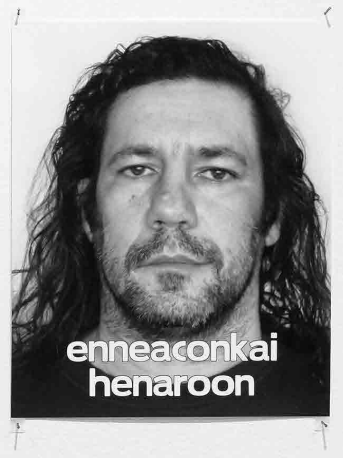
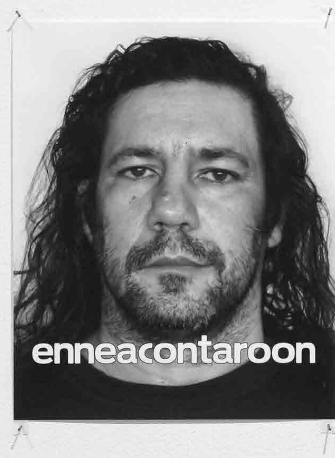
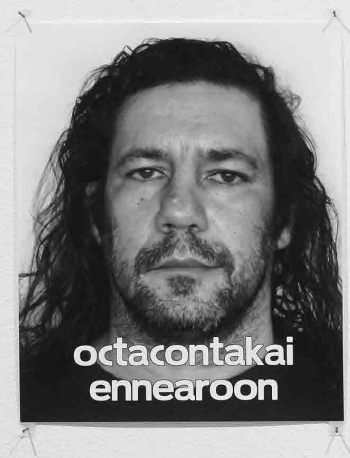


DJON MUNDINE



# The Colour Line: *Archie Moore & W.E.B Du Bois*

*I Am Somebody!*<sup>1</sup>

Bundjalung elder and Christian minister Lyle Roberts Snr.<sup>2</sup> set down three principles in the 1950s for his descendants to live by: retain pride of race and colour, retain identity and language, and consider other people to make the best of life. All foods in the garden (landscape) were deemed edible and used by the Indigenous people, and they should interact and thrive in this present society. In the same decade, Caribbean postcolonial intellectual Franz Fanon posited that a colonized society would move through three phases of self-realization. Firstly, the colonized group would attempt to imitate the colonizer's culture and lifestyle to be more French than the French, to be faux English lords and ladies. Secondly, usually upon liberation, to cast-off all remnants of the colonizers and embrace all pre-colonization cultural practices, bordering on an essentialist position. Thirdly, a rationalizing of present life, a rich positive creolization. Each line of thought understood that a present-day concept of oneself came from a strong historical line, but that you positively lived in the present.

An exhibition by Indigenous Australian artist Archie Moore is always special, and different. It is different, in the focus on an idea or concept that is strongly personal, clear and direct, but is wider in the Australian and world context and history. He employs out of left field, insightful materials with which to engage the viewer. Identity is that consciousness of self-being, physically, mentally and emotionally. This is of course also created by how your family and society you live with, and in, see you. It is central to Moore's three facets-faces of Australia's incipient racism, hidden in plain view. It is this concept of self that Kamilaroi/Bigambul<sup>3</sup> artist Archie Moore stimulates us to think about with three carefully formed, profound artworks in the exhibition *The Colour Line: Archie Moore & W.E.B. Du Bois*,<sup>4</sup> and lead us in this discussion; *Blood Fraction* (2015), (one hundred self-portrait photographs); *Family Tree* (2021), (Conté crayon on blackboard paint on board); and *Graph of Perennial Disadvantage* (2020) (acrylic paint on handmade paper made from pages of Hansard, Parliament of Australia).

*I don't speak my father's native tongue  
I was born under the Southern sun  
I don't know where I belong.  
Mo'ju, Native Tongue, 2018*<sup>5</sup>

The thought of what is Aboriginal self-consciousness has been tied with the 'official invisibility' of Aboriginal people in the national consciousness; the symbolic order of a national history and identity. Archie Moore has referenced two periods of Australian history; the first of which is the difficult time of national construction of identity around federation of the six colonies into a new

nation-state in 1901. The second period is that of his own life; born in poverty in 1970 on the edge of a regional hamlet where his family, although of Aboriginal descent, struggled to achieve poor 'white trash' status. Archie Moore references the writings of Australian Surveyor and amateur anthropologist R. H. Matthews<sup>6</sup> on the belated defining, listing and recording the Aboriginal tribes and nations of the Australian continent after over a century of attempted genocide. Matthews' work would not however, move the new nation to include his Indigenous subjects into the Constitution of the newborn nation. Aboriginal people were defined by their absence. Archie Moore used Matthews' lists and descriptions of Aboriginal nations to create large totemic flags for each 'Neytion' (*United Neytions*, 2017), now installed in the International Departure Lounge at Sydney Airport, after their exhibition in the first iteration of the exhibition of contemporary Australian art, *The National*, in 2017.

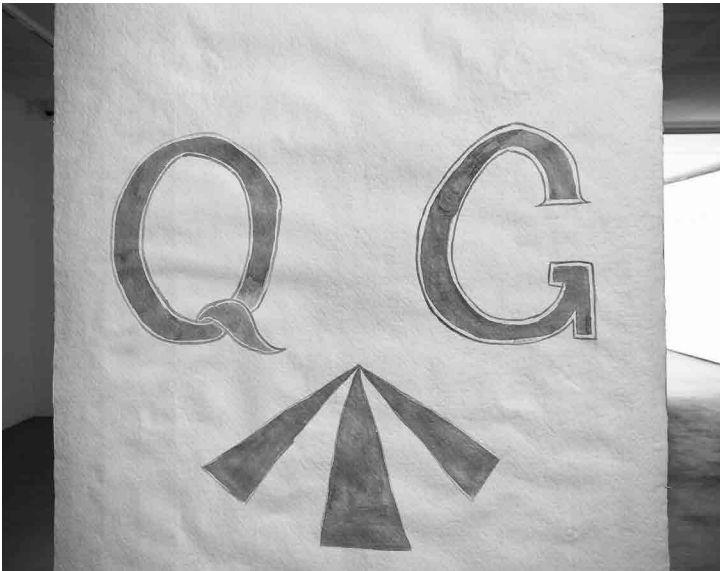
*The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line.*  
W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>7</sup>

It was around that time (of Australian federation) that African-American academic and intellectual W. E. Du Bois would write of American Negroes carrying a dual consciousness of their own idea of themselves and the largely negative stereotype that white society carried of their fellow black citizens. His *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), spoke of a similar social environment where black people were living invisible lives in the minds of the people in power; 'behind the veil' of discrimination and the psychological experience in never being recognized as a full human being.

*I am a one in ten a number on a list  
I am a one in ten even though I don't exist  
Nobody knows me, but I'm always there  
A statistic, a reminder of a world that doesn't care.  
One in Ten, UB40<sup>8</sup>*

Archie Moore: "I first heard this song in Croatia in 2001, my most felt line was, 'I'm another teenage suicide, in a street that has no trees'."<sup>9</sup> There are lies, goddam lies, and statistics. Bureaucracy can use numbers, figures, correlations to erroneously prove for good or bad. To counter negative, unsupported ideas of black Americans crippling American society economically and socially, W.E.B. Du Bois had already carried out social research on the African-American population in Philadelphia, in his book *The Philadelphia Negro*, in 1899. He later wrote a study on white Americans blaming Negroes for spiking the reconstruction of the US southern states following the Civil War, in his 1935 book *Black Reconstruction in America*. In a prescient action, Du Bois had earlier turned the later figures of Negro contributions to the US economy into coloured Venn type diagrams, indicating how the two races are positively the same but different, and positive black and white images of African-Americans at work and play contributing to US society. Archie Moore: "I haven't seen a Venn diagram from Du Bois. Most diagrams I've seen are pie charts, bar graphs or infographs." These were presented in an exhibition he organized against the existing racist stereotypes and caricatures, *The Exhibit of American Negroes at the Exposition Universelle*, held at the Palace of Social Economy at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris; now housed in the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

The Colour Line: *Archie Moore* & *W.E.B. Du Bois*



*For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay.*  
Robert F. Kennedy<sup>10</sup>

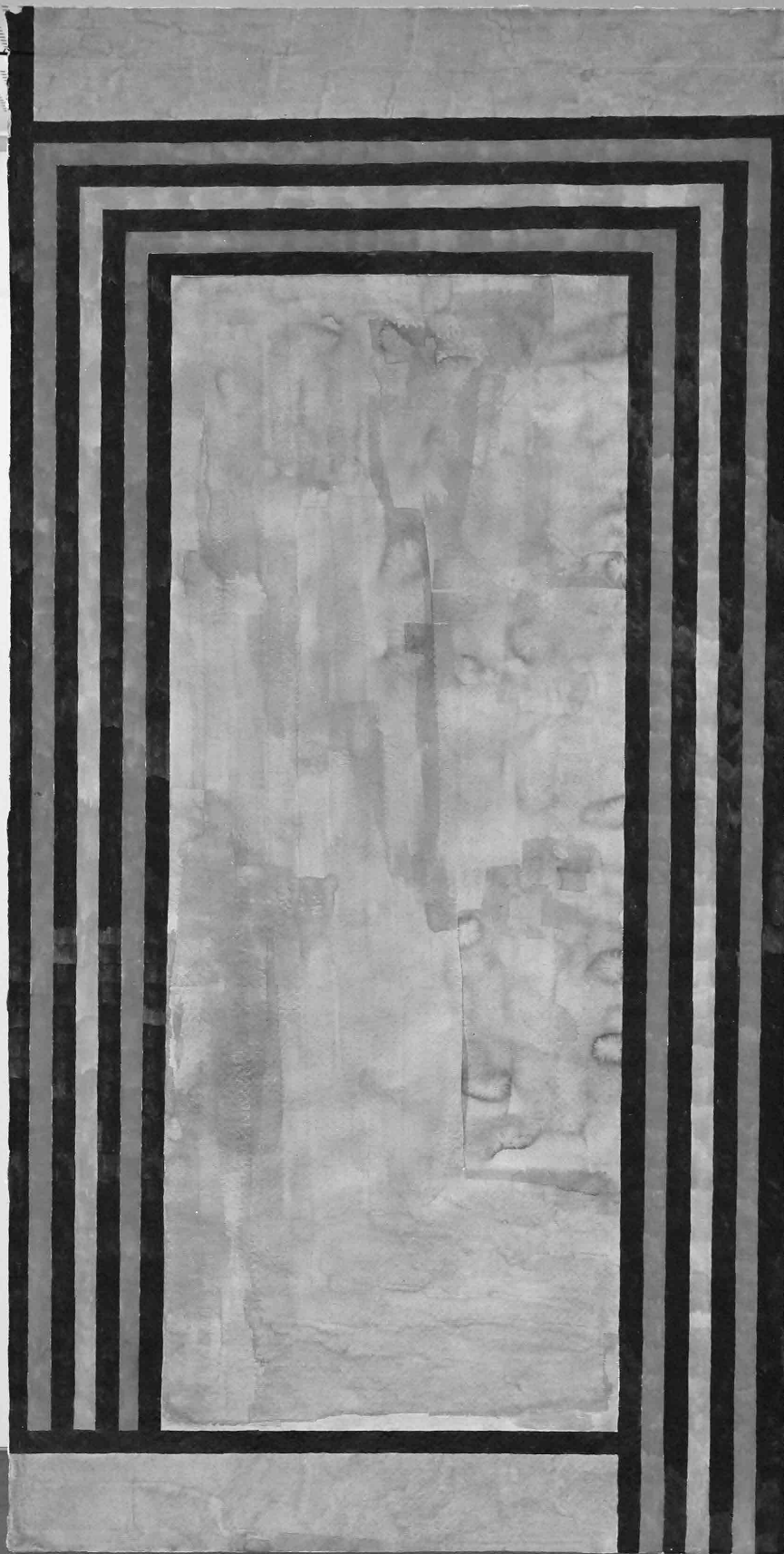
Archie Moore's observation on Australian institutional racism takes the form of a colour-striped paper blanket made from the pulped pages from one copy selected from one hundred copies of Hansard the Parliament of Australia, where many debates and comments were made on the "Aboriginal problem". This paper-pulp blanket is slightly thicker than the thin spare blankets handed out to Aboriginal people in compensation for the murder, rapes, dispossession, theft of over seven million square kilometres of land, and other colonial crimes. They remained "Property of the Crown" even after being given out every Queen's Birthday, one blanket per person. Archie Moore: "After all the debate, it was the most minimal needed action you could get away with." After legislation brought into being para-military regiments of Native Police under the command of white Australian officers from the mid-1800s, these forces were despatched over Queensland to "disperse" groups of Aboriginal people (often at the request of colonial land holders). The term "disperse" that appears often in these Parliament records, was/is a euphemism for massacres of Aboriginal people who got in the way of colonial expansion, often just for their existence. Moore's response to Du Bois' numbers, figures and graph artworks is *Graph of Perennial Disadvantage*, where the term "disperse" often appears. In the late 1800s, after decades of attempted annihilation, two positions of Protector of Aboriginals were established in the Aborigines Protection Act of 1897, to relocate surviving populations onto reserves where they would be supplied with poor quality European food and blankets. In previous British colonial actions in North America, blankets carrying smallpox were knowingly given to Native Americans who were subsequently infected and died. The Queensland blankets were colour-coded with yellow, blue or red stripes, setting ones for Aboriginals apart from those for horses and police. The 'blanket lists' would later be used to discover Aboriginal population numbers in particular areas.

*... there are strange hells in the mind that the desert makes...*  
*Night Parrot Stories*<sup>11</sup>

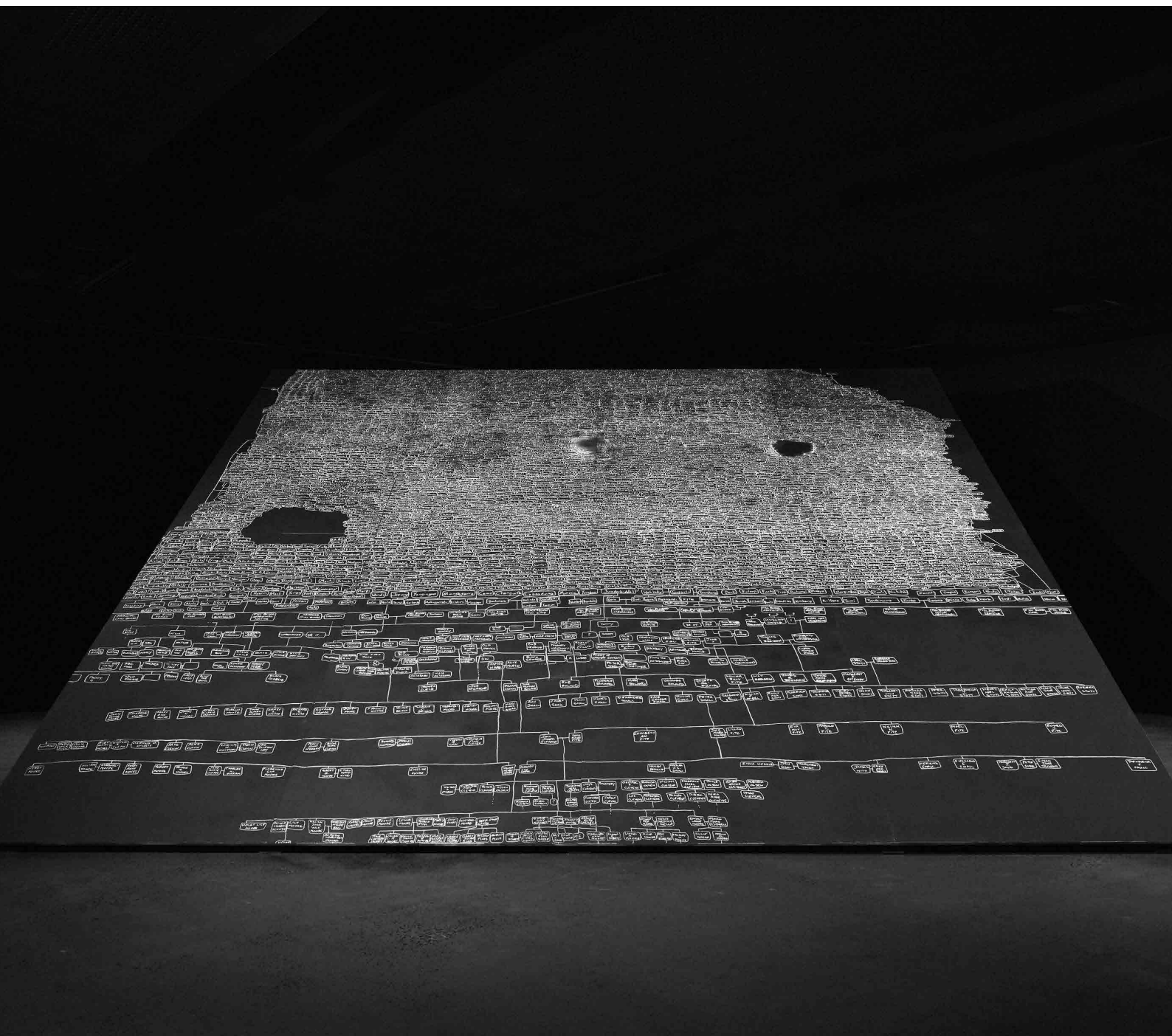
I have written prior on *Family Tree* in its 2019 iteration at Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane ("The Night Parrot: the Entire Contents of Archie Moore's Mind") and quote, in part, from it here. A family life can be an artwork—it is usually a combination of facts and faction/extended facts, an Aboriginal extended family. A large twelve metre-long, five metre-high chalk on blackboard Aboriginal family tree drawing dominates the space. The descent-line record reaches back thousands of years from known, named people like Archie himself; a box on a long limb, low down at the bottom enclosing "Me", back into the past, to descriptive names; Johnny Come-lately was one, "a Full-blood Aboriginal", an old gin,<sup>12</sup> and those existing only as numbered individuals (subject). It speaks to the awareness of the enormity of Aboriginal people's existence on the continent and the magnitude of the colonial crime in the national history. Archie Moore:

*I left out most of my father's line but looked and found more names on my mother's side. My mother used to tell me stuff that I didn't know to believe it, but now I've been able to cross-check and validate funerals, marriages and births; back to Queen Susan of Welltown (a sheep station, Goondiwindi). The family and my mother are supposed to have a reunion there*





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*later this year that I'm looking forward to. Both my grandparents had German names; Fitz and Clevens. I don't know how that came about. People in those days weren't really concerned in recording their real names. It was common for Aboriginal people to adopt or be given their bosses name or the station name. Aboriginal names were often thought to be too hard to spell.<sup>13</sup>*

Normally these family diagrams drawn up by anthropologists revolve around an 'ego' depicted by a triangle for males (to the left) joined to circles for females (to the right). Social workers now depict an apparently non-gendered ego as a square/flat rectangle called "genograms" and interestingly in using the social worker boxes system Archie's family tree could appear to be (intentionally or not) described in 'post-colonial' terms, about the dominant social worker interaction in Aboriginal life in the now, than that of traditional anthropologist fieldwork of the past. I imagined Moore drawing this like a scene of someone like Einstein constructing an algebraic equation to solve an intangible, immeasurable, problem—trying to find one small entity far out in the universe. A small individual surviving in the world of internally displaced people from the war of annihilation against them.

Traditionally God can appear in Aboriginal life as a flash of 'white' light or a refraction of light into the seven rainbow spectrum colours. Certain creatures display this refraction; the skin of reptiles, wings of certain insects, shellfish, and the scales of fish. Archie Moore meticulously drew row upon row of flat rectangular boxes in his family tree, that run down the wall like chanting names of dead people, as scallops-oyster beds, like fish scales, or a dripping broken honeycomb. Both metaphors (my own) are very evocative of life, sex, regeneration, vitality, and potency. And very totemic and very Aboriginal.

*... these are remnants of behaviour...*  
*Night Parrot Stories<sup>14</sup>*

There are three black, reasonably large holes in this constellation of ancestral star heroes around three quarters of the way up the board—one I'm told was a major massacre event that leaves a gap 'in the record', another black empty space to the right around the same time records a devastating smallpox outbreak, and the third represents a destroying of records from negligence, fire, other natural disasters, or a deliberate act to cover crimes of embezzlement, murder, or mismanagement.

*Bill Carey: Do the whites accept these half-castes?*  
*Father Antoine: No, they only create them.*  
*Lady of the Tropics<sup>15</sup>*

In the 1970s I worked in a city office where we would spend Friday night drinking at a nearby pub. Here, relaxed after a few drinks, my white Australian colleagues made the, for them, comforting comments that there was no 'Aboriginal problem', they'd already "shot nearly all the 'Abo' men" and were now "fucking the 'Abo' women" out of existence! Around the end of the Victorian era (coinciding with Australian federation in 1901), following the abatement of colonial policy of the physical elimination of Aboriginal populations, the survivors were moved onto reservations or Christian missions, to break generational bonds. As a result of many genuine cross-racial marriages, with a mixed-race population then existing, the Australian authorities came to reason that in order to save the 'whiteness' of the children of these unions from Aboriginal 'contamination', and 'civilize'



them as ‘good white British citizens’, a graduation of what was the crossing of this line, between black and white, came into bureaucratic practice: full blood, half-caste, quarter-castes/quadroon, octroon, and so on.

*Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga*  
*Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga*  
*Still nigga, still nigga!!*  
*The Story of OJ*<sup>16</sup>

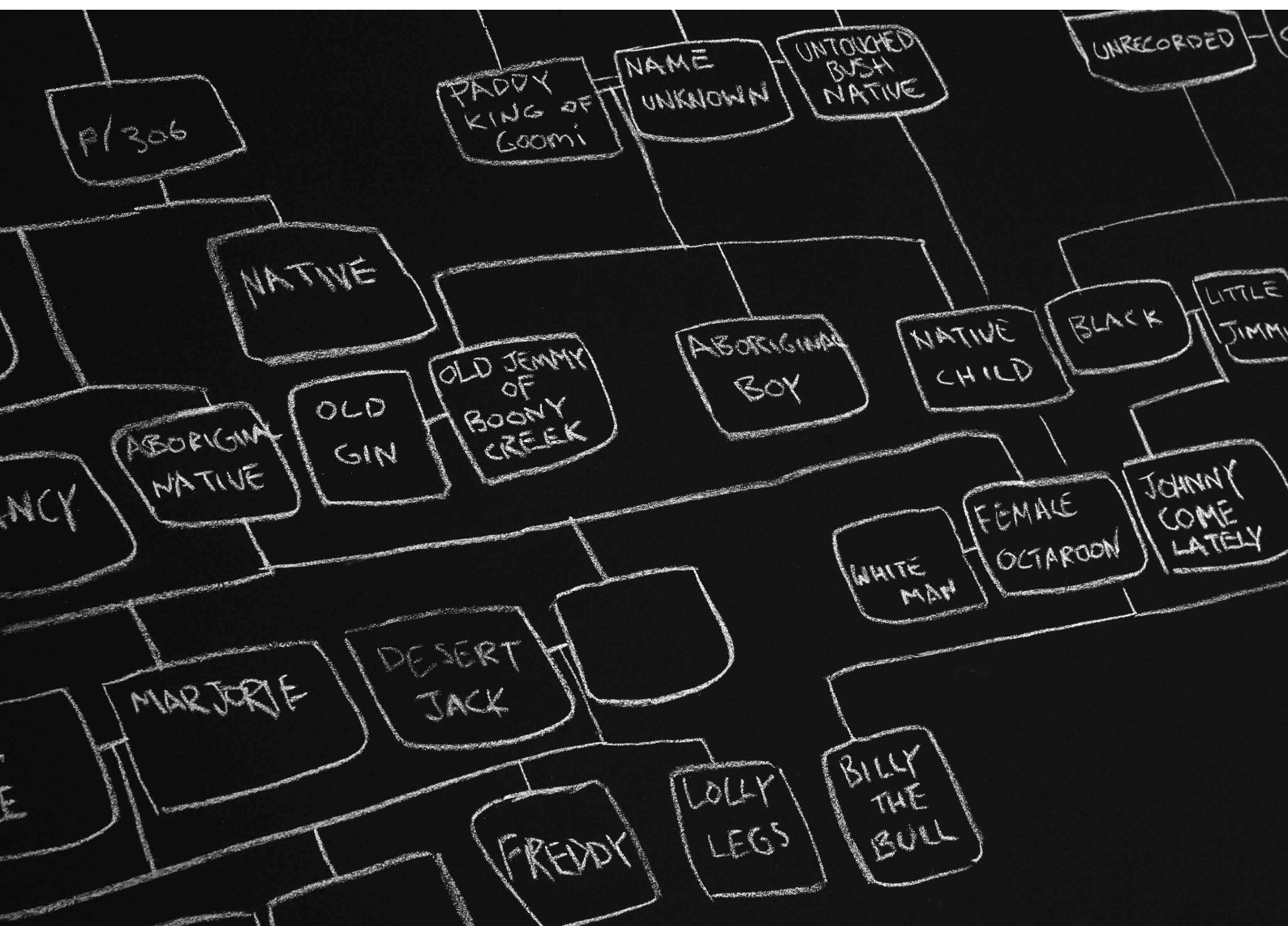
The official Australian Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs’ definition of Aboriginality, from Review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Canberra, 1981), came to be in three measures—“Are you of Aboriginal blood descent, do you want to publicly declare yourself as of Aboriginal descent, and lastly are you accepted by the Aboriginal community you work and socialize in, as being Aboriginal. You are required to satisfy all three criteria.” In response, Archie Moore’s third work, *Blood Fraction* talks to this most insidious view of racial identity. His one hundred self-portraits move in a continuum around the room, from a strong black through one percent degrees to a real ‘fair-dinkum’ average Australian. A feature of Aboriginal descent is that skin tone/colour is a recessive gene for Aboriginal people; skin tone can vary incredibly. A moving arbitrary line in colour decided whether you could live on a reserve or wherever you could survive in a shanty town on the edge of country townships, whether you could find work, determine where you lived, who you could marry – until late into the twentieth century. An Aboriginal person could apply for exemption from these controls if they could convince authorities they were sufficiently Westernized; civilized. My father, Roy Mundine had worked during WWII with a construction company in the Northern Territory engaged in building airstrips and the Darwin to Alice Springs highway. Despite this, after the war, and like apartheid in South Africa, he was given a small passport to be carried “at all times”, that allowed him and his family to live and work off-reserve, to buy a house and move about relatively freely. In the last issuing of that document, when he was forty-two years old in 1961 and I was ten, he was defined as a “half-caste Aborigine.”

This prejudice continues into the present times, but with a twist. In the 2021 King Wood Mollison Indigenous Art Award, skin tone politics appeared in the artwork *Branded* (2019), a minor award-winner by the artist Carmen-Glynn-Braun, born in Alice Springs. Her textile artwork of four large white sheets of Organza, dyed in graduated flesh colours of face foundation make-up. The sheets are hung overlapping one behind the other from fairest to darkest. She describes the definitional “branding” in full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste, and so on. She was however, referring to the prejudice by other Aboriginal people as much as white-Australians in the present-day.

*Harry Angel: [almost sobbing] I Know Who I Am*  
*Louis Cyphre: [smugly] That’s it Johnny... take a good look... No matter how cleverly you*  
*sneak up on a mirror, your reflection always looks you straight in the eye.*  
*Harry Angel: [voice breaking as he sees his reflection] I Know Who I Am*  
*[starts screaming as Cyphre makes him remember all the homicides]*  
*Harry Angel: I Know Who I AM!*  
*Angel Heart*<sup>17</sup>







Aboriginal people are always deemed to be suffering from numerous social problems when in fact, it's possible we only mirror an image of wider Australian society issues. If Aboriginal people suffer an identity consciousness and were victims, murdered, raped, robbed and pushed off their land of living in an undeclared war, then what of the criminal perpetrators of this attempted genocide? It appears to me that every generation in Australia approaches an awkward acceptance of the colonial-national birthing crimes and a discussion in resolving a repentance. This comes near at certain celebratory centenary and bicentenary times, though conservative forces in society force a recoiling in terror that they could become so responsible, so adult, so human. It is this identity crisis, this consciousness, to achieve absolution, that is the focal point of our national society trauma and haunts us. We, the nation, has known this for a long time. Will we allow it to shadow and stain us for eternity?

Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Bundjalung people are Aboriginal Australians who are the original custodians of the northern coastal area of New South Wales, located approximately 550 kilometres northeast of Sydney. The poem 'I am Somebody', was written by Dr. William Holmes Borders, Sr., senior pastor at the Greater Wheat Street Baptist Church and civil rights activist in Atlanta, Georgia

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Roberts Senior was the last initiated man of the Bundjalung Nation who set down three principles for his descendants to live by; see [www.monumentaustalia.org.au](http://www.monumentaustalia.org.au)

<sup>3</sup> The Kamilaroi people are Aboriginal Australians whose lands extend from New South Wales to southern Queensland, and the Bigambul people are Aboriginal Australians of the Northern Tablelands and Border Rivers regions of New South Wales and Queensland

<sup>4</sup> University New South Wales Galleries, Sydney January–March 2021; see <https://artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries/the-colour-line>

<sup>5</sup> Mo'ju, *Native Tongue*, featuring Pasefika Vitoria Choir, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hamilton Mathews (1841–1918) was an Australian surveyor and self-taught anthropologist who studied the Aboriginal cultures of Australia, especially in the states of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. He was in his early fifties when he began the investigations of Aboriginal society that would dominate the last twenty-five years of his life

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903

<sup>8</sup> 'One in Ten', a single by UB40, from their second album *Present Arms*, 1981

<sup>9</sup> Archie Moore, all quotes from a conversation with the author, 5 July 2021

<sup>10</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, remarks to the Cleveland City Club, Ohio, 5 April 1968

<sup>11</sup> *Night Parrot Stories*, documentary film, Rod Nugent director, 2016; [lookingglasspictures.com.au](http://lookingglasspictures.com.au)

<sup>12</sup> An offensive term for an Aboriginal woman

<sup>13</sup> Archie Moore, op cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Night Parrot Stories*, ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 1939 American Hollywood drama film set in Saigon

<sup>16</sup> *The Story of OJ*, by hip hop artist Jay-Z from his album *4.44*, 2017

<sup>17</sup> American film directed by Alan Parker, 1987