserve because he was not an Aboriginal. He was denied permission to enter the Returned Servicemen's Club because he was Aboriginal (Gardner-Garden 2000-01).

It is within such terminology and institutional policy that marginalisation begins and with which a single term’s longevity persists: ‘half-caste’. Various definitions offer an insight into why such a term would be considered offensive:

*Half-caste is an archaic label for categorising people of mixed race or ethnicity. It is derived from the term Caste, which comes from the Latin castus, meaning pure and the derivative Portuguese and Spanish casta, meaning race, and is now considered offensive* (Memidex 2012).

*Half-caste - along with labels such as caste, quarter-caste and others—were widely used by ethnographers in British colonies in attempts to classify natives* (Neville 2009).

*Throughout the world the label ‘half-caste’ has had atrocious repercussions for peoples born of two cultures. People labelled ‘half-caste’ were considered inferior. It was believed that the blood of Black people or of races other than White was ‘tainted’. In line with this concept was also the assumption that Blacks would somehow be ‘improved’ through White inter-mixing. People labelled this were ostracised and criticised in life, literary and political media. It was suggestive of a dilution of ethnicity* (Memidex 2012).

*In Australia, the label was widely used in the 19th- and early-20th-century British Commonwealth laws to refer to the offspring of White colonists and the Aboriginal natives of the continent* (Neville 2009).

*It became a term of common cultural discourse and appeared even in religious records. For example, John Harper notes from records of Woolmington Christian mission that ‘half-castes’ and anyone with any Aboriginal connection were considered ‘degraded as to divine things, almost on a level with a brute, in a state of moral unfitness for heaven’* (Harper 1973).
There was a saying ‘God created the white man, God created the black man and the devil created the ‘half-caste’’ (Perkins 2008).

The sentiment of such a definition would create ripple effects within New Holland’s governance structures.

It became evident in the Australian Government’s first legislation of the Aboriginal Protection Act, in Victoria in 1869 and grew in subsequent years (National Archives of Australia 2005).

This document made Victoria the first Colony to enact a comprehensive scheme to regulate the lives of Aboriginal peoples. It gave powers to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which subsequently developed into an extraordinary level of control of people's lives including regulation of residence, employment, marriage, social life and other aspects of daily life (Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 (Vic)).

In 1886 in a further expansion and extension of the Aboriginal Protection Act, the term was immortalised in the Half-caste Act (in full, an Act to amend an Act entitled “An Act to Provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria”) (National Archives of Australia 2005).

This legislation started removing Aboriginal peoples of mixed descent, labelled ‘half-castes’, from the Aboriginal stations or reserves to force them to assimilate into European society. These expulsions separated families and communities, causing distress and lead to protest. Nevertheless the Board refused to assist the expelled people. It was assumed that the expulsions would lead to the decline in the population of the reserves and their eventual closure (Gardiner-Garden 2003).

In 1951, the Aborigines Protection Board officially adopted the Policy of Assimilation. From this time the Board substantially increased the already established practice of removing native children. The children who were targeted for removal, in almost all cases, had one parent that was white and one
that was native, also referred to at the time as ‘part Aboriginal’ (National Sorry Day Committee 2013).

It was allegedly a racist policy derived from the theory of eugenics that flourished in Nazi Germany (Windschuttle 2009).

The Australian public was led to believe that Aboriginal children were disadvantaged and at risk in their own communities, and that they would receive a better education, a more loving family, and a more ‘civilised’ upbringing in adopted white families or in government institutions, as well as be ‘trained’ to take their place in white society (National Sorry Day Committee 2013).

The practice of taking fair skinned children from their families for over 187 years has tyrannized a people already suppressed, leaving many generations of children stolen from their families, known today as the Stolen Generations (Nagle - Summerrell 2002).

Nearly every Aboriginal family and community was affected by these policies of forcible removal – those taken away, their parents, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, and the communities themselves. Many were never returned or found their families (National Sorry Day Committee 2013).

You can see the enormity of the challenge faced by people labelled ‘half-caste’ given its historical portrayal through the eyes of the invader. I quote frequently throughout this dissertation to offer an insight into the devastation of my feelings when listening to the dominant culture’s history.

Because back when the abundance of the lands and waters that lay at the explorers feet were home to over 250 languages, 600 dialects, a population of 750,000 peoples, its oldest resident of 70, 000 years is Culture (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013). Aboriginal peoples fought for their lands and waters, and paid with their lives and those of their families, as the deterioration of their livelihood became a necessity to the invaders. Land dispossession took away many links to kinship, songs,
storytelling, dances, land care and cultivation. Within its extensive empire, Great Britain forced its customs, religion and ways of life onto the original owners of ‘Australia’. The imposed ways of living obliterated the lives of countless Aboriginal peoples.

Anthropologists offered to ‘smooth a dying pillow’ while capturing images of a race not adapting to western culture (Nethery 2009).

Within the 226 years of occupying terra nullius, numerous Aboriginal cultures have been annihilated, languages decreased to 110 and populations reduced to 413,000 people (Statistics 2010). Our cultures and peoples that remain have survived the onslaught of progressive government Acts, policies and mistreatment all executed under the guise of ‘betterment’ of natives lives. Imperialism has led to multiple periods of genocide, segregation and disadvantage with its scent continually growing potent over time. All the while leaving the remains of Culture’s past scattered at the feet of his people who have persevered in his honour.

*Cultures’ Funeral Ceremony*

When the British arrived here they didn’t just walk up to its occupants and say, “Hello, we’re moving in”. They did as they were instructed, to take possession of ‘a Continent or Land of great extent’… but…‘with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain’ (National Archives of Australia 2005).

Hundreds and thousands of original landowners were massacred. The explorers weren’t just killing one person, but many, with cultural knowledge that surpassed their individual lifetimes. Now 226 years after British agents arrived on Eora country, I see how Great Britain has drastically altered my inheritance and left me apparently responsible and at fault for *losing* my Bundjalung culture.

It has only been through experiencing Yolngu, Tiwi, Pitjantjatjara, Warumungu and Yindjibarndi ceremony that the true importance of my culture weighs in as an embodied longing. A longing that engulfs my spirit with the possibilities of stories that have passed in the wind for centuries, around fires and within dreams, to a
knowledge that surpasses my imagination, and connects me to my ancestors.

But I stand drenched in hurt, anger and sorrow for all that should have been mine to learn and share, for the stolen cultural moments and for what now remains simply as documented traditions. I feel blind because I’ll never look into Culture’s eyes, and will only feel his spirit. No amounts of ‘I’m sorry’ can change this.

Sadness seeps from my heart as I lie at Sorrow’s feet and weep.

It is deep within these emotions that I create my first solo for HA LF (December 2012, VCA) entitled *Loss*.

The only way to capture this emotion is to humanise it and place it in a construct to grieve. To intensify past sorrows and make them present today, I imagine Culture to be a man and give him the rightful burial he deserves. To make it tangible the dancer is a woman grieving for her lover. She mourns for her life partner, Culture.

It is also constructed in a way to mourn for someone instantly, as how do you possibly grieve for something that has been taken away continuously for over 226 years? Would it be equivalent to someone in your family dying each year for 226 years? How would people cope with that reality and how would they find their way through it? In that instance, I don’t think people would be too quick to say ‘get over it’.

The components of *Loss* are grounded in gathering cultural elements to perform this farewell ceremony i.e. to have the dancer sing in Bundjalung language and to dance with the essence of cultural presence. The foundation of this new ceremony is grounded in my own continued desire to learn more about my mother’s (Githabul) and father’s (Gidabul) roots. This continues to offer the opportunity to unearth language, song and dance to begin my own practice of decolonisation.

To set this in motion, my first point of contact culturally is always my father. He has advised me throughout my life and continues to do so over the course of this study. To gain knowledge for building language and song he guides me to the Elders most appropriate. The various visits back to Jangmum (Casino NSW) also offer opportunities to gather words to practice speaking my mothers’ Githabul language.
Identity – GUMARR JAGURR MA, which translates more to ‘blood on country’.
Language – GURRGUN
Pride – DUM
Culture – BUTHERAM

Although these are four words to add to the words I already have, they produce much pride. But quickly there is a shift in focus as I began to concentrate more on my father’s language as speakers are declining. I was advised to go see Aunty Patsy Nagas (who passed away in early 2014); she is the daughter of Uncle Mick Walker (deceased). He was a fluent speaker/teacher of Bundjalung language. Aunty Pat granted me permission to use the Bundjalung words from ‘The Tracker’ soundtrack, as she had no words to offer me. Uncle Mick had written the songs in Bundjalung. I am told structurally the words have no meaning, they are words on a page that don’t make any sense but they are Bundjalung words.

Traditionally I would have sat and heard songs that would tell me which dance to dance and songs to sing but now I was sitting in the State Library of Victoria with headphones on, writing down how I was hearing the words so I could then speak them myself. This process once again solidified the feeling of loss and the sacredness of rituals and ceremonies that aren’t readily available to me. But I continue with the task of composing a song with the little details I have.

To help capture the essence of a ceremony to put into a song, I remember the songs and dances from Yirrkala, the Tiwi Islands and Turkey Creek. I remember the feeling of learning the songs and dances, the preparation of paint up, and the meanings behind the colours and designs being painted onto the body. The separation of women and men, the differentiation of designs from male to female, having the right feathers, headbands and armbands were all essential in depicting the stories of the dances about to be performed.

When the women paint up with their backs to an open space I am reminded of sacredness. The ceremony that was taking place really only consisted of women. It wasn’t a gesture in anyway of being shy as they sat with their backs bare but a
moment for the women to paint their stories, in secret, to their bodies and then dance the cockatoo, the seven sisters, the shark and the barramundi: all relevant to their countries. Each piece is an important strand to ceremonial preparation. Nothing exists if it has no place or meaning.

I do my best to try and capture these feelings but music is not present without movement. Now I must begin to create the movement to accompany the sense of the song. I once again remember dancing in the red sand, the way in which my body moved while being conscious of the earth, how it changes from possum-crow-cockatoo but most importantly how my spirit felt when dancing them.

From this memory, the foundation of movement is strong yet delicate, generating awareness as one moves within, creating purpose and reasoning to each movement. Intention is present and the body is activated with its instructions. This is the starting point with which I begin my movement investigation.

Bodies of Cultural difference

As I am in the city the dancer I began working with Jackson Russell contradicted the study immediately; he is a white 26-year-old contemporary technique-trained male. How do I transfer the emotions contained within the meaning of this piece to him, as intention is integral to Loss? How much do I disclose to him? How do I teach him what has taken me many years to learn and accept? It’s not about teaching him to dance the dances I’ve learnt. It is more about him understanding the feeling of what it means to me when I dance them and transferring that essence to his body.

In an attempt to transfer that essence we begin our first workshop outside in the sand, he closes his eyes and his body rests with the earth beneath him, as I speak.

Imagining the land beneath you is yours;
It has been handed down generation after generation to you.
All that you see,
You are responsible for.
You are not separate from it;
it is an extension of your identity.
This land supports you.
You are safe when you are connected to it.
There are many stories contained in the earth, at your feet.

I leave him alone, with his eyes closed, to connect to the words spoken. I return to ask him to open his eyes, to see the sky and feel the earth that is now his. I ask him to let the responsibilities that come with the land be present when he walks, talks and moves. I believe over time this exercise connects him to that feeling of what I understand as essence. We begin this practice every day, prior to moving. Now that essence of intention is planted within him, we progress by connecting him to the emotions of Loss.

The most relevant association to the content comes via the connectedness to his mother. This relationship instils love, respect, honour and pride by association. Now the importance of land is accompanied by the love and respect of his parent. As the content is quite dense we create a character Craig, for his emotions to reside so he can detach from the personal.

We work in the studio for several weeks but periodically return to the sand to reconnect Jackson to the earth, strengthening that relationship, its intention and heightening the meaning in the movement. Throughout the three months of sporadic rehearsals, I see a change in Jackson. I see presence in all that he does, a connection to his whole body and its place within a bigger space.

Figure II: Dancer Jackson Russell. Photograph Mariaa Randall.
Eventually the time comes to return to country [Jangmum/Casino] and introduce the movement to Githabul-Ngarabul woman Jennifer Williams. What is usually Gugin Guddaba Local Aboriginal Land Council meeting room is now our rehearsal space for three weeks.

In our first rehearsal, we attempt to place the trained male constructed movement onto Jennifer’s untrained female body. This does not work because of the differences between the two dancers, namely male/female, trained/untrained, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal. We now have to somewhat start all over again.

Initially I was not aware of the complexities present from an Aboriginal woman (Myself) creating movement on a white male (Jackson) and transferring it to another Aboriginal woman (Jennifer). This was an example of the many complexities that unravel within apparently simple differences. What emerged was a consciousness that two bodies aren’t the same, that techniques offer aesthetic conformity but exclude cultural individuality.

When working with Jennifer I am mindful of her connection to spirit and intention when moving. My kooriographic process becomes different to working with Jackson. In this instance, I need to focus on building Jennifer’s movement base not her essence to develop a vocabulary uniquely her own. I draw upon Jennifer’s natural movement through gestures and motion. This task is based within the confines of my own practice i.e. to work with an individual body and explore what resides within it. This brings to the fore various elements of the moving body and creates a basis for a movement language.

We begin with an exercise to bring out her natural movement and fully knowing she is strongly connected to her traditional dance, I get her to show me the movement of her feet, then add her arms, then hands. Within this simple task three factors are highlighted; the focus in her eyes, the range of what her body can do when
comfortable in familiarity and her unconscious relationship with her body and the floor she is dancing on. This proves a great starting point to create bigger movement ideas. Tiny movement sequences are slowly woven together for the duration of my time on country. My father and his work colleague are present at our final rehearsal ‘showing’. They are invited to see what we have created so far and yarn with us about what they see, feel, hear when viewing the work.

My return to country the second time allows Jennifer and I the chance to weave the movement and song together. But first we have to compose the song. To set the scene each word is written in bold print on pieces of newspaper. We speak them out loud then place them on the floor. We sing them in our own individual way, while drawing a tiny pattern on the page to depict that sound. We find our favourites and begin to add them together, to hear and to feel what they sound like. We continue this until all elements seem right. Within a week we have the heart of a song with no emotional restrictions present.

Throughout the five-week period of working on country, we generate a movement sequence that combines Jennifer’s long hair, charcoal and the emotions of grief. The song ensures storytelling is present. When Jennifer does arrive on the land of the Kulin Nation, we must bring Culture to life.

Culture’s presence is symbolised by way of projection. Dancer Jack Sheppard, a descendent of the Wallangamma and Takalaka Tribes of North Queensland, is Culture. He appears, disappears then reappears periodically throughout the short film. My traditional Gidabul art style characterized by crosshatching is applied to Jack’s performing body. Black crisscross lines outlined areas of his limbs. Every time he reappears one of the designs vanishes until he is eventually left bare. It is then we are lost to his sight as he fades into the landscape that surrounds him, never to return. It is only on stage that Culture and his lover meet to say farewell.
In retrospect; this particular piece could have only been grounded in the intimacy of familiarity. A sense of place and knowing made the connection to this piece stronger. There is a feeling of comfort, support and presence in creating work on country. This is my first opportunity to ground a work in this way before it is then taken back to the city. For that reason, it isn’t just a work but a responsibility that accompanies Jennifer and I when it is performed in Narrm.

It is in the city that Jennifer’s character, Iyungi, arrives. It is through a longing for her children that Jennifer relates to the content within her solo. She carefully places these emotions into Iyungi’s hands when she is rehearsing and performing *Loss*. 

*Figure IV: Culture – Dancer Jack Sheppard. Photograph Jeevika Ragajopal*
Figure V: Loss, Dancer Jennifer Williams. Photograph Jeff Busby
Present: Unpacking lived experiences

‘Once you actually start to speak to people, whatever the way or however they look, it's how they've lived their life [that counts]. There is absolutely a lived experience that comes with Aboriginality and that is not predicated on skin colour’ (SBS One Insight episode ‘Aboriginal or Not’ transcript 2012).

The Lived

At a time when the Commonwealth Constitution states that you should not be counted. When Blood-quantum references are rife within your life. When the NSW Aborigines Protection Act excluded you from voting or going to school. When it is illegal for ‘half-castes’ to live on reserves. When maternity allowance is introduced but does not include you. When you know, at the beginning of WWI, approximately 400 to 500 Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families, including those whose fathers are overseas at war. When your peoples are widely believed to be a ‘dying race’. When the power to remove your children without a court hearing is legal. When your population is estimated to be at its lowest at 60,000 - 70,000 people. When Aboriginal peoples were separated into categories of ‘could be civilised’ and others who were just stuck in the stone ages and were ‘uncivilised’ (Korff 1999).

Imagine not being considered a human being. Imagine being treated like a slave. Imagine being considered part of a dying race. Imagine your life lying in the hands of someone you didn’t know. Imagine decisions being made for you without your permission. Imagine being forced to live a different way of life. Imagine the responsibility of fighting for your people.

This is the reality in which my great-grandparents lived. (1900-1930)

At a time when most Australians have no contact with your peoples due to segregation and social conventions. When Federal law for family endowment excludes your peoples and instead payments go to the Aborigines Protection Board. When your peoples can apply to ‘cease being Aboriginal’ and have access to the same rights as ‘whites’. When the Commonwealth Citizenship and Nationality Act for the
first time makes all Australians, including all your peoples, Australian citizens, but at state level you still suffer legal discrimination (Korff 1999).

Imagine not being able to walk your land as you want. Imagine now being another generation still not considered a citizen in your own country. Imagine signing your identity away. Imagine having to fight for all that you have a right to but others think you are less-than. Imagine the responsibility of fighting for your people.

This is the reality in which my grandparents lived. (1930-1960)

At a time when your people are yet another generation excluded from voting. When Aboriginal Welfare, the Conference of Commonwealth and State Authorities called by the Federal Government, decides that the official policy for some of your peoples is an assimilation policy. When your peoples of mixed descent are to be assimilated into white society whether they want to be or not. When those not living ‘tribally’ are to be educated and all others are to stay on reserves. When children are still being removed. When there is a Royal Commission into the circumstances of too many Aboriginal men dying in custody (and nothing changes) (Korff 1999).

Imagine a State/Territory official who doesn’t know you judging your parenting skills on their own family models. Imagine that person then making a decision to take your child away from you because they think they can give them more love and ‘protection’. Imagine being forced to live on the grid, in the social system brought by others to your country, a different way of life to one that flows in your veins and plays your heartstrings. Imagine someone enforcing superiority and segregation over all facets of your life. Imagine having to fight to convince a majority of people in order for you to be counted in your own country. Imagine an ‘us and them’ mentality not just from white Australians but also from other Aboriginal peoples. Imagine the responsibility of fighting for your people.

This is the reality in which my parents live. (1960-1990)

History’s harsh realities don’t seem so far away when they exist in each generation of your family. And the view of continuing colonisation isn’t so blurry; it’s a lot clearer
the closer you look. Segregation, discrimination and injustice continue to breathe down our necks as they did our forefathers and foremothers. These continued disparities aren’t off in the distance but present in the lives of each person seated at the dinner table with me.

**The Living**

In 2012, Indigenous populations increased to 2.5 % of the overall Australian population with 90% identifying as Aboriginal. While this increases numbers, it also magnifies the criticisms of the past as to who and what classifies as a ‘real Aborigine’ and who can identify (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics

- Nine out of ten Indigenous people have non-Indigenous partners, 2.3 children and live in urban cities.
- 30% live in New South Wales,
- 28% live in Queensland
- 14% in Western Australia
- 12% live in the Northern Territory, but make up almost a third (30%) of the total Northern Territory population. In all of the other states and territories Indigenous peoples make up less than 4% of the total population.

The stereotypes and discriminatory assumptions that have controlled and prescribed who was and who wasn’t Aboriginal at any given time in the past 226 years, can no longer be used in describing Aboriginal peoples today. The idea that all Aboriginal people look the same as out-dated caricatures of the ‘exotic other’ is a huge falsehood. My family, along with many others, demonstrates continuing Aboriginal diversity, striking down stereotypes on an intimate level.

Within my kin you get to see a richer, fuller representation of our multifaceted selves. You will see blonde hair, pale skin, green eyes, thin lips, fair skin, extra long eyelashes, dark skin, thick curls, bushy eyebrows, olive skin and full cheeks. Above and beyond the exterior of our human appearances, we all hold our Aboriginal identities close to our hearts.
Our sense of Aboriginality doesn’t just tie us to family but to a placement within our community and others when we arrive on different lands. It offers a place of respect through recognition, as a common practice of Aboriginal peoples is to ask ‘Where you from?’ or ‘who’s your mob?’ when meeting for the first time. This gives an instant kinship lineage and a link to country: it’s a manifestation of identity.

But for as long as I can remember Aboriginal peoples have had a label placed on them that has not been removed. ‘Natives’, ‘naturals’, ‘savages’, ‘blacks’, ‘niggers’, ‘Aborigines’, ‘Aboriginals’ and ‘Indigenous’ are all terms and concepts imposed on our realities by those who have come here from Western Europe. None of these are our own conceptual understandings of who we are from thousands of years ago to now. When has anyone asked an Aboriginal person what he or she would like to be known as?

And it is made evident in the continued government stipulated criteria of Aboriginal peoples’ validity: ‘Since the time of white settlement, governments have continued to use no less than 67 classifications, descriptions or definitions to determine who is an Aboriginal person’ (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991).

In 1981, a new definition was proposed in the Constitutional Section of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs’ Report on a Review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Australian Law Reform Commission 2010). The section offered the following definition which has continued to be the standard across the country: An Aboriginal is a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.

Whether this was for the advantage or disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples was not quite apparent to all at the time.

In 1988 the Victorian State president of the RSL, Mr. Bruce Ruxton, called on the Federal Government: To amend the definition of Aborigine to eliminate the part-whites who are making a racket out of being so-called Aborigines at enormous cost to the taxpayers. When asked to explain the Ruxton resolution,
the national RSL president, Brigadier Alf Garland, spoke of genealogical 
examination to determine whether the applicant for benefits was ‘a full-blood or 
a half-caste or a quarter-caste or whatever’ (Slee 1988). 

Public reaction to the suggestion of a blood test included the observation that there is 
no blood test that establishes Aboriginality and that: 

When any of their numerous and varied kind put a foot wrong and often even 
when they don't, white Australians will have no difficulty at all in identifying 
them as Aborigines and ascribing their shortcomings to their Aboriginality. 
But when there is some benefit flowing the Aborigines' way, such whites will 
raise silly questions. As Mr. Ruxton did (Slee 1988). 

The three-part definition was seen by most as preferable to ‘blood quantum’ 
definitions of a century earlier. It was seen as helping to protect individuals 
from the tendency among ‘mainstream Australians' to consider ‘real’ 
Indigenous people as people living somewhere else and others as manipulating 
the system (Gardiner-Garden 2003). 

It has been stated that Aboriginal peoples need to be defined because laws have been 
enacted ‘for the benefit of’ Aboriginal peoples. Over the many years of distillation 
the term ‘for the benefit of’ transgressed into ‘benefits’. This was accompanied by the 
still widely held (incorrect) mentality that Aboriginal peoples where receiving more 
monetary, housing, health and education services than the average Australian. 

These misconceptions appropriated and subverted the positive provisions of the 1948 
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the most relevant of which follow in their 
original form: 

Article 25. 

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and 
well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and 
medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event
of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

**Article 26.**

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

As Aboriginal peoples were not considered human beings until the 1967 referendum, many human rights were and continue to be violated under successive Australian federal, state and territory governments. And if you were to ask any Aboriginal person if they identify for the purpose of ‘benefits’ you will be sadly mistaken when you get a disgruntled ‘No’.

The frequency of casting Aboriginal peoples as the ‘Other’ is overwhelmingly evident in Australian history. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating offered a rare and validating moment of recognition in his landmark speech in Redfern Park, Eora Country (1992):

> And, as I say, the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.  
> It begins, I think, with that act of recognition.  
> Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing.  
> We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.  
> We brought the diseases. The alcohol.  
> We committed the murders.  
> We took the children from their mothers.  
> We practised discrimination and exclusion.  
> It was our ignorance and our prejudice.
And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.
With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds.
We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me?
(ANTaR 1992)

As groundbreaking as this moment may have been, the majority of people standing with me in the audience were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Although it had taken 204 years for this to be acknowledged it is still taking wider Australia longer to hear.

To think that institutionalised racism does not exist within Australia is a grave mistake. In author Andrew Bolt’s public newspaper content featuring racial vilification, his ignorance is obvious as he questions the Aboriginality of nine ‘fair-skinned’ Aboriginal peoples. His articles published by the Herald and Weekly Times Pty Ltd “It’s so hip to be black”, “White is the new black” and “White fellas in the black.” (Bolt 2014) reinforce and give strength to antiquated views that draw simplistic connections between money/opportunity and an individual’s Aboriginal identity.

Once again, the colour of one’s skin equals the amount of Aboriginal blood flowing through one’s veins without consideration of life experience or deep cultural connections. This is best summed up by plaintiff Mark McMillan, one of the nine in the successful class action against Bolt’s discriminatory publishing:

“As if you've got a choice about it. When you grow up in a small country town, we didn't have a choice about identity - we were that Aboriginal family. There are a couple of other people who went through the Andrew Bolt litigation and that was probably the most offensive thing ever to happen in my life where somebody from the outside questions you, you know - I was raised by my mother and grandmother. My father was English and never featured in my life. So my experiences are just that”
(SBS One Insight episode ‘Aboriginal or Not’ transcript 2012).
Denigration usually includes opinions from wider Australia but does not exclude other Aboriginal peoples from the debate of authenticity. Those from remote and regional communities, and even my own [Casino] also weigh in on the debate. It is from this place of discomfort that I develop audio recordings to accompany large face projections in my dance work **HA LF**, to highlight these reductionist viewpoints.

“You yellow-bala from the east coast you got no culture”, “Nah, she’s nothing but a coconut”, “She thinks she’s too good for us, now she’s all educated,” “What you gunna do? Go out bush and dance a corroboree with the full bloods?” These words have been dealt to me at different times. With others still very present in online media today: ‘But you’re too pretty to be Aboriginal’ (Liddle 2012), “Fuck off! You’re not black enough for me. You’re not allowed in our club any more, go play with the white kids” (Dangalaba 2012).

SBS One’s Insight episode *Aboriginal or not* (2013) offered a public platform where identity was once again scrutinised and televised, this time from within and outside our communities. The discussion centred on the ‘Confirmation of Aboriginality Letter’ and the apparent authenticity that it provides. This document once signed by an Aboriginal organisation confirms an individual fits within the 3-part definition. (*An Aboriginal is a person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives*).

In theory the letter emphasised the protection of Aboriginal ‘entitlements’ but in practice has largely excluded Aboriginal peoples based on their appearance.

**Anton Enus: In spite of your appearance, have you always identified as Aboriginal?**

**Tarran Betteridge: To be honest, I know I don't look Aboriginal. I look at myself and I see my mother completely - she's of Scottish heritage - I don't deny that at all so I understand when people see me at face value that I don't look what they expect to see of an Aboriginal person. That in itself is an issue. And I can completely see that because I don’t look dark, people consider reverse
Just because I don't look black, doesn't mean I'm not Aboriginal and it doesn't mean that I have grown up that way and it doesn’t mean that I can’t be proud of who I am. Just because I don't have skin colour makes me no different to any of you [who] have colour. My family is my family and my community is my community, just because I’m white [doesn’t change this]. You can’t claim Aboriginality, you are Aboriginal or you’re not. You don't have a choice. When I was born, I was born Aboriginal. When I die, I will die Aboriginal. Everything in between is Aboriginal, yes I have another part to me but I don’t claim anything.

(...)

**Bess Price:** I didn’t know you were blackfella as well because I'm sitting here and you totally look like a whitefella to me.

Once again words reinforce the underlining divide that is present within and between Aboriginal nations throughout Australia. Such definitive comments solidify the psychology of handed-down identity descriptions that have led to a failure to enact change in our own actions. We continue to use the labels imposed on us by successive Australian governments/society to discriminate, classify and exclude our own mob. Whether it is a conscious or unconscious phenomenon, the ramifications of each individual’s choice of words to prescribe another’s identity re-enacts and continues the intergenerational damage of recurring assimilation practices. Because once you say you are Aboriginal, you can’t take it back and then become someone else.

As time persists so does the stigma of validating authenticity and this is the reality in which I live. (1975- )

**Confinement by Definition**

I have found at the core of my own pain of ‘not fitting in’ or ‘not being enough’ culturally speaking, that there is an unconscious burden of carrying the weight of other people’s judgments on this deeply personal aspect of my being. My struggle lies in a constant reshaping of myself to others’ opinions. This barrage becomes harder
when the taunts are constant. I become a chameleon when words and labels become the tool by which I am confined, placed in a box. I don’t actually fit in.

Continuing to extract traces of lived experience from the self to the stage is a constant within my work. The drawing out of emotions to inspire connection binds the practice to storytelling through movement.

This sentiment is present in Nakas woman Taloj Havini’s work ‘Blood Generation’. It is a collaborative work with photographer Stuart Miller that captures the effects that mining has had on family, land and culture in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. It highlights the term *blood generation* that is placed on the children born of Australian and Papua New Guinean parentage.

> ‘It’s about resilience. To portray this blood generation who have been labelled in a negative way as rather defiant.’ (Blak Dot Gallery 2011)

Frustration, hurt, anger and disappointment have a tenacious grip when being categorized. They accompany the ‘what part’, ‘you’re not’, ‘not enough’ judgments and become the motivation behind my second solo within *HA LF* (December 2012, VCA) entitled, ‘*segregation*’.

**Bodies of Cultural sameness**

The dancer I work with to piece together ‘*segregation*’ is Rheannan Port. Rheannan descends from the Lama Lama, Aiyapathu and Eastern Kuku Yalanji peoples of Cape York Peninsula. I have known Rheannan since 1999, as a student at NAISDA Dance College. This solo is our first opportunity to work together outside of our training at NAISDA. The process with Rheannan differs immensely from working with Jackson and Jennifer. Rheannan has been dancing and teaching professionally for over 15 years. Our links to NAISDA offer a shorthand dialogue when finding movement outcomes. Contained within Rheannan’s body are elements of the trained body with the foundations of cultural *essence*. 
Our initial rehearsal is moving to words on a list I create. The words that appear for investigation and exploration are ‘segregation’, ‘fit in’, ‘alienation’, ‘interpreter’ and ‘translator’. We work to place them within the Locus Cube structure. It is an imaginary cube with 27 points that correlate with the letters of the alphabet and is an orientation point for the performer. This is the organisation of movement used by American choreographer Tricia Brown to develop her work Locus (Brown 2000).

![Figure VI: Locus cube, Journal notes](image1)

![Figure VII: Locus Cube - aerial view, Journal Notes](image2)

Each word carefully articulates the body through movement gestures and shapes with each single letter. Using the symbolism of being confined to a box allows for the movement to be stationary and restrictive. This heightened the investigation and the purpose of the mover.

As our rehearsals are sporadic and the space ever changing, there is an erratic nature to the kooriography. Without a daily routine to practice we don’t develop a cohesiveness or predictability in the work. We continually rehearse without music in the space and when it comes time to connect the sound with the movement it doesn’t work. Instead silence fills the room with a heightened intensity. Our only way through is to ask the ‘character’ to voice her opinion. We had initially bypassed this development possibility and entered straight into our movement investigation. We now reversed the process and luckily it works to our advantage. Rheannan memorised the movement quite quickly so adding the voice seemed an obvious addition.

To find her character, Rheannan performs the sequence of movement two times; each with a different intention and character attached. First to grace the stage is May.
movement is very subtle and passive. Then Daisy steps out with an unassuming attitude that is perfect for the piece. While Daisy remains, May exits.

Words replace counts to become a mental movement map for Daisy. What she is thinking becomes her personal vocal soundscape. It starts softly at first then gradually grows into a shout. This process allows for the body and voice to exist together seamlessly.

Daisy becomes a person constantly replying to questions asked by others, replying like a cracked record that slowly drives her crazy. As she writes these words in the air and observes those written to her skin, small pieces of paper fall from the costume designed for Rheannan. These memories of such hurtful taunts, blank with numbness, continue to fall from the pockets of the dancer.

Figure VIII: segregation. Dancer Rheannan Port. Photograph Jeff Busby

Thoughts are invisible but words confine her. They are used to segregate, alienate but then become the one thing that allows her to fit in. By then she has learnt their meaning which enables her to be the one to translate and interpret what others sling in her direction. – ‘segregation’ description in HA LF program 2012.
**Future: Implicated in the present**

In our communities, the presence of our elders, who have lived history, is imbued with an unconscious dread of losing yet another. Our parents, who pushed forth creating histories of protest, insisting on equality, now stand at the helm of the organisations they have fought for and established for us. They stand with one arm tightly holding the hands of our elders and the other around our shoulders waiting for us to find our feet to follow in their footsteps, all the while attempting to foresee what their grandchildren will inherit.

**Crafting the tools of the storyteller**

Gaining intricate details into history, culture, family, performance making and identity have enabled a transformative process through doing. It is present in the creator I am today; she is different to the maker of the past. This journey has taken some time for the storyteller within me to find her voice.

In 2010 it began at first as a whisper while unearthing components of the ‘creator’ throughout my Postgraduate Diploma in Performance Creation (Choreography). Concentrated time offered investigation and connection to the moving body. These periods in the studio allowed me the opportunity to analyse the intricate details of ‘the’ body and find what influences ‘my’ body to move.

This lead to the creation of a list that mapped the many movement styles contained within my body. It was a process of listening, allowing the residue of past ways of ‘my’ body moving to appear and became a guide in seeking out something original. These movement styles came out either one by one or as a blended form of something else.

I continued to move within this construct, without ever assuming that I had reached the end of the discovery process. For example I observe the movement journey of one joint/body part to another, while manipulating it by morphing from slow to fast, and giving detail through attention to the act of doing and noticing any ambiguity.

A detailed gesture of the shoulder created a complete ripple effect of the body in response to its initial movement, bouncing, pausing and at times breaking its natural
flow. Apparent angles appear and melt effortlessly into circular gestures as if water running over the body.

It is here that I unearth a potent movement motif, uniquely mine and combine it with emotions of personal experiences and my research to uncover the fundamental elements of a language in which the ‘creator’ communicates.

Previously I had created works for and with other people, but now the microphone was mine regardless of how soft my voice appeared while creating my original Postgraduate work Half-caste (VCA Studio 221, 2010).

Within Half-caste I created Sacred/Ceremony/Ritual, I, dentity and Loss, three components that became the fundamental foundations for my lived experiences to materialise on stage.

A small stream of sand begins to fall from the ceiling as a representation of history keeping time. I sit with my bare back to the audience as I cover my body with mixed charcoal and oil, to darken my skin. I had learnt that Aboriginal mothers mixed charcoal and oil to cover their ‘fair’ skinned children to safeguard them from being taken, a reality for my mother and many family members. This is a gesture to acknowledge my mother and the many other Aboriginal mothers who had to practice this on a daily basis, to keep their children safe.

A white feather string symbolises culture and is handled delicately imagining it is something very important to me; care is given to its manipulation and the intention in which I touch it. The hands initiate this movement. Thought is not present when moving, just the inquisitiveness of observing the conversation being composed by the hands and feather string, the story unravelling as they speak. Recorded hums of Jennifer Williams are accompanied by spoken Githabul words, creating the soundscape for Sacred/Ceremony/Ritual. This becomes a moment to capture sacredness and ritual from all that I have learnt about my culture.

Now a white powdered line divides the space: only black and white appears. You have entered the world of I, dentity. A lone figure stumbles down the line with her
charcoal skin now picking up pieces of the powdered line that lay beneath her feet. The line, no longer straight, has now become a map of her movement. Her story of triumph over struggle ends in darkness but her presence lingers in the space. A corridor of light pre-empts the journey ahead as Cultures’ funeral ceremony begins.

Partnering me is Yugarra and Ugar singer John-Wayne Parsons. He performs a Torres Strait Island hymn ‘Baba Waian’. It is a farewell song wishing family a safe journey home but also a safe return. While we dance he wipes the charcoal off my skin with the feather string. The remnants are slowly transferred to John’s white shirt, leaving traces of what could have been. As a final farewell to Culture, the feather string is placed in the mounting sand and slowly buried, laid to rest. The sound of John-Wayne singing is heard as the lights slowly fade to darkness and silence concludes the ceremony of Loss.

![Figure IX: Half-caste - Performers Mariaa Randall and John-Wayne Parsons. Photograph Mimmalisa Trifilo](image)

Dance is usually accompanied by counts, emphasising the beat and showcasing technique but devising and performing this work was different. Instead it was based on feeling, experience and a connection to narrative. Counts did not exist just the emotions that influenced the dancer to move, sing and perform.

It is within the confines of this performance that I acknowledge the moving body as an integral source of my storytelling, outside of me just being a dancer deciphering and performing movement sequences. This is a powerful discovery.

Another important realisation within this process was crafting a character to contain each of these elements. My supervisor Helen Herbertson introduced me to the practice of using a character for the moving performer. She becomes a force within the work. The character that emerges for me is Tiffany. She is the vessel with which
to express the movement vocabulary and the emotional content. Her presence only exists when intention is visible.

So when creating there are three personas present; the creator, the performer and the character but never at the same time. They emerge at different stages. I had discovered that I the creator am very different to I the performer. The creator has a more intimate dialogue with the spiritual self and the body, communicating ideas, intrigue, curiosity, dreams and goals. The performer becomes the reaper of the creator's hard work and gets to indulge in movement at its final realisation. Eventually the performer, combines story with movement and transforms into her character. This becomes a powerful tool when creating work with other performers.

Throughout this process I acknowledge the importance of storytelling, unearthing movement residue, using a character and the distinct separateness of the creator from the performer as intrinsic facets that evolve and inform my Master’s work:

**HA LF.**

It is within my Master’s study that my analytical and creative minds amalgamate to further scrutinise my lived experiences and adjust the perimeters of my practice. The most important tools in finding distinct lines come by sitting, listening and letting information permeate while awaiting its response - all very significant in trusting my gut and valuing self-reflection. I no longer wish to scratch the surface but want to delve deeper into my own artistry. Within the infinite possibilities of creating now comes clarity in character, tone and volume, with which my storyteller can speak.

From this grounding comes the progression of **I, dentity.**

**I, dentity** is a girl whose life walks a fine line of uncertainty. She often struggles to define herself in a world of labelling and judgement. Her journey is to place one foot in front of the other and stand at times unsure while embracing herself and painting the world, not her skin, with who she is (HA LF Program 2012).
Light divides the stage into two worlds; light and dark, black and white. The only thing that separates them is a white powdered line that the dancer performs along. When falling right the darkness dissects the body poking fun at the ‘What part Aboriginal are you?’ while falling left amplifies the colour of the skin.

The walking of a tight rope is a metaphor for capturing the struggle between discrimination and recognition of one’s identity, within Blak and White Australia.

The movement base begins with imagining someone trying to push her from a tightrope whilst she struggles to stay on it. The ‘pushes’ are conceptually peoples’ opinions. At first, the pushes are ineffective but eventually they overpower her. She falls persistently between the two worlds. Perseverance fights for her but is overpowered by hopelessness. She sits with her head down and contemplates removing the line or herself. With all her strength she draws over the line and begins to force it away.

Nurturing the body and accepting the self is represented through sensual movement. This is a moment where providing proof is no longer a relevant happenstance. She has risen from the struggle. She no longer tries to conform to the regiment of the line and slowly crosses it with joyous movement, emulated in flowing gestures that form through the body while resonating strength. Her final triumph is crossing the line to walk from the light into the darkness with only her head visible. As she turns to see

Figure X: Identity - Dancer Mariaa Randall. Photograph Jeff Busby
the audience the light slowly fades from her face to darkness.

This solo is a moment that encapsulates my own unpacking of the many challenges placed on my Gooriness.

**Culture of the Individual**

I continually find myself seated across the table from Responsibility. He does not sit passively but is active in our conversation about dance making. At times creating work seems so isolating, but a sense of walking in the footprints of the past and somehow continuing the fight makes the journey less lonely. In moments of anguish when ‘why are you doing this?’ and ‘is it really that important?’ are slinging each other around in my head, I remind myself to honour the memory and spirits of my grandmothers. Then Conflict’s presence doesn’t linger so long.

But I often wonder what would be present within me if colonisation’s casualty wasn’t my culture and capturing stories wasn’t so hard. I daydream of clap-sticks off in the distance, high pitched singing, dust rising from the ground as the women caress the earth with their feet as they dance, a movement that encapsulates language, dance and culture.

But dance and culture are different now; they are moments dancing ballroom with my Nanna (Mona) Randall, doing the twist with my mum and Aunty while watching Elvis movies, teaching myself breakdance from the movie *Electric Boogaloo*, learning Janet Jackson’s choreography from the television and dancing ‘devil’ dance from Yirrkala. And as the years have progressed Ballet, Jazz, Contemporary, Hip-hop, Butoh and traces of ‘what could have been’ through learning Yirrkala and Tiwi Islands Aboriginal dances are embedded within my body.

*So today, ceremony is different*; its ritual is created as part of performance preparation that happens prior to entering the stage. The space in which I perform is cleaned and prepared. This instantly brings me to place, to let go of my surroundings and to ready the space for what is to come. I quietly walk through the middle of the stage and take a moment of its silence. I breathe in and out then leave the space as I have found it,
to ready myself to dance.

I prepare myself as if I were performing a dance that contains a story that is many, many years old, with the important responsibility of telling it. Water is carefully poured over my feet, there is a moment to breathe, to let go of the creator and allow for the spirit of the dancer to enter. As I wipe each foot, connection comes as they are placed one by one on the floor beneath me - a support, a relationship - to now tell a story through movement.

This is not an exclusive practice Jennifer and Rheannan have their preparations as well. We then gather to stand in a small huddled circle while holding each other’s hands. Time is spent connecting to our characters, Daisy, Iyungi and Tiffany. The feelings within each solo resonate with our individual experiences, so our characters allow us to simply be performers while exposing narrative. As we let our hands go we all step into the wings of the stage and wait for the moment to be storytellers.

The true meaning behind each movement piece strengthens its delivery as it takes the dancer and her character on a journey each night. For me, throughout the performance I am rendered obsolete as Tiffany takes over and tells her story. I only re-emerge when the performance is over. It is somewhat of an out of body experience when I am focused and connected to her. And it is only on stage that this experience materialises. It is in moments of conscious connectedness to dance that I am being.

Being Marlba is a connection to all that surrounds us. Being Goori means being tied to a culture that has existed over millennia. Being Wongi is a connection to the sea. Being Bama is a bigger sense of community. Being Koori is a connection to stories that have passed in the wind for generations. Being Ngarda is a connection to the land. Being Nyungar is knowing we are the same but still very different.
Reality: Same, same but different.
At the end of 2012, I had wrapped up my performance of **HA LF** and now came the task to distil the work into an installation. I allowed myself time to reflect on the year that was and the content found but nothing moved me to create.

An eventual point of interest came in investigating how kooriography would change if its intention were different. This became the motivator in the initial stages of what would become the refined work, **half and half**. A kooriographic tool was to use short poems I had written to instigate movement. They were never really intended for the voice but eventually became the driving motivation for the dancer to speak.

To tie the movement and poetry together as if the words were coming from my character’s mouth and not mine, I enlisted the help of 2011 Slam poetry champion, Luka (Lesson) Haralampou.

To begin, Luka and I sat and spoke about Tiffany, her story and the emotions that were contained within her **I, dentity** solo. He waited as I moved to find her emotions and once I was connected to her, we began. Luka asked her questions and as she answered, he would write down her response.

*What if the heaviness, weight is all an illusion? What does that do to your world?*

*If the weight is the delusion then I have no answer*

(...)

*I’ve mastered it for a second*

*that second, where I’m just me and it’s OK.*

*I think the one-second is a delusion and the weight still exists.*

*When I feel like I don’t fit in, it is heavier than others*

*covers your whole body, always*

*I don’t know*

*I don’t understand it*

*I’ve tried*

*I really have*

*But what can I do?*
It’s not like I’m a body builder
I can’t keep taking that much weight
Cause it’s too much for one person to hold
Too much, too much
It’s black (whispered)
Like a bubble filled with jelly that is slowly suffocating me
I’m fighting to be me
the version I want to be
not should be!

Here Luka interjects, Tiffany vanishes and Mariaa reappears. We talk and look at the notes taken by Luka. I realised that although the workshop was directed at my character it was deeply grounded within me. Used to design words for my character it had proven to be a personal transformative process instead. I felt lighter and with that was reminded of the important fact that my family has always been the motivation behind my research. Now seemed the perfect time to represent them further in my work half and half.

My ultimate motivation to showcase my family was to show our diversity. I attempted to materialise this by placing photographs of seven generations of my family on the gallery walls.

In this simple idea of presenting my family through photographs, I try to go further back into history in an attempt to find more of my family, but this task becomes a challenge within itself. Historical images highlight the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples and become very confronting material to access and research. As my emotions overwhelm me, for now I leave the research alone.

Eventually I am introduced to my great-great grandparents and great-grandparents through photographs. As I look at my great-grandfather as a child there is no smile on his face, none on any of my family members. A slight smile came in the wedding picture of my grandparents. But smiles became more apparent in subsequent generations, from my dad’s to mine and to my nieces and nephews. So this becomes
my focal point within the installation, capturing my family’s portraiture across various generations.

**half and half** becomes a work dissected into two worlds (rooms) to challenge the viewer’s perceptions and assumptions of Aboriginality. The first room (world) is a place where only black and white photographs, films and live performance exist. Photographs of family members are meticulously placed as visual documentation of lives changing with our complexity not yet apparent. I project the short film **Culture** onto a wall. Across from it are enlarged images of my family and friends placed on the blinds in the order of the pigmentation zone system. At night the city creeps in and the static and the living exist simultaneously. The black and white lens for the viewer is a tool to critique the false divisions and assumptions that have been operating in Australia for a number of generations.

Within this world my character, Tiffany, once again exists between black and white. She re-emerges from the darkness of **I, dentity** and continues telling her story through a new solo entitled **Painting the world**.

The kooriography is the same, only the intention has changed. She no longer struggles with who she is; now she is simply **being**. She had struggled so much to walk the line between two worlds and eventually created her own path but now contemplates existing in this new unknown.
This new world contains a white wall and at her feet floorboards. She dances along both while standing and lying. The black dress she wears is covered in black paint and every move is documented by the caress of her hand, arm, leg, torso, head and feet as the paint residue is left behind. This movement paints her journey to the wall as she dances on the surfaces finding the relationship between the body, the paint and the wall. This celebratory danced artwork is an ‘up yours’ statement to those whose legacies are condemnation.

Tiffany leads the audience from the black and white world into the room of colour. In this realm, the same images appear, now in colour. There are the ‘ah huh’ moments when perception encompasses the ‘technicolour’ full spectrum of being.

Charcoal is placed in each of the fireplaces in both rooms representing ‘presence of before’ as if someone had used the space previously. I use elements of my everyday life as constituent parts to my ceremonial cultural practice. Charcoal, flour, paper, paint, fabric and the body are my media. This work is created leaving physical imprints on the space as well as on the dancer. This is a poetic action that I have developed for ceremonial purpose.

To bring the work into the present day, a short danced film **Divercity** is played on a flat screen television. This captures the individual dance styles of four Aboriginal dancers highlighting once again our diversity in a dense urban context.
As Ritual, Diversity and Kinship stand beside me, I am drawn to my family. It is in these moments of conscious connectedness to them that I am being.

Being Nunga is filled with a resilience of the lived. Being Yolngu is a different definition of family. Being Koori is filled with a unique sense of humour, regardless of where you are in Australia. Being Yamitji is pride in a connection to our families’ (peoples’) struggles. Being Nyoongar is knowing our ancestors fought for their land. Being Anangu is the consciousness of being an advocate for our families (peoples).
Reflection – (Personal)

There will always be a feeling of pride in knowing I have blood that flows through me that contains stories of cultural evolution, ceremony and sacredness for which I have no tangible link, just a sense of connectedness to something bigger than myself. So when I create stories that translate to movement this forever guides me.

I had originally hoped that all elements of the study would have a wide reach and therefore influence a bigger audience. But I have realised change for the moment isn’t for the wider community but for me alone, as the ‘doing/action’ has produced the transformation through this journey. I now await the further exposure of the creative pieces developed within my study to gauge how or whether this work will generate some form of change within others.

For me, somewhere within the movement, questions, reflections, information and words I have found a deep resolve within. I have realised I had been presenting my work/view from the implied ‘not being enough’, that I had somehow needed someone else to validate my Aboriginality.

Throughout the duration of this study that view shifted to an affirmative ‘*I am*’. I had dispensed a lot of energy trying to fit into a box that others hold, carefully placing myself within it. The weight/burden of this had been largely unconscious but heavy. Metaphorically, it became a black heavy liquid that seeped from my pores, and when I realised its presence, I removed it immediately. That weight now remains in a pile on the floor from which I have walked away.

I have discovered the aspirations of my practice, work and identity: to forever be fluid in their evolution and never stagnant. To acknowledge the presence of the storyteller as vital to any creative endeavour I undertake now and into the future. To make this tangible I must continue to unearth and interrogate my practice, through doing; approaching this as a holistic methodology that adds to the many skills I possess as a kooriographer, dancer, performer and community arts worker.

After Thought – (Factual)

‘Indigenous cultural expression not only acts as a celebration of identity and culture, it also makes an important contribution to modern Australia. The arts and culture of Indigenous people are integral to Australia’s national identity: socially, politically and economically’ (AIATSIS 2014).

I have to acknowledge my work is a tiny ripple in the bigger injustices that Aboriginal peoples have suffered at the hands of History. We are a people that have been exposed to the varying timelines of colonisation, the rollout of assimilationist, integrationist and exemptionist policies. And yet there is still a continuum to incarcerate Aboriginal to one definition. The systems of old will continue to malfunction the longer they are enforced under the self-congratulatory pretence of ‘equity’ coated with ‘good intentions’.

Authenticity has continuously been scrutinised then handed back to us without encompassing what we actually experience or where we come from. Instead the colour of our skin prescribes it without acknowledging the systems that have repeatedly fuelled intergenerational disparities.

The sheer depth of cultural diversity within Aboriginal Australia makes it hard to confine Aboriginality to a singular definition. As Aboriginality is complex and diverse it only makes sense to insist on using its plural, Aboriginalities, for now.

Aboriginalities are embodied through individual experiences that are tied to a bigger tapestry of our peoples’ lives and histories. From the inside we know how we identify and who we are without being told. We know what has influenced our lives and what it is that we choose to fight for and against. We are the ones that make and embody our Aboriginalities.

An Aboriginal Nation represents one country of peoples that identify specifically to those particular lands and waters. Goori people of the Bundjalung Nation can be found within the perimeters of Beaudesert (North), Grafton (South), Byron Bay (East) and Tenterfield (West). The contestation of space, the lack of treaties, the unequal
power dynamic in this society, intergenerational traumas from continuing policies and practices, all point to significant unfinished business.

The central realisation of this thesis is to diversify the lens of Aboriginality within Australia. It is the act of more deeply understanding this diversity and complexity that opens up future possibilities.

*Aborigine is a racialised term, which has been constructed to homogenise people who are culturally diverse. Race enters into it and makes skin colour the measure of authenticity. The blacker you are the more Aboriginal you are. When in fact the identity of Gooris and Kooris was specific to their culture and their country not their colour. There is no term for race in our languages* (Fanning 2012).

At times this journey has been confronting and heart wrenching but it does not compare to the great Australian silence that continues to ring in our ears. It is now time to cease generating this generalised term and instead create the opportunity to diversify one’s perception of this land’s Original owners.

At present I work with Jacob Boehme (Narangga and Kaurna), Isaac Drandic (Noongar), Carly Sheppard (Wallangamma and Takalaka), Nikki Ashby (Narangga and Kaurna), Emma Donovan (Gumbaynggirr) Trent Nelson (Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta), Sandy Greenwood (Bungjalung and Dunghutti and Gumbaynggirr) and Derik Lynch (Yankunytjatjara and Arrernte) to name a few. This is my everyday practice.

Today in 2014, the Yolgnu, Anangu, Palawa, Nyoongar, Yamitji, Wongi, Goori, Ngarda, Marlba, Bama, Murri, Nunga, Koori, Nyungar and many more are alive and well and living in your neighbourhood.
Bibliography


Appendix 1: HA LF program

HA LF
I would like to dedicate the performances of ‘HA LF’ to my past; both my grandmothers, Margaret Olive and Mona Randall, whom I am named after. I was lucky enough to gain both their strength and independence. To my future; Jesse, Shakai, Jayden, Tegan, Neika and Lucas, you all inspire me to do and be more.

‘HA LF’ is an extension of my postgraduate study in 2010, titled ‘Half-caste’. The information I gained throughout 2010 simply scratched the surface of unknown knowledge and I felt there was still so much more to be uncovered.

I am a Bundjalung woman from the Far North Coast of NSW and both my parents are Aboriginal. But on numerous occasions I have been called ‘half-caste’, not quite considered a ‘real’ Aborigine but still being too dark to be white. The shade of my skin has led to many interesting and confronting situations, to say the least, during and throughout my work in various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities within Australia.

‘HA LF’ is a moment to reflect and debrief in the hope of capturing something that highlights what someone else may be feeling, all simply based on the way we, you, I, look. What I should or shouldn’t know, have, be.

The performance you see tonight is one section in a three-part structure of my Masters i.e. live performance, gallery installation and written thesis. Although this study finishes in 2013, my life experience of this continues.

I, dentity is a girl whose life walks a fine line of uncertainty. She often struggles to define herself in a world of judgement and labelling. Her journey is to place one foot in front of the other and stand at times unsure while embracing herself and painting the world, not her skin, with who she is.
Projected Images
Scott Lambeth
Voiceover: Jack Sheppard and Mary-Jane Heron

Derik Lynch
Voiceover: Mariaa Randall and Jackson Russell

Kooriography
Mariaa Randall

Music
Mariaa Randall and Rob Healey

Performer
Mariaa Randall

segregation
Thoughts are invisible but words confine her. They are used to segregate, alienate but then become the one thing that allows her to fit in. By then she has learnt their meaning which enables her to be the one to translate and interpret what others sling at her.

Projected Images
Marian Randall
Voiceover: Mary-Jane Heron and Jack Sheppard
Paul Johnston
Voiceover: Mariaa Randall and Jack Sheppard
Kooriography
Mariaa Randall and Rheannan Port
Performer
Rheannan Port

Loss is a woman who has lost her partner - Culture. We see her when sorrow has consumed her soul. It’s easy to grieve for someone if they are taken away from you instantly but how do you grieve for something that has been taken away continuously for over 242 years?
Loss attempts to capture the funeral ceremony that has not quite taken place for the desecration of culture.

Projected Image
Maurial Spearim
Voiceover: Jackson Russell and Mary-Jane Heron

Kooriography
Mariaa Randall in collaboration with Jennifer Williams

Dancer/Singer
Jennifer Williams

Projected Dancer
Jack Sheppard

Composition of the song
Mariaa Randall and Jennifer Williams

Music
Mariaa Randall and Rob Healey

Vocal Assistant
Maurial Spearim
Appendix 2: half and half Program

I am a Bundjalung woman from the Far North Coast of NSW and both my parents are Aboriginal. But on numerous occasions I have been called ‘half-caste’, not quite considered a ‘real’ Aborigine but am still too dark to be white. The shade of my skin has led to many interesting and confronting situations, to say the least, during and throughout my work in various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities within Australia.

‘half and half ’ takes a closer look at the progression of Aboriginal identity, through personal experience. Shared through photography, film and live performance it aims to highlight the various shades of Aboriginality.

To try and capture the diversity of Aboriginal Australia in this installation seemed an impossible task. The only way I could attempt to do this was to look at my own family, if there are many shades contained within them, imagine the multiplicity within Australia.

The process of gathering content for the installation, involved my family. This in itself became a greater means of growing the family tree and looking back a little further than before. It allowed the opportunity to glimpse the roots of where I come from.

Although my research finishes in 2013, my life experience of what is being studied will continue.

I had intentionally left the names off the images that appear on the wall in an attempt to challenge learned perspectives and assumptions of Aboriginal peoples. I invite you to come and yarn with me about anything you see on the walls.
Short films:

**Culture (in Black and White)**

Loss is a small attempt at capturing the desecration of culture through colonisation.

**Dancer:** Jack Sheppard

**Music:** Mariaa Randall

**Filmmaker and Editor:** Jeevika Rajagopal

**Diversity (in colour)**

Four dances, four different ways of moving, one thing in common, their Aboriginality.

**Dancer #1 and Kooriography:** Nikki Ashby

**Dancer #2 and Kooriography:** Carly Sheppard

**Dancer #3 and Kooriography:** Mariaa Randall

**Dancer #4 and Kooriography:** Jacob Boehme

**Cinematographer:** Simon Green

**Music design:** Morganics

**Art Director:** Mimmalisa Trifilo

**Editor:** Suemi Akita

**Black and White room**

*Framed images*

1. My great grandmother

2. My grand parents

3. My great grandfather and my great, great grandparents.
Acknowledgements:

Besen Family Foundation

The Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development – Deborah Cheetham, Léuli Eshraghi, Eugenia Flynn and Tiriki Onus

Gugin Guddaba Local Aboriginal Land Council – Ron Randall

VCA Production – Kym Williams, Greg Clarke, Georgia Johnson

VCA Dance – Associate Professor Jenny Kinder, Helen Herbertson, staff and fellow students

VCA Performing Arts – Geraldine Cook, Sara Koller, Darren Golding, Monique Aucher, Naomi Adams

To Mum, Dad, Di, Helen Herbertson, Rheannan Port, Jennifer Williams, Jackson Russell, Mary-Jane Heron, Sedat, Mimalisa Trifilo, Simon Green, Léuli Eshraghi, Luka Haralampou, Jesse Randall, Kellee Randall, Aunty Carole, Roy Randall, Angela Randall, Marian Randall, Jacob Boeheme, Amelia Lever-Davidson, Paula Van Beek, Carly Sheppard, Nikki Ashby, Sean Kelly, Jack Sheppard, Jeevika Rajagopol, Kelsey Henderson, Maurial Spearim, Kristy Freeburn, Paul Johnston, Scott Lambeth, Derik Lynch, Mick Lambeth, Greg Freeburn, Michelle Evans, Nooshin Laghai and everyone that makes up my family.

It has to be acknowledged that without your support, belief and generosity this would not have been possible. Thank you for contributing your time to the elements contained within the four walls that tell the story of ‘half and half’. Your gestures are received with much love, respect, gratitude and appreciation for being an important part of this journey with me.
Appendix 3: HA LF DVD Documentation.

Attached to this thesis is a DVD of the Performance Folio Work HA LF.

This DVD is used for documentation purposes only. HA LF is the full performance outcome edited together for the purpose of this thesis. This work has been edited by the student researcher.
Appendix 4: half and half DVD Documentation

Attached to this thesis is a DVD of the Perfromance Folio Work half and half.

This DVD is used for documentation purposes only. half and half contain the films Culture and Divercity, the solo Painting the World and images of the installation art. Each has been edited by the student researcher.
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Author/s:
RANDALL, MARGARET

Title:
Half - Living between two worlds

Date:
2014

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File Description:
Half - Living between two worlds