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The Australian National University

**First Nations' pop-cultural heroes:
Indigenous communication practices in the age of mass media**

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Statement of Authorship

Unless otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original research of the author

Irina Samsonova

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Irina Samsonova', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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I dedicate this thesis to my family. This paper is a testament to your love and support.

Notes

*I refer to Australian Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people as Indigenous people or First Nations *interchangeably*.

*Quotations from interviews and social media posts are typed *verbatim*, with grammatical mistakes or repetitions retained if those were present in the quote.

**Wylah the Koorie Warrior* book series was available to me in e-book format through Booktopia's Kobo reading app. Hence, it *did not* contain fixed page numbers as numbers changed depending on the size of font and the layout of pages.

*Social media posts and comments are referenced in footnotes for convenience and clarity.

*For copyright purposes, *all images were deleted* from this version of the thesis and substituted with image descriptions and online links where possible.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines innovative forms of media making in Australia with a focus on a new generation of writers and artists working in popular media formats that are not getting sufficient attention in scholarly literature. This thesis situates two in-depth case studies of Australian Aboriginal media franchises, Jordan Gould and Richard Pritchard's *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* (2022–) and Jonathon Saunders' *Zero Point* (2016–), within the dual histories of First Nations media production and mainstream appropriations of First Nations identities within popular culture. As I study the criticism of two Disney films, *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Moana* (2016), I find that tackling problems of representation with seemingly effective strategies of cultural research and consultations with cultural experts is not, in fact, a straightforward and infallible solution.

By investigating how Gould, Pritchard, and Saunders engage with pop-cultural production and what messages they intend to communicate to their cross-sectional audience, I unpack some of the complexity of Indigenous engagement with contemporary mass media in general, and Indigenous identity representation specifically. These franchises reveal insights into the complex, multilayered, and politicised space of Australian Indigenous mass media. By analysing forms, storylines, readerships, business models, political contexts, positionality of authors, and historical trajectories, I find that this field represents a novel development in Australia and that Indigenous media creators negotiate utilisation of media technologies to articulate their own relatively autonomous concerns.

The Indigenous identity of the media creators I worked with does have a profound impact, that is both enabling and limiting, on their production process, funding, career and marketing opportunities, and relationship with their audience. I find that the meaning and place of Indigenous cultural identity in the current socio-political state of Australia is the subject of intense negotiations linked to political, cultural, and social divides within society. In the end, I explain that viewing Indigenous communication practices as relatively autonomous components of Indigenous cultural systems helps in viewing Indigenous mass media use without leaning into the essentialist rhetoric of Indigenous cultural authenticity or social amalgamation into the wider Western society.

Contents

Introduction	1
Literary overview of Indigenous engagement with digital and mass media technologies.....	3
Methodology	10
Research approach: identifying research topic and question	10
Mainstream media, Indigenous media, and pop culture	12
Case studies and participants: peculiarities of the Indigenous digital media field.....	18
Methods.....	25
Part I. Indigenous people and mass media: socio-historical context	37
Chapter 1. From past to present: a brief history of Indigenous people in the mainstream media.....	37
Indigenous people’s encounter with mass media technologies	37
Indigenous people taking control	45
Chapter 2. Indigenous characters in media entertainment production	55
Indigenous characters in the US media	55
Indigenous characters in Australian media	58
Chapter 3. Problems of Indigenous representation: exclusion, tokenism, and cultural appropriation	62
Exclusion.....	62
Tokenism.....	65
Pitfalls of tokenism	68
Cultural appropriation	70
Chapter 4. Disney and representation of Indigenous people.....	74
Pocahontas	74
Moana	77
Part II. Case study analysis. <i>Wylah the Koorie Warrior and Zero Point</i>	86
Chapter 5. <i>Wylah the Koorie Warrior</i> , marketing and social impact.	86
Wylah’s success	86
Marketing media diversity	90
Critique of Indigenous art	103
Chapter 6. <i>Wylah</i> : Indigenous business vs. Indigenous culture?	110
Cultural educational material	110
Indigenous business	113
‘Warm business’ vs. ‘Cold business’	122
Chapter 7. <i>Wylah</i> : how to represent diversity?.....	132
Who is Indigenous?.....	132
Cultural licence to represent	143
Chapter 8. <i>Wylah</i> : representation in the context of Indigenous politics	152

From irreconcilable to inseparable: the range of Indigenous political views.....	154
Politics and children’s books.....	163
Chapter 9. <i>Zero Point</i> , a ‘non-tokenistic’ Indigenous hero	177
Zero Point’s media presence	177
Relatability in Indigenous representation	179
Chapter: 10. <i>Zero Point</i> and politics of ‘normalisation’	196
Politics and pop culture.....	196
Assimilation vs. normalisation.....	204
Chapter 11: Emergence of new institutions and the complexity of social change	219
Who holds the power to represent?.....	219
Indigenous mass communication practices and rapid social change	227
Conclusion	235
Reference list	244
Images:.....	244
Media sources:	248
General reference list:	251

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Introduction

In 2020, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was in my hometown in Russian Siberia, locked up together with my family. I was a first-year doctoral student and I spent long days of isolation frantically looking for materials for my fieldwork. One evening, casually scrolling through Instagram, my attention was captured by a striking image: an Indigenous warrior girl with a glowing boomerang standing beside a huge black cockatoo. She stood tall and confident with a firestorm raging behind her. I was instantly captivated by this image of an Indigenous hero who could rival Disney protagonists like Elsa and Mulan.

What I saw was an advertisement for a brand-new up-coming Indigenous media franchise, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. This Instagram advertisement impressed me on several levels. Firstly, it reached me in Siberia, a place on the opposite side of the world, over 11,000 kilometres away from Australia where it was launched. Secondly, it resembled a Disney production in character design and art style, while at the same time having its own distinct look making the image instantly appeal to me with the mix of familiarity and novelty it evoked. This franchise felt different – just looking at this singular image, a concept of a story not yet written, I could tell that this project approached Indigenous representation differently.

(Figure 1: Pritchard 2020, Wylah the Koorie Warrior concept art

Image description: a young woman with long dark hair and white paint markings on her face and body stands beside a large black cockatoo. She holds a glowing blue boomerang in her raised hand. Behind her, there are red flames.

<<https://www.broadsheet.com.au/national/entertainment/article/meet-wylah-last-koorie-warrior-book-fantasy-real-world>>)

Being an Indigenous Yakut person, I always felt that documentaries, cultural TV programs, and films that represented my Indigenous nation never quite captured my lived reality. Seeing my people represented as dancing in the forest in traditional clothes and playing hand drums while imitating horse sounds on national TV programs did not correspond with my experience living in Yakutsk, the urban capital city of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the Russian Far Eastern Federal District.

My mother is an anthropologist, as was her mother, and I spent my childhood in the halls of the Yakutia People's Museum of Music and Folklore, their workplace, surrounded by cultural heritage. But this experience only highlighted my confusion watching media representation of

my culture as ‘ancient’, ‘traditional’, and ‘connected to nature’. What I learned growing up in the museum founded by my grandmother was that culture is a living entity: it changes and adapts together with its people. If four centuries ago we sought the blessings of the fire spirit by pouring fermented horse milk into the fireplace, today we sprinkle sparkling wine onto the gas stove in the kitchen.

But then why, I asked myself, does the media portray us differently, so unrecognisably to me? I noticed similar trends in other settler-colonial countries around the world. When I moved to Australia to study in mid-2010s, I observed this trend here, too. In media, in academia, and in policy-making, many people seem to be fascinated with the ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’ side of Indigenous culture. It is important to recover, preserve, and popularise traditional Indigenous practices, languages, and knowledges in the aftermath of the European colonisation. However, I felt that there was comparatively much less attention paid to the contemporary accomplishments of Australian First Nations. So, I decided to look into it.

The twenty-first century is often referred to as ‘the media age’. Mass media, with its ever-expanding reach, has developed into one of the most powerful tools of social, cultural, and political influence. As mass media reflects, popularises or shapes discourses present in the society, studying contemporary Indigenous media products can yield significant insights into the contemporary state of Indigenous culture, society, and politics. This thesis poses a question: how does mass media impact Indigenous culture, identity, self-expression, self-awareness, and positionality within the wider Australian and global contexts? This research studies how Australian Indigenous people engage in contemporary mass media creation, what messages they intend to send to the mainstream media audience, and how they approach Indigenous representation.

This thesis consists of three parts. Part One explores the socio-historical context of Indigenous engagement with mass media technologies. I trace the history of Indigenous people being depicted in audio-visual and photographic materials, negotiating the content of such materials with non-Indigenous researchers, filmmakers, and explorers, and eventually becoming media creators in their own right. I discuss the progression and problematise the depiction of Indigenous characters in mass media and pop culture and use Disney’s animated films *Pocahontas* and *Moana* as examples of the mainstream media representation of Indigenous people.

Part Two presents the analysis of two case studies, Indigenous media franchises *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and *Zero Point*. In this part, I follow professional and personal journeys of their authors to explore their motives, trace the development of their creative ideas, discuss their political views and the impact they had on their work, and look into their approach to business and marketing. I study the responses of their audiences, and also the reactions of the creative industry, government, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities to these media franchises. I do this to see what messages wider audiences have received and what meanings they seem to have assigned them. Through these case studies, I work to explore different but complementary aspects of contemporary Indigenous media production. In this part, I investigate why these media franchises work by understanding the stories behind their creation, the motives of their authors. I then juxtapose them against the current state of Indigenous media production.

Part Three features a discussion that brings the findings into a wider context and returns to the questions that Part One has posed. I reflect on the historical complexity of the Australian colonial context and its effect on the cultural, social, and political diversity among Indigenous Australian individuals, groups, and regions. I then look at Saunders, Pritchard, and Gould's use of mass media through the lens of *relative autonomy* proposed by Howard and Frances Morphy (2013). I use this concept to discuss the process of Indigenous social change without being forced into opposing perspectives that either assert Indigenous cultural essentialism, or promote the idea of inevitable Indigenous socio-cultural incorporation into the wider Australian society. As a result, I propose that Indigenous mass communication practices exist as relatively autonomous social elements that are flexible and, thus, able to preserve cultural coherence while still allowing for cultural changes amidst rapid social change.

Literary overview of Indigenous engagement with digital and mass media technologies

To better understand the subject of Indigenous engagement with mass media, I searched for literature that studies it from various angles. Initially, I was interested in any literature that investigates the use of media technologies in Indigenous communities and institutions. Such a broad approach to literature search allowed me to get a sense of the general state of this field before focusing on particular areas of interest. I then narrowed my focus to the specificities of

Indigenous representation in mass media, and specifically in popular culture, and searched for potential gaps in research.

From the use of audio and video technology to the engagement with mobile phones, Indigenous people's interaction with media technologies has been studied since the late-twentieth century by researchers from North and South America, Europe, and Australia. Film historians such as Michael Leigh (1988) studied and documented the early involvement of Indigenous people with visual media production. Eric Michaels (1986) recorded and analysed Walpiri engagement with media and telecommunications. Their research proved that Indigenous people had been involved in media consumption and creation for more than a century. First as subjects and collaborators and later as directors, many Indigenous groups across Australia were well familiar with media technologies. Marcia Langton's (1993) essay for the Australian Film Commission explores Indigenous filmmaking history, highlights its major developments, and maps trends and issues. Jennifer Debenham (2020) traces the history of Indigenous people's engagement with documentary films, first as subjects and later as filmmakers.

Overseas research on Indigenous self-representation in media has yielded interesting insights into how First Nations challenge dominant society's envisioning of the future as devoid of diversity. For example, Grace Dillon (2012) and William Lempert (2014) studied the American First Nation's science fiction genre as an inventive and subversive mode of representation, uniquely situating Indigenous filmmakers to reimagine multiple futures for their communities whilst critically engaging with current challenges. Jason Lewis (2016) wrote about North American Indigenous futurism and envisioning Indigenous people in the future through the genre of sci-fi. In 2018, Lempert published his article on futurism and digital technologies that looked at examples of VR, television, film, and stop-motion animation from New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and the United States. He argues that Indigenous people in these countries use digital media to envision themselves in the future and challenge colonial attitudes to the future as mono-cultural and Western-centric.

The educational potential of digital media technologies is another point of research interest. Researchers Beth Lameman, Jason Lewis, and Skawennati Fragnito (2010) launched an education program for North American Indigenous youth that encouraged their participation in online culture and exploration of new media technology through workshops that taught them digital design, programming, art, animation, and audio. They found out that Kahnawake

youth were motivated to integrate their community stories into new media formats that they found enabled them to be creative and innovative through new modes of storytelling. In a similar vein, Toni Robertson, Laurel Dyson, Heidi Norman, and Bill Buckley (2002) investigated how to effectively encourage Indigenous Australian youth to study IT to empower themselves and help bridge the gap in living and professional standards. Laurel Dyson (2004) reports that Indigenous people generally view using information and communication technology as positive and desirable, but limitations in technology availability, affordability, and the lack of user knowledge might be factors that contribute to slow engagement. Hilary Smith, John Giacom, and Bonnie McLean (2018) documented the advances of a linguistic project aimed at reversing and preventing Gamilaraay Indigenous language loss with the use of multiple online learning tools. Robyn Jorgensen and Tom Lowrie (2011) examined the outcomes of a learning initiative that approached the ‘both ways strong’ educational goal (that is, encouraging Indigenous students to learn and be proficient in mainstream schooling without compromising their culture) by integrating digital games and technologies into learning processes in a secondary college in a remote region of Northern Territory. They reported that students in this school were keenly interested in the range of digital media and that the use of games could effectively foster students’ musical learning. Belinda MacGill, Theodor Wyeld, and Faye Blanch (2010) proposed ‘Reconciliation Pedagogy’ to foster a more holistic, shared Australian cultural heritage through schooling practices. Their experiment involved using video games in six primary schools to foster empathy, understanding, and collaboration between students. The researchers found this to be an effective and practical way to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration to people.

Reconciliation, self-determination, and decolonisation is another point of academic interest that came into focus in the twenty-first century. Jason Dittmer and Soren Larsen (2010) explore the construction of Indigenous and Canadian identity through an analysis of Canadian nationalist superhero comics from World War II to 2004. Their analyses point to moves to establish a white, southern-leaning Canadian identity in the images and stories of Canadian Indigenous characters who are created by non-Indigenous writers and artists. Frederick Luis Aldama’s invaluable edited volume *Graphic Indigeneity: Comics in the Americas and Australasia* was published in 2020. In this book, a range of researchers outlined different aspects of Indigenous representation in comics in North America and Australia. Most notably, Brenna Clarke Gray studies Inuit representation in Canadian comics and examines problems of cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture and northern regions. Dennin Ellis looks at

Marvel's representation of Indigenous and other culturally-diverse characters. Jack Ford and Philip Cass document Indigenous representation in Australian and New Zealand comics. Ford and Cass analyse and criticise non-Indigenous produced representations of Indigenous people in twentieth-century American and Australian newspaper strips and comic books, and outline the general state of the comic industry in Australasia. The authors stress that little academic research has been conducted on this topic, which is an indication of the underestimation of this media form within Australian universities.

Graphic Indigeneity's significance goes beyond its subject matter, as it also illustrates the effects of rapid social changes (accelerated by social media, political activism, and minority empowerment movements) on the perception of Indigenous representation. For Indigenous societies that aim to be a part of mainstream national discourse there is a tension that arises from the question of when representation falls over into appropriation. This is especially so in nations with complex and uneven colonial history as it is in most settler colonial societies.

The use of social media is another novel field of academic interest. Probably the most prominent researchers in this field are Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, who have published an array of literature on this topic. Their book *Indigenous digital life: the practice and politics of being indigenous on social media* (2021) offers a deep look into the use of social media by Indigenous people in Australia. They focus on such themes as identity, community, fun, hate, desire, activism, history, alliance, and death and analyse them against the broader context of the politics of Indigenous identity and expression. Other publications of Carlson and Frazer include dedicated studies of emerging Indigenous identity in the era of social media (2013), Indigenous activism and its manifestation on social media (2016), and the research of cyberbullying and young Indigenous people (2018). There is also emerging global interest in this topic. A chapter book, *Indigenous interfaces: spaces, technology, and social networks in Mexico and Central America* (2019) edited by Jennifer Gómez Menjívar and Gloria Elizabeth Chacón, investigates the use of social media by Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. A range of researchers share their insights into Indigenous use of technology, nation-building in cyberspace, and Indigenising social media. Most notably, Adam Coon writes about how Nahua people use Facebook for activism; Brook Lillehaugen studies Zapotek use of Twitter as a language activism tool; and Alicia Estrada demonstrates how contemporary Maya rock music and YouTube can help the Maya people to revitalise their culture among younger generations.

The artistic potential of digital technologies has been studied by researchers like David Garneau (2018). Garneau writes about North American ‘Indigenisation’ of digital and contemporary art that challenges the ‘traditionalist’ gaze of the dominant society, cast on Indigenous and First Nations people. He particularly studies digital artworks and integration of contemporary and experimental technologies and Indigenous cultural concepts in order to promote Indigenous people’s ability to adapt and participate in the contemporary technologically-reliant lifestyle. Garneau’s take is interesting as it represents one point on the axis of views regarding Indigenous interaction with technologies and Western lifestyle.

The other end of this axis could be exemplified by the argument of some of the Australian academics and Indigenous community members who view ‘media as cultural genocide’. This opinion expressed by some early Australian anthropologists who witnessed the emergence and popularisation of new media technologies is centred around the anxiety that Indigenous Nations would lose their cultural and social values, languages, and practices if exposed to Western media. This opinion was shared by some Indigenous people, too. Michaels (1986, p. 1) quotes Darby Jampijinpa Ross, Walpiri Elder, who addressed the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Inquiry into Satellite Program Services with these words:

In the olden days, Aboriginal people didn’t have any satellites. They only had their traditional law on their tribal lands... Now people chasing after them with satellites to interrupt their tribal law... That’s why we got the land back, to keep away from European things. [translated by F. Jupurrula Kelly]

From this point of view, mainstream media could appear threatening: as Michaels (1986, p. 5-8) expressed this, the potentially uncontrollable nature of media could contribute to the exposure of secret knowledges, distribution of images of deceased people, enablement of non-experts to appear as spokespeople for lands and peoples that they do not formally represent, or promotion of English at the expense of traditional languages. While some of these concerns could be seen as greatly exaggerated, such anxieties point at the desire of some Indigenous communities to maintain their autonomy and development of their own content. Faye Ginsburg (1991) calls this sentiment a ‘Faustian contract’ – the idea that by using and consuming Western media Indigenous people are trading off their culture and becoming somehow ‘corrupted’. Ginsburg (2002, p. 228) reiterates this in her essay ‘Mediating culture’ highlighting the diversity of opinions Indigenous people across the country have on media and its effects on culture, ranging from viewing it as ‘an invader’ to seeing it as the best hope for

cultural survival. However, the generations who grew up exposed to the mainstream media view it in different terms.

As the field of media now transitions into the domain of digital space, giving rise to multiple outputs of creativity, storytelling, and self-expression, not all aspects of this production receive equal academic attention. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (2002, p. 5) stress the significance of studying media:

Many anthropologists found *media a rich site for research* on cultural practices and circulation that took seriously the multiple levels of identification—regional, national, and transnational—within which societies and cultures produce subjects.

[emphasis added]

Internationally, Indigenous media has been linked with Indigenous cultural activism. New media technologies make possible the international spread of media and new social configurations. This ‘new media era’ brought informal media structures and economies that are fragmented, diverse, and related to neoliberal and late capitalist systems. Ginsburg (2002) argues that media is the ‘battleground’ for shaping national narratives, for finding ways to challenge the dominant cultural impositions and for helping create a more inclusive, pluralistic understanding of national identity. Worldwide, Indigenous media ‘represent a countercurrent to neoliberal trends that seek to deracinate and commodify culture’ (Ginsburg 2011, p. 244). It is in this context that Indigenous people gain the opportunity to utilise media technologies for empowerment and activism. In *Media worlds*, Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (2002) outline how media intersects with power, activism, inequality, and identity formation. They explain that media can enforce societal structures and help perpetuate oppression, but it can also serve as tools for resistance, cultural revival, and creativity. The authors point to extensive research that has emerged to study Indigenous use of media as a form of social and cultural activism in the 1990s: Timothy Asch (1991) who wrote about Amazon’s Yanomamo people, Patricia Aufderheide (1995) about Brazilian Indigenous people; Kathleen Fleming (1991) – Inuit; and so on.

This literature provides vital insights into the use of technologies in education, communication, cultural preservation, and cultural knowledge dissemination. Yet, the potential for digital technologies is bigger than even that. As the contemporary Anglo-Australian lifestyle has grown almost inseparable from digital technologies, the government,

institutions, and the public now rely on it in practically every sphere of life. A means to reach millions of people with the tap of your finger, a trove of human knowledge in your hands – digital technologies and their products, social media and digital media entertainment, transform the ways people connect, learn, perceive the world, and form impressions. As digital technologies make it much easier to participate in media content consumption, creation, and dissemination, Indigenous people in turn have much more freedom and agency to tell their own stories, share their experiences, and represent themselves in the eyes of the world. Still, the relations between Australian Indigenous people and mass media remain largely understudied.

But firstly, it is important to understand what media is and what it encompasses. In the next chapter, I will discuss concepts and definition that are relevant to this thesis, outline my approach to this research, and reflect on my journey to finding research participants and case studies.

Methodology

Research approach: identifying research topic and question

I ventured into this research project with an interest in the engagement of Australian Indigenous artists with digital art today. As I observed that historically, and presently, there is a disproportionate academic interest in Indigenous ‘traditional’ art often defined in terms of close roots to continuing cultural and religious traditions and usually produced with historically used tools and materials, my goal was to shed light to the most recent and novel forms of Indigenous self-expression. The novelty of digital art and its profound potential for creativity, distribution, and its practical and aesthetic application seemed so captivating to me – as if it symbolised a new expansion of artistic expression, unlimited by material limitations. I anticipated that the digital space provided by VR technologies, digital drawing, and moviemaking software could be opening a literal new dimension to Indigenous people’s engagement with art, self-expression, and creativity. But I quickly realised that this area of production was far more complex than I first thought.

‘Digital art’ is a vague term that can be applied to multiple types of existing and emerging types of production. With technological leaps constantly opening new possibilities, is there a useful way to define and outline what ‘digital art’ is? A number of contemporary art galleries have offered various definitions of digital art in the context of the professional artworld. On their website, Tate Gallery describes digital art as ‘a term used to describe art that is made or presented using digital technology’ (Tate Gallery 2024). The definition adopted by the Eden Gallery expands on this idea and defines it as any art ‘made using software, computers, or other electronic devices. Anything produced or made on digital media, such as animations, photographs, illustrations, videos, digital paintings, and such can be classified as digital art’ (Britto 2021, n.p.). A more contemporary definition that accounts for the recent development of AI technologies is outlined by Artland Magazine:

Placed under the larger category of *new media art*, digital art is defined as *any creative practice that uses digital technology as an essential part of the artistic process*. Just like traditional fine art, digital art offers multiple mediums and styles that artists can use to express themselves, from digital photography, computer graphics and pixel art to more experimental mediums such as AI-generated art and AR art, *everything goes in the spectrum of digital art*.

([emphasis added] Bravic n.y.)

The commonality between these and other definitions is the idea that digital art is any art that relied on digital technology at any stage of its production, distribution, or access. This encompasses any genre, art media, or style. Therefore, digital art includes not only arthouse movies and VR-experiences that people can find in galleries and art museums; it also includes digital animations, illustrations, videos, books, comics, and many more. Indeed, ‘everything goes in the spectrum of digital art’ (Bravic n.y.).

While the theoretical breadth of digital art’s scope stunned me with its expansive coverage, I noticed the significant lack of Indigenous participation in its creation. Looking for works in this field, I quickly realised that Indigenous-created VR-projects, digital artworks, and artistic digital recreations represent a newly emerging field. As my research subsequently confirmed, the late 2010s and early 2020s had seen the early rise of Indigenous engagement with these specific fields of digital production. This positioned me as a witness observing the emergence and development of Indigenous digital production. However, this also meant that while looking for potential art/media projects in these emerging fields via Internet and in the dedicated websites of galleries, libraries, and museums, I could often find only one or two works that were advertised or discussed publicly. As many media projects (just as with artistic, cultural, or religious projects) created by Indigenous communities are intended for use and circulation within their communities, I was unable to learn anything about such projects without having points of contact within those communities. Hence, I found it unexpectedly difficult to identify potential case study materials. In addition to the scarcity of study materials, I found that many Indigenous authors/collaborators/artists had either no listed contact information or did not respond to my invitations to participate. Often, information about past projects was very brief and lacked pictures or other records available in open access.

As I brainstormed how to overcome these challenges of access, I noticed that Indigenous pop-cultural production represents another unique and intriguing slice of data. Typically representing entertainment production, as I will discuss below, pop-cultural products are intended to reach extensive, demographically varied, and geographically scattered audiences. While I encountered a similar problem of the lack of variety among potential case studies, I realised that this field is of significant research potential. By design, this type of media is a much more public field than that of ‘high’ art that tends to appear in galleries, exhibitions, and

museums. As I realised the implications of the accessibility, wide reach, and appeal of Indigenous pop-cultural entertainment, I decided to redirect my research focus to pop-cultural and entertainment products such as video games, animated films, and interactive digital comics, in other words, to the field of mass media entertainment.

Mainstream media, Indigenous media, and pop culture

As this thesis discusses different sub-fields of media production, it is necessary to define the working terms and their relations to each other. Reflecting on the power and pervasiveness of media, Eiselein and Topper (1976, p. 114) emphasise that media continues an immeasurably long human tradition of long-distance communication:

Media are pervasive. In nonindustrial societies, we find media in the form of petroglyphs, art work, smoke signals, and signal drums. In industrial societies the media are truly massive. In the United States, for example, every individual is immersed in a media stream.

Indeed, in many developed and developing countries and societies, mass media is omnipresent. Integral to our daily lives, it exists in practically all spheres of life, from the most private to the most public. Even as far back as the 1970s, researchers were advocating for the importance of studying media for anthropology:

If anthropologists are going to contribute to the understanding of man and culture in today's world, they cannot close their eyes to *a major human activity, a major artifact, and a major vehicle of cultural change.*

([emphasis added] Eiselein & Topper 1976, p. 119)

‘A major vehicle of cultural change’, media allows us to reach multi-billion audiences with the tap of a screen. This is no small advance in human technology – this unprecedented ability to allow people watch, listen, and interact with the content of media affects many areas of our life, including deeply personal ones:

[I]t would be a mistake to overlook how digital media have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life projects.

(Coleman 2010, p. 490)

Media has the power to influence and shape people's perceptions of self, interests, societal and cultural norms, and even affects what goals people pursue in their life. Arguably, the most influential type of media would be mainstream media.

Mainstream media carries messages, communicates values, and promotes points of view accepted as 'mainstream' by the society, politically and socially. Maryville University defines mainstream media within the US context as the general source of information, news, and communications:

Until about the early 2000s, mainstream media, which simply refers to where most Americans get their news, generally included a person's local newspaper, local TV affiliate, and one of three national broadcast news programs. Nowadays, the media landscape is more complex. It has broadened from traditional news sources (print, TV, and radio) to video, AM/FM radio, podcasts, satellite radio, and social media. It also now includes news producers and aggregators.

(Maryville University, 23 June 2021)

Hence, mainstream media is a generally accepted source of information that is transmitted to the public with the goal to reach as many people as possible. Its scope is defined by the contemporary level of technological development and can be physical and digital. The US context in this definition could be translated to *any other local or national context*; however, it is worth noting that the *global* mainstream media is still primarily generated in America.

Being distributed via public outlets, mainstream media heavily relies on *mass media*. Mass media refers to an array of different modes of media communications that are distributed via digital technologies to large numbers of people. Debra Spitulnik (1993, p. 293) describes mass media from an anthropological standpoint as such:

Mass media – defined in the conventional sense as the electronic media of radio, television, film, and recorded music, and the print media of newspapers and magazines, and popular literature - are at once artifacts, experiences, practices, and processes. They are economically and politically driven, linked to developments in science and technology, and like most domains of human life, their existence is inextricably bound up with the use of language. Given

these various modalities and spheres of operation, there are numerous angles for approaching mass media anthropologically: as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments.

As Spitulnik explains, mass media is a vast field that can reveal various insights into numerous connected fields, activities, and practices. It does not just transmit information; it holds the power to reflect, affect, or shift cultural and societal values and perceptions through the messages, images, and ideas it communicates.

While traditional outputs of mass media such as news are closely linked to politics, media entertainment and pop-cultural media production are usually perceived as less politically charged types of media and more creatively-oriented, with the goal of being universally appealing and entertaining. In fact, *pop culture* has a range of different and sometimes contradictory definitions. Williams (1983, p. 237) describes four ways in which pop culture tends to be understood: as something that is ‘well liked by many people’; as ‘inferior kinds of work’, as opposed to ‘high culture’; as culture, that is ‘actually made by the people for themselves’; and as ‘work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people’.

Encapsulating concepts that relate to a range of different aspects of people’s tastes, motives, lifestyles, and modes of production, pop culture is a multilayered field that requires a narrow lens to be a useful concept. While all definitions offered by Williams capture different distinguishing features of pop culture, in this research I am interested in pop culture as media production (films, TV series, comics, graphic novels, and other similar products) that is created deliberately to appeal to wider, cross-sectional audiences of a society.

The University of Minnesota’s book titled *Understanding media and culture: an introduction to mass communication* (2010, n.p.), points out that pop-cultural media production has a close relation with mainstream media:

Popular culture is the media, products, and attitudes considered to be part of the mainstream of a given culture and the everyday life of common people. It is often distinct from more formal conceptions of culture that take into account moral, social, religious beliefs and values [...]. It is also distinct from what some consider elite or high culture.

[emphasis added]

Pop culture, in subtle but persistent ways, surrounds the life of its society. Not built on large foundations such as religion or an identity of a specific community like national, regional, or traditional cultures are, pop culture could be seen as a 'lighter' version of culture that is easily adopted, practiced, and consumed, often in addition to people's actual national or traditional cultures. Due to pop culture's ability to permeate society and unite it with stories, products, and ideas, some researchers such as Storey (Storey 2018, pp. 29-30) refer to its power to form 'public fantasy'. Same as how 'conventional' cultures can create and pass down cultural stories such as epics, legends, and religious narratives, pop culture does that, too. Blockbuster Disney movies like *Moana*, internationally known media franchises like *Pokémon*, *Star Wars*, or *Bluey* – these titles are known for people across most countries on all continents. Due to this ability to disseminate stories, ideas, images, and potential role-model characters, 'popular culture is understood as a collective dream world' (ibid.).

Storey (2018, pp. 27-28) explains that pop culture is mostly spread by mass media with the intention to appeal to the largest number of consumers while requiring the least effort from consumers to access it:

It is mass-produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers. The culture itself is formulaic, manipulative (to the political right or left, depending on who is doing the analysis).

As a result, pop culture is not only connected with financial interests (ibid.), but also to politics. Turner (2003, p. 6) explains this connection as an interplay between the everyday life and power relations that are embedded into it:

Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves

Overall, pop culture is a vast and multidimensional field that could be studied in numerous contexts. In this research, I focus on the aspect of mass media products that shape everyday life in society, and I explore how political, financial, business, and government contexts interplay with it.

In many countries, Indigenous populations not only consume media entertainment derived from pop-cultural production, but also actively produce it for local, national, and even international audiences. In many ways, the digitalisation of mass media production makes it much easier for people to engage with, create, and disseminate their mass media entertainment content with minimal training, resources, and skills. Today an entire comic book franchise or animated film can theoretically be produced by one person with a tablet. While in practice it is difficult to create a financially or socially successful project without any training, practice, or education, the implications of such technological availability for Indigenous people are enormous. Being able to participate in the creation and dissemination of mass media, and using this to then influence mainstream media representations and messages, hands the power of this medium to Indigenous people.

Indigenous media, as a field, occupies a somewhat ambiguous position – it is media production that is created by or with the close involvement of Indigenous people, produced with digital and mass media technologies (such as printing press, drawing and animation software, text creation and editing software, etc.), and disseminated through either mass media outlets (streaming services, social media, popular book stores, pop-cultural stores, newspaper selling points, etc.) or other alternative ways of distribution (for example, specific distribution pathways present in Indigenous communities).

Yet it is often viewed as existing within a separate social and cultural category distinct from mainstream media. Ginsburg (2002, p. 210) describes accessible new media technologies as ‘new vehicles for internal and external communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination’, emphasising the role of media as an emerging genre for social, cultural, and political Indigenous activism. As I mentioned above, Indigenous media is often discussed as falling between two tropes: either as a ‘Faustian contract’ (that regards traditional culture as ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ while regarding media technologies as ‘polluting’); or a ‘global village’ (that regards media technologies as uniting and empathy building tools that can help build a close-knit ‘village’ type community) (Ginsburg 1991). In practice, as Ginsburg (2002, p. 230) insists, Indigenous engagement with mainstream media is neither a path to a ‘global village’, nor is it necessarily a ‘Faustian contract’. Instead,

At its best, [I]ndigenous media is expressive of transformations in [I]ndigenous consciousness rooted in social movements for Aboriginal empowerment, cultural autonomy, and claims to land.

(ibid)

Later, Ginsburg came back to explain the false duality of these extreme visions further:

Now, more than a decade after I wrote that essay, it is clear that both fields – [I]ndigenous media and ethnographic film – have continued to develop, in the context of the dizzying proliferation of media forms and images that distinguishes the contemporary era. From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine that just over a decade ago, some scholars were assuming that the uptake of media in [I]ndigenous communities would be the death knell of “authentic cultural practices” despite the considerable evidence to the contrary.

(Ginsburg 2011, p. 238)

If media does reflect transformations in Indigenous consciousness, expresses the most up-to-date views on Indigenous rights, and works as a framework that distinguishes the contemporary era of Indigenous self-expression, then Australian Indigenous media today is a valuable source of anthropological, artistic, political, and social data. Ginsburg (ibid, p. 40) specifically points to cultural and linguistic maintenance, preservation, revival, and popularisation, maintenance and strengthening of social relationships, and opportunities to generate publicity, income, and employment as areas where Indigenous media has the most beneficial impact.

Prominent theorists have flagged Indigenous media as a tool for self-determination. In her famous essay titled ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’ (1993), (referencing the opening lines of ‘Treaty’, the most iconic song of the famous music band Yothu Yindi), Langton argues that media creation is an important tool for Indigenous people to influence their representation in mainstream media that has historically been centred on the ‘colonial gaze’. Ginsburg (2002, p. 216) argues that Indigenous media facilitates the communication of culture and identity, and creates understanding between different groups of people. She explains:

...[I]ndigenous filmmakers, scholars, and policy makers have been advocating [I]ndigenous use of visual media as a new opportunity for influence and self-expression. In their view, these technologies offer unique potential for the expansion of community-generated production and for the construction of

viewing conditions and audiences shaped by [I]ndigenous interests and, ultimately, cultural regeneration.

(Ginsburg 2002, p. 217)

‘Community regeneration’ and ‘community production’ are highlighted by Ginsburg as prominent features of Indigenous media, together with the promotion of Indigenous interests. This emphasis on the prioritisation of collective needs and political goals, as Langton and Ginsburg put it in their research of Indigenous media, intrigued me. Despite this, Indigenous media development tends to stay towards the sidelines of academic, artistic, and political inquiry. Ginsburg wrote about this in her 2002 essay, highlighting that ‘there is very little written on these developments, and what exists comes mostly in the form of newsletters, reports, brochures, and catalogues that are useful but difficult to obtain’ (Ginsburg 2002, p. 212). Researching this field some two decades later, I found that this field still does not attract as much academic and institutional interest compared to other areas of Indigenous cultural production, especially in relation to research into the newest and most recent developments in digital technologies and new media. This is problematic because a better understanding of the features, state, and trajectory of Indigenous media’s development, especially by state and federal government bodies, could contribute to better and more diverse support programs and initiatives.

The question of whether Indigenous media creators use pop-cultural production to create a contemporary representation of Indigenous identity firmly grasped my interest, but I found no answers to these questions in the literature. I realised that I must find the answers myself. I began a more focused look for case study projects and participants.

Case studies and participants: peculiarities of the Indigenous digital media field

This research is designed as a case study analysis. It consists of two main and several supplementary case studies. I unpack my main research question with a series of targeted questions that focus on exploring how Australian Indigenous media creators approach Indigenous representation in their works and what do they want to communicate to the mainstream audiences with the help of mass media technologies.

Reiterating the terms defined in the section above, I refer to media as all types of communication technologies. Indigenous media specifically encapsulates all media created by and with the heavy involvement of Indigenous people. Within it, I distinguish Indigenous

mass media, a type of media that is produced with an explicit goal of being accessible to as many consumers as possible. Its sub-component, Indigenous pop-cultural production, is media that is created to be appealing to a large cross-section of people and is designed to be entertaining. Digital media is any media that is created with the use of digital technologies.

As I am interested in Indigenous self-representation in media, I set the following parameters that guided my selection of potential case studies among media entertainment production:

- a) Indigenous media production that featured Indigenous characters;
- b) that was specifically created by or with close collaboration with Indigenous media creators/authors/artists/directors; and
- c) created with the intention to reach wider, mainstream audience.

These parameters limited my primary case studies to Indigenous media franchises that are produced with the mainstream audience in mind. I did not set specific parameters in regards to what messages or representation these franchises communicate because this was one of the points of my interest.

What I refer to as *franchises* are various media products that are linked together by the same story or fictional world. Loehr et al. (2020, p. 321) provides a useful definition of franchises as

...the creative works that comprise *the story world* of an original creative work, such as a book, movie, or TV show. The works in the media franchise are *transmedia works* in that they span mediums to convey and create a more comprehensive fan experience, as well as initiate and maintain active fan involvement [emphasis added].

Hence, franchises are stories that exist as transmedia works. There are a lot of contemporary examples of franchises. Marvel superhero franchises such as *X-Men* or *Avengers* grew from paper comic series to animated series, blockbuster movies, TV series, mobile/video games, and merchandise. Practically all Marvel's stories and characters exist in the same story world, and each new project adds to the detailed richness of it. Such approach to storytelling encourages audiences to be less tied to a particular media encouraging them to follow the franchise and consume it in various manifestations.

As digital technologies make media production and consumption easily accessible, the separation between different media becomes less significant. A sketch can become a book

illustration, that can become a comic book frame, that can turn into an animated character in a film. In turn, a consumer can access all of these media forms from their smartphone. This blurring of boundaries between different media and the tendency of contemporary digital mass media projects to spill from one media format to many others makes it impractical to focus on only one format. Further, by focusing on franchises, I expanded my data scope allowing myself to be flexible with what data I examined and compared.

As I was conceptualising my research, I expected to find numerous case studies that I could compare and contrast. I expected that all of them would communicate similar and easily comparable ways of engagement with mass media, digital technologies, and representations of contemporary Indigenous identity. However, very early on I realised that the situation in the field of mass media and understanding of Indigenous identity are very different from what I envisioned.

At the turn of the second decade of the twenty first century, there were not many Indigenous digital and mass media products that were publicised. In fact, in 2019, as I prepared to begin my project, I started searching for research materials. However, I could only find three titles that fit my research parameters, that were mainstream enough to appear on Google search, in catalogues of the National Library of Australia, and in listings on dedicated Indigenous media websites. While there were certainly more titles made by Indigenous creators present at the time of my search, it was very difficult to find them without having prior specialised knowledge of where to look, what to look for, or who to ask. I attempted to reach the authors of these three titles that I identified.

The first project was *Neomad* (2013-2014), a digital graphic novel created as part of the Yijala Yala project (2011-2015) run by art and social justice organisation Big hART in collaboration with more than fifty young Indigenous children in Roebourne (Western Australia). This franchise also includes a short life-action film that features real children who inspired *Neomad's* characters. The lead artist was Stu Campbell ('Sutu'), an Australian digital artist and director. The second project was *Ubbys Underdogs* (2011-2019), a graphic novel by Brenton McKenna published and distributed with Magabala Books. The third project is *Little J & Big Cuz* (2017-), a children's TV series directed by Tony Thorne and created with the support of Australian Council of Education, NITV, Screen Australia, and Screen Tasmania. This franchise consists of a TV series, several online point-and-click games, and a free e-book, and several children's hard-cover books available in bookshops. Despite my hopes to

include these projects as my case studies, accessing some of these creators proved difficult. One creative team did not respond and two others who initially did express interest in being interviewed by me later withdrew for either personal or scheduling reasons.

It felt discouraging for my attempts to reach out or begin data collection to be rejected, often with no explanation. Given the uncertainty surrounding the reasons for these refusals – whether they stemmed from mistrust in the process of academic research, reluctance to share personal information with a stranger, a desire for privacy, or a long list of other possible reasons - I had to keep looking for people willing to work with me. As I kept researching the field of Indigenous mass media production, I witnessed that new titles of comics, web series, literature, and video games began to appear in bigger numbers as time passed by. I continued to reach out to the creative teams of these new media titles. I contacted authors, consultants, and producers of three more Indigenous graphic novels, digital comics, and TV series. Some people did not indicate if they received my emails or what they thought of my research project. However, I was successful in the end. Among people who were happy to be a part of my research project from the very beginning to the very end were Richard Pritchard and Jordan Gould, the authors of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* (2022-) and Jonathon Saunders, the creator of *Zero Point* (2016-).

Wylah the Koorie Warrior is a media franchise for children written by Richard Pritchard, a Samoan person from New Zealand, and Jordan Gould, an Indigenous Australian from Peek Whurrong tribe of the Maar Nation (Victoria). This media franchise consists of a children's book series, colouring pamphlets, and a trading card game. This is a coming-of-age story set in the distant past and it follows a young Indigenous girl protagonist. It is sold on *Wylah's* official website and in major conventional and online bookshops. *Zero Point* is a media franchise for young adult/adult audience created by Jonathon Saunders, a Woppaburra man, who lives in Darwin. This franchise includes a comic series, a web-series, and an animated short film. *Zero Point* is a story about an Indigenous man who discovered superpowers within himself. In its different increments, the franchise narrates his story at different points of time (at the time when he just discovered the superpowers and many years later when he works as a government worker in a small elite team). It is sold in dedicated comics shops and online on the official website of its publisher, Wild North Comics. While these titles fit the research parameters, a significant reason they were selected is the openness of their creators to be a part of this research.

The analysis of two main case studies was supported by inclusion of supplementary case studies – Disney’s animated films *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Moana* (2016). While these two films were not created by Indigenous creative teams and were produced in a completely different geographic and cultural environment to Australia, *Pocahontas* and *Moana* are still important media titles that need to be considered in research of Indigenous media representation. In particular, they helped me to contextualise my analysis of Australian Indigenous media projects and served as data which I use for comparison and contrast. These specific titles were selected for specific reasons: (a) they portray Indigenous people (American First Nations in *Pocahontas* and Pacific Islanders in *Moana*); (b) they are created by a well-recognised international media conglomerate that dominates the animated film industry; and (c) they illustrate different points in the history of Indigenous media representation with *Pocahontas* being an earlier example of pop-cultural representation actively circulating in the global media and *Moana* being a more recent one. *Pocahontas* is Disney’s early attempt to centre a story on Indigenous point of view, characters, culture, and experiences. Seeing how Disney approached Indigenous representation in 1995 provides an insight into changing historical attitudes on this subject, problems Disney faced, and criticism it subsequently received from Indigenous people. *Moana* is Disney’s attempt to address these problems and pioneer a new benchmark of Indigenous representation in international mainstream media. Moreover, *Moana* is a case study that is closely comparable to *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*: the authors of *Wylah* admitted that they were heavily inspired by it; the stories, characters, and events have many parallels; and the visual depiction of both franchises has profound similarities.

My experience looking for case studies and participants struck me as intriguing for several reasons. I studied academic literature on North American Indigenous pop culture and mass media, a field that has been developing for almost a century and has some dedicated infrastructure for its creation, dissemination, and consumption in form of publishers, comic book stores, and annual events. I was expecting to find a similar situation in Australia; however, what I anticipated I would find did not correspond with what I eventually observed. There appears to be limited clearly defined specialised infrastructure for Indigenous pop culture in Australia at the moment. While there is a number of Indigenous publishing houses such as Magabala books, IAD Press, Aboriginal Studies Press, Burany Press, and Batchelor Press, these publishers are not specialised in pop-cultural or entertainment titles. Some of them specialise in educational and academic publications. Others have a more general scope

encompassing children's books, fiction and non-fiction, and cultural and educational materials. There is a growing range of Indigenous comic book publishers, but they tend to be local small businesses, such as Wild North Comics, a publisher established by Jonathon Saunders and Timothy Parish, or Gestalt Comics established by Wolfgang Bylsma and Skye Ogden. However, these publishers are not exclusively Indigenous – they tend to specialise generally in independent comic book production that includes Indigenous titles. Could the lack of infrastructure be explained by the early state of Indigenous mass media production, or are there other reasons for it?

The more I looked the more I observed the lack of a well-defined Indigenous pop-cultural community. What I found instead was a set of individual creators who produce their media projects in relative isolation and individual consumers seemingly unaffiliated into distinct groups. This took me by surprise because initially I imagined I would be able to find more research participants in a 'snowballing' technique, that is to use my established contacts to attract more participants, but this technique failed. None of the creators I spoke to personally knew any other media creators that would fall into my parameters of research. This professional seclusion meant that these individual media creators had to figure out the intricacies of publications, marketing, and budget management on their own.

Further, there appears to be no momentum in the movement to create a separate Indigenous pop-cultural community, at least in the sense reported in the United States. In Australia, IndigiCon, a pop-cultural convention for Indigenous Australian pop-cultural creators, actors, directors, and fans, was set up as a platform to unite Indigenous audiences and promote Indigenous media production. Alas, it only hosted one event in Sydney in the late 2010s and as of 2025 its official webpage has expired and its Facebook page has only 1,400 followers (for comparison, Oz Comic Con, the main Australian pop-cultural festival, has 138,000 followers and IndigiPopX, the biggest annual First Nations pop-cultural convention in the US, has almost 10,000). However, what I find the most peculiar in this, is that while IndigiCon failed to become a cultural movement, this is not the indication of the wider public's lack of interest in Indigenous culture, nor it is evidence of the decline of Indigenous pop-cultural production in the country. The number of new and upcoming Indigenous pop-cultural media projects is growing with every year. Multiple grants, financial aids, and programs are offering support for Indigenous media creators on local and national levels. Overall, this field shows strong potential for growth. Then, I asked myself, what could be the reasons for the lack of a separate Australian Indigenous pop-cultural community.

Another point of difference between the American and Australian contexts that I observed is the relations between pop-cultural media production and political agendas. There appears to be no universal, well-defined, and explicitly politicised agenda of decolonisation and anti-colonialism guiding the development of recently established Indigenous mass media and pop-cultural industries in Australia. This was the most surprising find for me because a lot of academic literature that studies North American Indigenous pop-cultural and mass media production tends to report a push for decolonisation and empowerment behind these works. An American Indigenous academic, founder of Native Reality Press and the founder of the Indigenous Comic Con, Lee Francis IV, stated that ‘the pop culture fight is the invisible war that nobody recognizes’ (Morris 2019, p. 326). American researchers like Amanda Morris (2019) argue that the US First Nations comic book creators push for decolonisation of mass media by centring their stories on Indigenous perspective. Often this is achieved through social commentary. For example, an Indigenous graphic novel *Sixkiller* (2018-) by Lee Francis IV and Weshoyot Alvitre, is a social commentary on violence against Indigenous women. *The Outside Circle* (2015) by Patti LaBoucane and Kelly Mellings, is a graphic novel that raises the issues of street violence, substance abuse, and poverty. *Tribal Force* (2023) by Jon Proudstar, Ron Joseph, Weshoyot Alvitre, and Lee Francis IV highlights the problem of domestic abuse.

Fully expecting to find similar narratives in contemporary Australian Indigenous pop-cultural and mass media production, I intended to study how decolonisation is expressed in pop-cultural media products made by Indigenous authors, artists, and writers in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This expectation was informed not only by the American example, but also by the prevalence of such narratives in the contemporary Indigenous politics: decolonisation, reconciliation, ‘Closing the Gap’, and Indigenous empowerment are usually at the heart of any Indigenous initiative in education, industries, and local and national politics. But the lack of emphasis on an explicit and polarised political agenda expressed in Australian Indigenous mass media production I studied challenged my preconceptions. It is worth noting that the focus on social and political issues is present in Australian Indigenous films and literature of the second half of the last century. However, the recent Indigenous media content, particularly Indigenous pop culture, seem to move away from this trope of storytelling. Could it be true that decolonisation and anti-colonial push is not among the main motivations for Indigenous media creators? What other motives might they have?

Finally, in my pursuit to understand how Indigenous identity is represented in the mainstream media, I encountered a vast disparity of views on what Indigenous identity actually is. My research led me into a contradictory, galvanised, and politicised field of Indigenous identity. Because of the state of this field, Indigenous mainstream media representation gets caught in the debates around who has the right to represent Indigenous people locally or nationally and in power struggles around cultural or social authority. Often used as a legitimising force behind media criticism or production, Indigenous identity has the power to open doors for various support mechanisms including funding and marketing. It could also potentially limit some other opportunities related to market availability, scope of creative production, and so on. But then, if Indigenous identity is contested, how can it be represented in pop-cultural or mainstream media? Is there a way to represent it in a way that avoids causing a backlash?

As I realised that my assumptions of the motives, goals, and needs of Indigenous mass media creators are wrong, I was fascinated by what exactly do Indigenous media creators want to achieve. How they approach Indigenous portrayal in their works, and what motivates them? *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and *Zero Point* became my windows into the world of Indigenous mass media production. Both aiming at mainstream media audience, the authors of these franchises revealed insights into what drives and motivates them. As the authors shared their personal and professional stories, I started to understand the vast complexity of this nuanced and region-specific field of production that only started to bloom.

Methods

While quantitative-qualitative epistemology debates are less relevant today, with more researchers combining frameworks and methods holistically, most of the methods I used in this study are qualitative. Approaching this research with open questions rather than theories, I was interested in gathering detailed and insightful data in an efficient way. To ensure the balance between efficiency and insight, I utilised a hybrid approach that combined *digital fieldwork* and *participant observation* to collect data and interact with participants.

A staple method of anthropology, *participant observation*, is praised as a way for researchers to immerse themselves in the lived reality of their participants and access data by participating in activities, observing them, and, through this process, learning about topics of interest. Okely (2012, p. 121) states that participant observation as ‘[t]he ideal and traditional practice for social anthropologists is at least one year of shared residence and 24-hours-a-day presence for a total participation and joint living.’ However, travelling to a distinct community and

living among the research participants for an extended period of time, is not always the most accessible or efficient tool for data gathering in the researcher's tool box.

As I had to plan my fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic when international and domestic travel was either restricted or impeded, I decided early on that my data collection would not involve visiting the houses or workplaces of my research participants in-person. Besides accounting for travel limitations, I kept in mind that the participants who joined my research project did not reside in distinct and secluded communities. Living in the urban settings of Warrnambool and suburban Darwin and working on their independent creative projects, they were not culturally or socially 'separate' from the mainstream Australian society in the sense how people in some Indigenous communities might be in terms of language, lived conditions, daily and religious practices, and so on. This, however, by no means indicated that they were not parts of their communities in other ways that did not involve close living arrangements. Rather than focusing on the specific details or technical aspects of production, or how the production aligns with their lifestyle, I was interested in understanding the underlying motives, reasons, and contexts that informed their creative processes. I was particularly keen to hear the stories behind their production. As a result, I decided to make use of such methods of participant observation as *ethnographic interviews* and *semi-structured interviews* while at the same time combining my observations with methods of digital fieldwork such as using *online tools* and *platforms* to collect data available online. I will explain the use and function of each of these methods below.

Digital fieldwork methods began to attract the attention of researchers from around the beginning of the 2010s, when many major social media networks and platforms became influential (for example, Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter) (Caliandro 2021, p. 226; Helmond 2015). Indeed, Caliandro (2021, p. 226) refers to the pervasive spread of social media platforms as 'the most pivotal and compelling socio-cultural phenomena characterizing the contemporary digital era'. As centralisation of these platforms attracted huge numbers of users, they started generating large amounts of both quantitative and qualitative data, representing the opinions, beliefs, and trends of populations across the globe (Caliandro 2021, p. 226). The opportunities to understand the functioning of social groups, the use of online communication, and the evolution of cultural practices – all this became possible with the 'little revolution in the digital methods field' caused by social media's infiltration of daily human life (Caliandro 2021, p. 226). Researchers such as Arvidsson et al., (2016) and Marres and Gerlitz (2018) looked at digital social formations; Marres (2015) and Geboers and Van De

Wiele (2020) studied online public discourses. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic emphasised certain elements of fallibility in traditional fieldwork as a method for data collection and pushed academics to use online communication technologies for work, research, and communication (Konken & Howlett 2023, p. 849).

Digital fieldwork methods are usually defined along the lines of “the deployment of *online tools and data* for the purposes of social and medium research [...] online methods, or methods of the medium, which are reimaged and repurposed for research” ([emphasis added] Rogers, 2017, p. 5). Chao, van Geenen, Gerlitz, and van der Vlist (2024, p. n.p.) go further, specifying that it also involves approaches to media research that employ the data, technical specifications, and functionalities of digital platforms, such as webpages, blogs, wikis, web archives, social media, and user interactions such as links, likes, posts, or comments, to investigate both the social dimension and the media itself. Being interested in the innovative forms of media making by Indigenous creators and their use of digital platforms for creation, dissemination, marketing, and viewer engagement, I found digital platforms to be crucial data sources for my research. Hence, I collected data from the authors’ social media posts, the audience’s comments and reactions from the *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and *Zero Point* Facebook, Instagram, and Kickstarter pages. I studied reviews on book review websites and online bookstores, as well as collected news coverage and advertisement content from Australian news and radio channels. Most importantly, all interactions between me and my research participants occurred online, via email, social media messaging, or an online conference software called Zoom.

Many researchers such as Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey and Lawless (2019), Braun, Clarke and Gray (2017), Cater (2011), and Deakin and Wakefield (2014) report that the widespread familiarity of the global community with online communication technologies in many parts of the world, and their accessibility, convenience and flexibility, highlight the potential of these methods to complement, expand on, or even sometimes replace traditional in-person methods of data collection. These benefits extend not only to the researchers but also to research participants – providing convenient and flexible arrangements that require less preparation, commuting, and do not involve meeting researchers in-person (Hewson 2008; Horrell Stephens & Breheny, 2015).

There are, of course, disadvantages to using Zoom for data collection. The successful deployment of Zoom for interviews is determined by a stable and fast internet connection, the

digital literacy skills of all users, and the availability and quality of hardware (microphone, camera, etc.) (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey & Lawless 2019, p. 4-5). Today, as a large proportion of global population was forced to engage with such online communication tools for work, study, and socialisation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic isolation policies rolled out across many countries, people of different generations have become much more proficient and experienced in using such software in their daily lives. This has made Zoom and other similar programs much more accessible and familiar tools for research and engagement with research participants.

In 2022, I was assisting my supervisor to host a Zoom symposium in collaboration with Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC). A mix of Indigenous community members, academics, and social and cultural workers from South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory joined from cultural and community centres, from their offices, and from homes. As part of cultural and religious sensitivity protocols, certain parts of the symposium were reserved for gender-specific business and those parts were not recorded. Everyone seemed familiar with the online conference etiquette and conduct: participants had their microphones off unless it was their turn to speak, they used the in-built chat to share their thoughts and comments during presentations, and used visual ‘gestures’ such as love hearts, thumbs up, clapping hands, or hand up that are designed to represent non-verbal reactions for the presenter and other audience members. While we encountered technical difficulties such as microphones being located too far from the participants who attended the symposium from community venues, or the confusion around microphones and speakers being either on or off, these problems were minor, and they did not interfere with the progression of the event. This, and many similar events that have taken place in the past five years, demonstrate that Zoom and similar online conference tools have become a familiar part of our personal and professional lives across regions and communities.

Among other downsides of digital methods of research are the issue of social media users’ privacy. For example, some materials such as Instagram or Facebook stories are designed to stay online for only 24 hours before disappearing. In other cases, some online platform users have private accounts or create online posts with the intention to share them with limited audiences (Caliandro 2021, p. 228-229). I mitigated these risks by using comments and posts left by users on public portals, for example, online book review webpages, social media pages of businesses and national and local news, public YouTube channels of businesses,

government bodies, educational and representative organisations, and so on. Since these are recognised public portals that attract hundreds and thousands of people, these posts are visible publicly and easy to find. There is also an understanding and expectation that any comments posted there by users will be visible and available to all users. I decided against adding usernames to quotes I use for this research. Instead, I provided links and references to all such materials for the purposes of research transparency. While this makes it possible to follow the links and see the original posts and their authors, this also avoids having account names published and identified in the context of this study. By following these guidelines around social media quotation use, I achieved several goals. Firstly, I collected data that is actively used to create, maintain, or express public opinions, discourses, and moods, which is of primary interest for this study on the impact of mass media on Indigenous identity, self-expression, and positionality. Secondly, I worked towards mitigating the ethical risks of intruding on the privacy of social media users beyond what is socially expected in the given settings. Overall, the methodology of digital fieldwork has proven not only a useful means of communicating with my research participants, documenting the voices of the authors I interviewed, and exploring the reception of their works, but has also enabled me to address how First Nations' identity is constructed and contested in online spaces.

Why do I refer to my work with participants as participant observation? While it may not seem obvious how participant observation can occur when the fieldwork is undertaken in the format of digital interviews, it is, nevertheless, the turn that my research took. While initially, I did not explicitly think of my work with research participants as a form of participant observation, it became clear to me that this most appropriately describes my work. Questionnaires, surveys, and formal interviews – these methods do not allow in-depth exploration of cultural concepts as they usually imply that the scope and possible outcomes of the research are, by and large, already established (Okely 2012, p. 119). The work I did was more than a series of informative interviews. I developed rapport with the research participants, explored and tested different directions of inquiry, learned about the personal and professional journeys of each of my participants, and shared my own stories with them. Exploration, the flexibility of empirical theory building, and the key role of rapport for working with participants – these are features of participant observation (Okely 2012, p. 121). Okely (*ibid.*) points out that while an interviewer may not even be in direct personal contact with their informants (for example, if using questionnaires), a participant observer ‘must confront the consequences of intimate enquiries and be exposed to similar scrutiny.’ Building

relationships with research participants is crucial for a participant observer: it affects the quality of collected data, its scope, and defines the overall fieldwork experience:

...even the most vulnerable and isolated individual will not give way to pressure to give away secrets unless the interlocutors indicate a desire to participate fully and share.

(Okely 2012, p. 117)

The central methods of my data collection were *ethnographic (informal)* and *semi-structured interviews*, methods often credited to participant observation due to their loosely structured nature and flexibility to follow data where it may lead. In his book *Research methods in anthropology* (2011, p. 211), Russell explains that *ethnographic (informal) interviews* are aimed at gathering insightful data from research participants while exercising ‘a minimum of control over the people’s responses’. Often referred to as ‘conversations’, informal interviews usually follow no written structure or plan, but rely on the researcher’s goals that are constantly kept in mind (ibid.). Russell (2011, p. 212-213) points to the power of this data collection method in capturing and understanding participants’ life stories, building strong rapport, and generally in working with people who may dislike the structure of formal interviews. *Semi-structured (in-depth) interviewing*, on the other hand, shares the ‘freewheeling quality’ of ethnographic interviewing, but is characterised by a scheduled and prepared approach as it follows a general, pre-determined script (Russell 2011, pp. 211-212). Representing a compromise between the freedom to follow leads and learn something new or unexpected about the topic of interest and a strategic approach that ensures efficiency, time-management, and targeted data collection, semi-structured interviewing is a method that works well in a time-limited setting and an online format.

In my research, I aimed to develop a balanced approach that involved moving between ethnographic and semi-structured interviewing at different points of the fieldwork process. These methods are complementary to each other. While ethnographic interviews were useful for me to explore the ‘field’, build rapport, and develop a degree of trust between me and the participants, semi-structured interviews helped me to generate in-depth data that was relatively comparable in an efficient and practical manner. My participants and I shared stories about certain aspects of life we had in common including topics such as being Indigenous in a big multicultural society, about the challenges of being racially and culturally misidentified, and the effects of the modern capitalist lifestyle on Indigenous practices and

social relationships. Most of the time, I asked my participants questions that related to the pre-determined topics I prepared beforehand. As my participants talked, I would ask them clarifying questions, supporting the discussions by adding my comments or by bringing up similar experiences from my life. My participants agreed and also disagreed with me, they asked me questions, and they clarified their answers so that I understood what they wanted to express. Often, they would deviate off-topic. In these cases, our interviews would shift into the ethnographic interview format. Participants would point me to unexpected and valuable insights into themes that I did not focus on initially. After the initial exploration, I would often add these insights to my list of pre-determined topics that we came back to during later interviews. In other cases, our interactions would shift into friendly conversations where we would joke, enjoy friendly banter, and share personal news.

As both methods reject rigid interviewing techniques and embrace blurring lines between data collection, conversations, and rapport building, I was aware that my positionality in relation to the research participants involved balancing between being a social contact and a researcher. I particularly felt this when I was exploring my participants' political affiliations and thoughts on expressing Indigenous identity. I was finding myself in positions where I needed to either break the ice around complex topics, encourage participants to explain something I did not quite grasp, or refer back to something they said a while ago. Russell (2011, p. 219-220) writes that in situations like this, interviewers can use probing techniques to encourage the participants to share more information. While 'leading questions' (questions that have an embedded assumption and thus the potential to skew the participants' answers) are generally criticised, Russell (*ibid.*) points out that any intervention of the researcher, including their very intrusion into the lives and environment of the participants, inevitably affect the participants. Thus, interference is not something that must be avoided but rather mitigated through reflexivity and thoughtful approaches to probing. Probing can be helpful as it may lead to gaining access to information the researcher seeks. 'Directive probes' as Russell (2011, p. 221) calls questions that lead or provoke participants to certain topics, can be useful to get back to previous conversations or ideas that have already been discussed with the participants.

During my fieldwork I would occasionally use such directive probes to summarise the information that the participants just shared with me for the purpose of double-checking their meaning, to nudge them to give me more in-depth explanations, or to recall an exchange we had before. I also found this to be a useful way to make sure that I understood my participants

correctly, as sometimes they would change topics as they would recall something from their lives or hesitate to express their thoughts, ending up abandoning sentences half-way through.

Another way to articulate my research methodology would be to refer to it as '*person-centred interviewing and observation*'. Levy and Hollan (2015) describe the concept as such:

Person-centered ethnography is a term used by Robert Levine (1982) to refer to anthropological attempts to develop experience-near ways of describing and analyzing human behavior. An effort is made to represent human behavior and subjective and intersubjective experiences from the point of view of the acting, intending, and attentive subject, and to actively explore the emotional saliency and motivational force of cultural beliefs, symbols, and structures, rather than to assume such saliency and force (see Hollan 2001).

(Levy & Hollan 2015, p. 380)

This approach is said to help in investigating complex sets of interactions between individuals and their wider cultural and social contexts. Hollan (2001, p. 62) argues that it offers a powerful way of grounding general theories of human behaviour in real people's experience of daily life. The central role of open-ended interviews conducted, the foundation of trusting relationships, and a focus on the participant's identity formation journey helps to explore how individuals live within complex layers of social and cultural behavioural scripts and discourses and also how individuals can challenge or shift them through their actions. In this context, a research participant plays a double role in the research, being an 'informant' (a source of knowledge) and a 'respondent' (a subject of research) (Levy & Hollan 2015, p. 384). Thus, the researcher collects several types of data during the person-centred interviewing and observation process – 'expert' knowledge about the topics in question shared by the research participant and also their reactions to questions, probes, and topics raised by the researcher. Sympathy and non-judgemental listening are key to this approach (Levy & Hollan 2015, p. 395).

The positionality of the researcher and the relationships with research participants play a significant role in the research quality of both participant observation and person-centred interviewing and observation. My positionality as an Indigenous woman from overseas gave me an opportunity to connect and bond with my research participants over our shared experience of being Indigenous in this world. I am not Indigenous to Australia, but I come from a community which underwent colonisation, cultural fragmentation, partial language

loss, land occupation, and displacement. I am, thus, intimately familiar with the subjects of interrogation and re-invention of Indigenous identity, reclamation of cultural heritage, negotiation of the historical 'coloniser-the colonised' relations, and the integration of traditional cultures into the globalised society. Indigenous people around the globe share a lot of common problems and many similar values. Such commonality of experiences with colonial governments and regimes contributes to the sense of mutual understanding and affiliation across many Indigenous Nations across the globe that is often referred to as 'global Indigeneity' (Merlan 2009, p. 303; Maaka & Fleras 2005, p. 20; O'Sullivan 2006, p. 3).

This shared sense of global Indigeneity may have helped me and my research participants build mutual bonds of understanding and respect while avoiding the possible obstacles of historical or racial tensions, and political implications that could have been present if I was a part of Australian society as opposed to being an international doctoral student of Indigenous background. Of course, researchers of any background are capable to build trusting relations with Indigenous communities and be accepted. My cultural identity might have been of benefit for creating synergies between me and the participants that were important for the research that investigates Indigenous identity, internal and national politics, intercultural relations, and mainstream representations.

The participants I worked with volunteered their time and efforts to share their experience, knowledge, and personal stories. Jonathon Saunders, Jordan Gould, and Richard Pritchard recognised the importance of their work to create Indigenous representation in mainstream media, as well as the importance of my work to document and study it as a significant social and cultural phenomenon. The least I could have done for them in return was to be an empathetic and curious listener. 'If you are open and honest about your intentions, and if you are genuinely interested in what people have to say, many people will help you', writes Russell (2011, p. 214-215), explaining how curiosity and respect are fundamental values for researchers undertaking participant observation. I never had the intention of 'exposing' or criticising my research participants, during our interviews, conversations, or in my thesis. I approach the gems of data shared with me as valuable glimpses into an emerging industry, as the confessions of private individuals, and also as the statements of public figures. As an anthropologist, I approached the data I collected analytically. I compared and contrasted my two case studies, I juxtaposed them against the contemporary and also historical backgrounds of political concepts, business, identity formation, representation in media, and public perceptions, and offered my objective conclusions. I embraced the insights that my

participants offered me and accepted the subjectivity of their views as windows into the complex and multilayered world of Indigenous media. As an anthropologist, I honoured my participants by writing up this doctoral thesis based on their biographic materials.

It is also important to remember that the authors who agreed to participate in this research are public personas and it is fair to expect that they will be conscious about how they represent themselves and their project to me, a researcher, who documents their professional and personal journeys for later publication. However, working with informants in social research implies a degree of trust between them and the researcher. Moreover, regardless of how conscious Saunders, Pritchard, and Gould were when sharing their motives, professional journeys, and other information with me, I am interested in what they choose to say or perhaps even how they believe they should frame their business project to the public. Such information can be considered an important insight into major and emerging narratives of the place of Indigenous culture and identity in contemporary mainstream Australian culture.

Theoretical lens

I spent several years sifting through the data I collected, witnessing the professional progress that my research participants accomplished, and discussing my ideas with my supervisory board. While the observations I summarise in the pages of this thesis are valuable as reflections of individual Indigenous media creators who venture into the new domains of business, self-expression, media production, and identity formation, I realised that there is also an opportunity to cast a theoretical look on the emergence of new cultural and social institutions. The interaction between the Indigenous artists and writers whose work I studied and their use of digital mass media technologies could, in fact, be seen as a part of a wider process of Indigenous social and cultural change. In their 2013 paper, Howard and Frances Morphy introduced a concept of *relative autonomy*.

Morphy and Morphy (2013, p. 178) define relative autonomy as a feature of ‘social phenomena that can be identified as analytically distinguishable components of a sociocultural system’. These social components could be kinship systems, language, or, in the case of this research, mass communication practices. They exist with a given culture but, practically, they function in relative autonomy from other social components. A kinship system, for example, is relatively autonomous from language, even though these components are encapsulated within a distinct cultural context. This autonomy allows space and flexibility

for cultural and social groups to remake themselves during rapid social change (Morphy & Morphy 2017, p. 2).

The concept of relative autonomy is a useful framework to explain dramatic social and cultural changes that Indigenous groups underwent in an aftermath of the European colonial regime. For decades, Australian state and national authorities made various attempts of to either control, separate from, or incorporate Indigenous communities and individuals into Australian social, cultural, and political institutions. Despite this, Indigenous people managed to keep their distinct cultural identities and continued their practices, even if they persisted in altered ways. What is notable here, is that these alterations of social components are two-directional. Morphy and Morphy (2017, p. 2) explain that small groups resist incorporation into larger groups by forming different types of institutions within their societies that face two directions: ‘inwards’, ‘towards their world of difference’, and ‘outwards’, towards the larger society. The researchers use the example of a Yolŋu mortuary practice to explain this process.

In their paper, Morphy and Morphy (2017) study the ‘memorial ceremony’, a practice that emerged very recently among Yolŋu. In the 1920s, Yolŋu mortuary rites consisted of a prolonged process with three stages. Firstly, the body of the deceased was painted with their ancestral designs and either buried or placed on an elevated platform (ibid p. 6). Secondly, six months later, the bones were collected, cleaned, and carried around in a bark container for a period of several years (ibid). Lastly, the bones were broken and placed in a hollow log coffin in the deceased person’s clan Country (ibid). This prolonged mortuary process allowed for a prolonged period of mourning and also ensured a safe return of the deceased’s spirit back to the land (ibid). With the introduction of Christianity and the associated social and cultural changes, Yolŋu burial rites changed.

Three stage burial ritual was replaced with one permanent burial. Painting of ancestral designs directly on the person was replaced with different practices: first with a painting of the coffin lid, then placing a bark painting next to the coffin, then wrapping of the body in a shroud decorated with ancestral designs (ibid). Carrying of the bones was replaced with carrying of the deceased person’s belongings in a suitcase which was subsequently either buried or placed in a hollow log (ibid). Notably, the singing and dancing that accompanied the 1920s funeral rites continued to be performed despite the changes (ibid).

These and many other changes that occurred in the Yolŋu funeral practice indicate a rapid transformation of a social component, a burial rite. Yolŋu managed to accommodate the

changed socio-cultural context related to burial rites through the adoption of a singular permanent burial (an ‘outward’ change that faces the larger society), while at the same time ensuring that their social and cultural meanings were still expressed (an ‘inwards’ reflection of social and cultural coherence). A similar two-directional alteration of social components could be observed in many other practices of various Indigenous groups.

The use of mass media technologies by Indigenous artists, writers, and directors exemplifies the relative autonomy of Indigenous communication practices that help Indigenous people incorporate new ways of communication without sacrificing cultural and social cohesion. For example, using media creation technologies (computer software, audio-video recording, image capture, internet, etc.) allows Indigenous people to participate in media creation, spreading ideas and information across large populations, and express cultural creativity that could be appreciated by people across the globe. Thus, the ‘inwards’ side the participation in mass media creation allows Indigenous people to accommodate new communication practices, ways of cultural and personal expression, and professional opportunities without losing cultural continuity and overall integrity. The ‘outward’ cultural side of new mass media technologies is their ability to reach far beyond local communities that gives Indigenous people opportunities to participate in the global exchange of ideas, information, creativity, and gain international recognition, that, in turn, could help them professionally, politically, and culturally. This research journey first takes me through a brief history of Indigenous involvement and representation in mass media, a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to Indigenous media portrayal, and close analysis of two Indigenous media franchises. I uncover many unexpected insights into the features of contemporary Indigenous media, its intersection with various fields of production and institutions, and the effects of media creators’ personal lives on the creative and professional decisions. In the end, I return to Morphy and Morphy’s concept by using it to help me make sense of sometimes contradictory findings of my research.

Part I. Indigenous people and mass media: socio-historical context

Chapter 1. From past to present: a brief history of Indigenous people in the mainstream media

Before delving into the nuances of contemporary Indigenous pop culture and its interaction with mainstream media, it is necessary to establish the foundation for this research. While at a surface level it may seem that Indigenous comics, children's book franchises, and animated films and TV series appear spontaneously as novel outputs of Indigenous creativity and self-expression, in reality they represent the most recent offshoots of a long tradition of Indigenous communication and storytelling.

Digital media technologies did not emerge out of nowhere. They represent the continuation of 'analogue' media traditions before it (such as newspapers, community board notes, etc.), which, in turn, represent even older local and region-specific traditions of mass communication. Indigenous involvement with digital and mass media introduced through the European colonisation also reflects a continuity of communication traditions, technological use, and development of novel ways to express ideas and identities. In this chapter, I will present a general overview of Indigenous participation in mainstream media production throughout Australian history. I discuss different time periods across different fields of production, such as film- and TV-making, souvenir art, radio, literature, performing arts, and animation. This section outlines the historical, social, and cultural contexts of my research on Indigenous self-representation in mainstream media. Here I outline my position that Indigenous people and media are not essentially foreign to each other. Indigenous individuals, groups, and communities have actively participated in media creation, often in unrecognised ways. Indigenous filmmakers, actors, writers, musicians, and dancers pioneered the push in Indigenous media production towards the mainstream Australian culture long before there existed special assistance programs and support initiatives. Due to the limitations of my thesis, I focus only on the turning points in history that help me outline the relevant socio-historical context of this dissertation.

Indigenous people's encounter with mass media technologies

Long before European contact and the invention of mass media technologies, Indigenous people exchanged culture, transmitted information and knowledge, and spread their ideas

across time and space. 'Knowledge was the currency of Aboriginal life', states Eric Michaels (1986, p. 2). The exchange of knowledge was oral and face-to-face, while also cultural, through performance arts and graphic design (Michaels 1986, p. 2). The early researchers and explorers such as Daisy Bates noted that news of their activities always spread faster than they moved: smoke signals and message sticks were effectively used to communicate across distances (ibid, p. 2-3). It is in this context of the high value of information and knowledge exchange for Indigenous cultures that Indigenous eagerness to use new communication technologies must be studied, argued Michaels (ibid, p. 3) in his report 'Aboriginal invention of television'. As knowledge exchange is closely linked to Indigenous cultural practices, Langton (1993, p. 9) emphasises that Indigenous people treated visual and oral expressions of their culture and religion seriously. Across Australia, their artistic and storytelling traditions were elaborate and complex (ibid). Even after the cultural interruptions that followed European colonisation, Indigenous artistic traditions remained on the forefront of their cultural, political, and personal self-expression, signalling the persisting importance of these practices.

With photography and video recording originating in the nineteenth century France and the commercial printing press invented in Germany in the fifteenth century (although the first wood block imprint printing first originated in around 800 AD in China), mass media is widely considered a fruit of Western civilisation. The 'analogue' audio-visual technologies, manual printing, and later the invention of digital technologies – all these media are aimed at delivering information to as many people as possible. Despite originating in Europe, ideas and equipment cannot be contained within one culture. Very soon people all over the world began using mass media technologies to create, disseminate and curate media content.

In Australia, Indigenous people have a long relationship with mass media technologies spanning over a century, in one way or another. Video recording was used for Indigenous language and culture preservation since the early days of its invention at the end of the nineteenth century. The early anthropological efforts to record the life and culture of Australia's First Nations often involved photographic and video recordings of cultural and social features of everyday activities, spirituality, family and clan relations, and technology use. Pioneers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries such as Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen are often credited as creators of the most influential collections of ethnographic materials. For example, compilation of ten film reels collectively titled *Aborigines of central and northern Australia: 1901, 1912* (Spencer 1901, 1912) depicts

corroborees, dances, ceremonies, and cooking scenes from Central Australia (Charlotte Waters and Alice Springs) and the Northern Territory (Oenpelli in Arnhem Land, the Flora River west of Katherine and Bathurst Island).

There is an opinion that was widely circulated among the Australian public and some academics that the earliest depictions of the First Nations in the early twentieth century were necessarily portraying them as ‘the last of their kind’, ‘as apolitical beings, hopelessly primitive’ (Debenham 2020, p. 13). This impression formed as a consequence of the cultural ethnographic materials collected by the anthropologists and the linguistic discourses commonly in use at that time. For example, Jennifer Debenham (2020, p. 14-15) argues that at the turn of the nineteenth century, Anglo Australian visual representations of Indigenous people were mostly focused on cultural differences by emphasising the mismatching levels of technologies and industrialisation between Indigenous Nations and Anglo European settlers. Mackinolty and Duffy (1987, p. 9 in Langton 1993, p. 20) state that the main motivation of some documentary makers working in Indigenous communities was to showcase ‘ethnographic curiosity’ to the Australian viewer. The authors argue that the ‘take your clothes off, throw on some ochre and look noble’ approach was not uncommon among the ‘would-be filmmakers’ who were interested in filming Indigenous people (Mackinolty & Duffy 1987, p. 9 in Langton 1993, p. 20). Certain ‘evolutionary’ undertones were indeed present in many early recordings and interpretations of Indigenous culture and society; however, it would be incorrect to assume that the main intention of these researchers was to portray Indigenous people this way for the wider Australian public. In his analysis of Spencer and Gillen’s Indigenous representation, Howard Morphy (2012, p. 558) explains that early ethnographic records are ‘rich and multi-layered, and that as a consequence it is possible to link their interpretations to many subsequent developments in anthropological theory in a way that is not as true of earlier writers on Australian Aboriginal society’. Arguments of researchers like Debenham rely on historical materials, interpretations, and depictions divorced from their socio-cultural context at the time of creation.

What is often omitted from the historical accounts and modern interpretations is the agency of Indigenous peoples in negotiating what should be filmed. There are multiple accounts found in personal diaries, recalled from personal interactions, and observed by researchers and media teams demonstrating that Indigenous people exercised their agency in choosing what they want to appear on camera or photographs, advocating for their interests in audio-visual documentation, and negotiating the locations, materials, cast, and time of filming with

filmmaking crews and anthropologists. For example, while working on their documentary film, Spencer and Gillen were requested by the Indigenous people of the community situated near Charlotte Waters and the community further north (Gillen identified as 'Ilpirra') to record several ceremonies on a daily schedule for more than two weeks in a row (Gillen 1968, pp. 60-65). The ceremonies recorded were titled as 'Quabara Earitja (Irrunturinya) of Kampilya' and 'Quabara Udnirringila ceremony of Unthurqua, the sacred ceremony of the Udnirringila totem' (ibid). The Arrernte people did the same by asking Spencer and Gillen to record their events (ibid, p. 64). These facts recorded in Gillen's travel diary point to Indigenous people actively negotiating and deciding which parts of their culture would be depicted on video. Walpiri people were regular subjects of research and documentation, too. Starting in the 1950s, they appeared on films, recordings, and in documentaries. Just like the Arrernte people, Walpiri managed their representation on film by refusing to record restricted ceremonies, preventing the appearance of people who passed away on video or photo, and resisting the 'BBC style narration' that they found to come across as inaccurate and paternalistic (Michaels 1987, p. 3).

On top of being able to protect and assert their interests in the documentation of their culture and society, Indigenous people could integrate audio and video technologies into their existing practices without seeing this as a deviation from traditions. In his report *Aboriginal Invention of Television in Central Australia 1982-86* (1986, p. 65) that reflects on his research among Walpiri people, Eric Michaels demonstrates that 'there is no necessary translation from orality to electronics'. Rather, electronics were incorporated experimentally into the events. Michaels notes that the process of video production he witnessed was conducted as an extension of tribal politics, religious conventions, and cultural practices. For example, Michaels (1986, p. 65) discusses that the role of the cameraman on one of the recording sessions was delegated by the people to a person who had a *kurdungurlu* (managerial) relation to the tribal Elder and others depicted on the video. Thus, there was strong evidence that Walpiri did not perceive their engagement with media technologies as a deviation from traditional communication, storytelling, or ritual practices.

Similarly, Jennifer Deger (2006) writes about Yolŋu engagement with mass media as creators and consumers in the twenty-first century. Deger (2006, p. xix-xx) states that while Yolŋu understand the effects of mass media and increasingly become a part of a global mediascape, they do not seem to believe that this contributes to the erasure or weakening of their culture. Deger (ibid) explains:

Yolngu use these technologies for their own purposes—putting them to work for remembering, imagining, connecting, and becoming-in-relation to the Ancestral—in practices that profoundly challenge conventional Western assumptions about the ontological nature of media and the kinds of cultural worlds that they engender.

By integrating technologies into their social and cultural order, Yolngu used mass media in ways that suit them and strengthen their position in the world, not the other way around.

Illustrating this point further, Morphy (2020) writes about an interaction he had with Narritjin, a Yolngu artist in the 1970s. Morphy showed Narritjin a set of Yolngu paintings made in the early twentieth century and asked him what he thinks about them. Narritjin's response was: 'I know what you are trying to do. You are trying to show that our art has changed. We will show you that it has not' (Morphy 2020, p. 4). What Narritjin meant is that the cultural interruptions of colonial encounter did not cause Yolngu people lose continuity with their past. 'The bark paintings in the museum collections were, in the Yolngu view, part of a continuing present', writes Morphy (*ibid*).

(Figure 2: Martin Boyd Hand Painted Pottery, 1946-1964.

Image description: a ceramic set of 5 plates, a pitcher, and 2 vases. All pieces are decorated with stylistic depictions of Indigenous figures in traditional attire and instruments performing different tasks (sitting, running, hunting).

(Figure 3: Two penny Australian stamp, 1934 portraying a Kulin man overlooking Melbourne (designer and engraver Frank Manley); Figure 4: Australian Cinderella stamp featuring Gwoja Tjungurrayi ("One Pound Jimmy"), 1938). Image descriptions: both Figures 3 and 4 depict Indigenous men in traditional attire holding spears overlooking urban landscapes. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Stereotypes-of-Indigenous-Australian-men-on-philatelic-products-a-Two-penny-value-of_fig2_362693483.

Yet, documentaries and TV broadcasts that centred on traditional Indigenous life and culture of the first half of the twentieth century were largely produced by non-Indigenous people and media corporations. While many reasons lay behind the fascination to communicate a certain separation between the settler-colonial and Indigenous societies, ranging from calls to protect

and preserve cultures to justifying historic injustices, the idea that these two societies existed on different trajectories lingered in the public's imagination. The second half of the twentieth century, after the World War II, saw a rise in Indigenous imagery appearing on various everyday items sold to the mainstream market. Examples of these include Martin Boyd pottery in the mid-1900s (see above).

Martin Boyd pottery is a brand of hand painted earthenware that was fashionable for domestic use in Australia in the mid-1950s (Powerhouse Collection 2025). 'Their standard range of wares included coffee-sets, ramekins sets, coupis, plates, ashtrays, vases, mugs and soup bowls as well as a special range of Ikebana and Camellia vases and boomerang plates', reports Powerhouse Collection (2025). Among imagery of ballerinas, floral and rural motifs, the pottery featured collections inspired by Indigenous culture (Powerhouse Collection 2025). Native Australian animals, emu tracks, Indigenous people depicted in various poses holding different tools – these images adorned Martin Boyd pottery goods that were sold in major department stores like Myer and David Jones, Georges and Kalmars, featured in 1956 Qantas *Airways* magazine, and found in most capital cities, regional centres, and even in New Zealand (Queensland Museum 2025; Powerhouse Collection 2025). Having recognition, influence, and reach, Martin Boyd pottery and its portrayal of Indigenous people influenced the Australian public's perception of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

As a consequence of Australian colonial history and its associated practices and policies (the doctrine of *terra nullius*, territorial expansion, historically and regionally diverse attempts to eradicate, displace, or assimilate the First Nations), Indigenous presence was not really acknowledged that much in Australia prior to the interwar period. Such imagery as that featured on Martin Boyd pottery inserted Indigenous representation into the Anglo-Australian consciousness, by placing it in reputable department stores and people's homes, and thereby linking Indigenous culture with the national image.

Similar looking images appeared in art, too, for example, on the covers of the Meanjin Art Magazine in the mid-twentieth century (see below). Founded in Brisbane in 1940, Meanjin began as a literary and cultural magazine. "Meanjin" was reported to refer to a local Indigenous word for 'a spike' which was also applied to a stretch of land bounded by the Brisbane River (Huppertz 2018, p. 37). In a search for what constituted a "modern" Australian culture, the magazine featured a variety of European literature and Australian writings on history, anthropology, and Indigenous art (ibid.). In 1945, Meanjin's production moved to the

University of Melbourne and, in 1949, magazine covers began featuring unique designs. In the 1950s, the cover art was heavily inspired by Indigenous art, imagery, and motifs.

Describing Meanjin's cover artworks and its artists, Huppatz (2018, p. 38) writes:

...Peter Burrowes, featured two stick figures on a dotted ground, while another, [...] W E Green, featured a caricature of a crouching Aboriginal, a cartoon-like figure with a long headdress holding a painted shield.

While Meanjin did contain articles about Indigenous art during this period, usually the featured artworks were not attributed to any authors or cultural groups, did not mention specific locations of origin, nor did they include any dates of their creation (ibid.). Articles written by Indigenous people were not featured in the magazine until the 1960s (ibid.).

Looking at the images in Martin Boyd pottery, Meanjin covers, and other public depictions of Indigenous people at that time (for example, on stamps), one can spot certain visual commonalities. Indigenous figures are represented in traditional attire, rural environments, and using traditional instruments such as shields, spears, or boomerangs. The skin colour of these figures, their hair styles, and the positions they are depicted in all reflect the specificities of the Indigenous lifestyle as it was commonly imagined by the Anglo-Australian society, consciously or unconsciously emphasising 'difference and distinction' in comparison to Anglo-Australian culture (Huppatz 2018, p. 35). Huppatz (ibid.) argues that the uniqueness of Indigenous art styles and their suggested visual differences are what attracted twentieth-century art professionals:

Beginning in the inter-war period, visual representations of Aborigines and their material culture by non-Aboriginal designers were promoted as a potential – if problematic – foundation for a modern, national culture. For designers in a peripheral locale such as Australia, Aboriginal culture could serve two functions – as a cipher of localisation and as a counterpoint to modernity.

Many designers and artists of the mid-twentieth century argued that by using Indigenous motifs and styles in design, various commercial art and goods, advertisement, and posters, they tried to bridge social, cultural and political divides between Indigenous and settler societies (ibid.). The idea was to integrate Indigenous visual cultural elements into Australian national identity. While this noble cause attracted a lot of attention from the general public and initiated the promotion of symbolic Indigenous presence in the national consciousness,

Indigenous artists themselves, their complex artistic traditions, and communities who produced art saw little to no professional and cultural recognition when their works were discussed, used, or appropriated. For example, Margaret Preston (1925, n.p.) wrote in her article that ‘return to primitive art’ and celebration of artistic simplicity is a promising ground of developing a new Australian national culture. Preston (1925, n.p.; 1930, n.p.) promoted the use of these designs on textiles, home décor, pottery, furniture and so on while at the same time discouraging other designers to heed any attention to the meanings embedded into Indigenous art: ‘please do not bother about what the carver meant in the way of myths, rites, etc; that is not the decorators’ affair’. This practice was also adopted by such artists as Gert Sellheim, Douglas Annand, Geoffrey Collings, Gordon Andrews, and Alistair Morrison. Meanjin, Martin Boyd pottery – these are just sole examples of a wide artistic movement of the mid-twentieth century. As Huppatz (2018, p. 39) characterises this period, ‘[w]hether understood as theft or misguided homage, it was in the decorative and commercial realm that Aboriginal culture remained visible in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s’.

While in many cases, these representations were not meant to be insulting, the predominance of such imagery and the approach that valued the visual expression at the expense of its cultural and social context had an impact on the mainstream imaging of the First Nations. In the discourse over Indigenous identity and representation, such images had a significant place, even if Indigenous *representation* was not their primary subject. As Langton (1994, p. 100) articulates it:

As a second category of cultural and textual construction of things ‘Aboriginal’, there are the familiar stereotypes and the constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people. These icons of ‘Aboriginality’ are produced by Anglo-Australians, not in dialogue with Aboriginal people, but from other representations such as the ‘stone age savage’, the ‘dying’ “race”’.

As a result, such ‘stone age’ depictions of Indigenous people in the contexts of popular commercial goods, posters, stamps, and souvenirs were not concerned with lived reality of Indigenous people or respect for their culture. Instead, it was the aesthetic potential, generic cultural localisation, and the fascination with cultural difference. Despite this, such images distributed widely had the power to challenge people’s sense of identity: they either

confirmed or popularised exoticised representations of the people who by that time lived and made an impact in urban areas as well as rural areas across Australia. Such visibility of Indigenous depiction did promote some cultural awareness for the public at a time when Indigenous people seemed invisible among the non-Indigenous majority. However, it also aided in isolating Indigenous people in the imagined traditional past. However, soon Indigenous people began stepping into mainstream media creation and started changing the lens of their representation.

(Figure 5: Indigenous Australian imagery on covers of *Meanjin*, 1949-1951.

Image description: 6 magazine covers that feature Indigenous-inspired art depicting stick figures, black human figures adorned with white paint, and X-ray-style animals and humans. (<<https://library.unimelb.edu.au/asc/whats-on/exhibitions/meanjin-80th/covers/inspired-by-australian-indigenous-motifs>>.)

Indigenous people taking control

Indigenous media is a multilayered field that is interlaced with the history of Indigenous political empowerment, representation, and marked with overcoming of the systemic limitations and technological problems. By tracing the advances of Indigenous authors, artists, performers, producers, and directors in the fields of Australian television, cinema, literature, art, animation, and digital content creation, I map their expansion from local to national mainstream media. Tracing these histories reveals that Indigenous media and creative professionals were often unacknowledged, unrecognised, and omitted despite the fact that they were avid and knowledgeable consumers of media. Mackinolty and Duffy (1987, p. 9 in Langton 1993, p. 19) state:

It is a little known fact that Aboriginal people across Australia are extremely film literate: from the fifties even very remote communities, reserves and missions commonly had up to three film nights a week in the open or in halls and the like. It is this familiarity with film, and more recently video, that has contributed to a strong awareness of the power of the medium.

Seeing the reach, appeal, and possibilities that mainstream media offers, Indigenous people also wanted to participate in its creation and see themselves portrayed in a way that appealed to them as opposed to being stereotypical or tokenistic.

The reasons for why it was challenging for Indigenous people to participate in the mainstream media creation and access wider audiences were fundamentally structural. The lack of equipment, funding, training programs, opportunities or the absence of interest in Indigenous-themed production made it challenging for Indigenous people to enter this field. However, this did not mean that Indigenous filmmakers, artists, directors, educators, and health workers produced no media. There are ‘thousands of hours’ of video materials made for internal Indigenous community consumption that could be found across the country (Langton 1993, p. 15).

The most significant moment in shifting the political and social discourse on Indigenous people in Australia was the referendum of 1967. The rise of equality and civil rights movements overseas in the 1950s galvanised the Indigenous population who had long sought to assert and protect their rights. Events such as the Warburton Ranges crisis in 1957, the Yirrkala Bark Petitions in 1963, the 1965 Freedom Ride, and the Wave Hill strike that started in 1966 highlighted the escalating push for Indigenous rights. The Australian Aborigines League, Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), the Aborigines Progressive Association, and the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship all campaigned for the referendum that was represented ‘as a matter of federal control, the repeal of racist laws, and citizenship for Aborigines’ (Attwood & Marcus 2007, p. 73). In the end, it passed with the overwhelming majority of people voting ‘yes’. The significance of this referendum was practical, but perhaps more importantly, emotional. The campaigning, the mood of the supporters and the sentiments behind the demands for freedom reflected a major shift in the narrative and representation of Indigenous people in Australia (Attwood & Marcus 2007, p. 73). With the rise of social activism that preceded and followed it, more Indigenous people felt compelled to voice their opinions, share their stories, and represent themselves the way they wanted.

The 1967 referendum precipitated shifts in policies and funding strategies that opened access for Indigenous people to such areas of national infrastructure as television and radio broadcast, filmmaking industry, publishing, and more. Understanding the regulatory and exclusionary policies, and the significant poverty and control under which Aboriginal people were living is important, and actions like social activism, protests, and the subsequent referendum of 1967 were political catalysts for the push to recognise the presence and existence of Aboriginal people as part of the society and culture of Australia.

In the aftermath of the referendum, the 1970s and 80s brought major changes in Indigenous representation. Indigenous people became increasingly vocal about demanding control over Indigenous representation in media which remained largely outdated and stereotypical (Langton 1993, p. 9). This sentiment has been expressed though ‘every major film and media conference during the last twenty years’ of the twentieth century (ibid). However, in practice, it was difficult to achieve this control, practically and ideologically. As Langton (1993, p. 10) pointed, ‘[t]o demand complete control of all representation, as some Aboriginal people naively do, is to demand censorship, to deny the communication which none of us can prevent’. Yet, Indigenous people found a way to influence their representation without fighting for complete censorship powers – through self-representation in mainstream art and media.

Australian First Nations people started to take the creative lead in filmmaking from around the 1970s (Screen Australia 2010). At the time, Indigenous video- and filmmaking production was associated with community-based media association, regional organisations (for example, Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, or CAAMA) land councils, and service delivery associations in public health, law, and housing (Langton 1993, p. 15). In the field of non-fiction, *Black Fire* (1972) is considered the very first Indigenous-made documentary film. It was made by an anthropology student from Monash University, Bruce McGuinness, and his non-Indigenous friend Martin Bartfeld. Contrary to the twentieth-century mainstream focus of documentary films on remote or rural Indigenous communities, *Black Fire* focused on urban Indigenous people in Melbourne and revealed a snapshot of Aboriginal politics and society. Showcasing notable Indigenous people such as Harry Williams, a famous musician, and his son Bertie, one of the original founders of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, *Black Fire* is a compilation of ideas being explored critically, humorously, and politically. With an Indigenous producer and Indigenous public in mind, this is a very different take on an Indigenous documentary. It focuses on an urban setting, on aspects of Indigenous daily experience, on notable people, areas of life, and it is set in the contemporary context. As the first documentary by an Indigenous filmmaker, it broke the rules of conventions and pointed to a new direction for the genre and representation – the contemporary urban life of Indigenous people.

Taking charge in fiction and entertainment, Indigenous filmmakers and producers started making an impact on Indigenous representation in mainstream media. People such as Tracey Moffatt, Michael Riley and Essie Coffey pushed Indigenous filmmaking into national and

international focus. Eric Renshaw, Wayne Barker, Rhonda Barker, Coral Edwards, Destiny Deacon, Bruce McGuinness, and Brian Syron are some of the most well-known names in the field of Indigenous cinematography of the twentieth century. Their films experimented with topics, explored new points of view that were not shown on television before, and pushed the boundaries of Indigenous art.

The field of TV entertainment initially had a somewhat slow start. The first all-Indigenous TV show aired on ABC was *Basically Black* (1973) directed by Nicolas Parsons. A satiric comedy, its one and only pilot episode showcased the experience of Indigenous people in Australia so humorously and poignantly that it was deemed a major critical success while being discontinued at the same time. Filled with witty commentary on inter-racial interaction, it uniquely provided a satiric look at Australia from an Indigenous perspective at a time when this perspective was mostly missing in mainstream television. While it did touch on sensitive subjects of racism and discrimination, it did not position itself as an attack on the white Australian society. Instead, *Basically Black* attempted to evoke a sense of understanding in the mainstream audiences by showcasing its characters as funny, witty, relatable, and likeable, while situating the comedy sketches in a socio-cultural context that is recognisably Australian. It was reported that ABC found the material ‘too political and provocative’ for broadcasting and the show was shut down after airing its pilot episode (ACMI 2023). Perhaps, *Basically Black* was ahead of its time.

While the 1970s saw a slow start to Indigenous participation in television production, in the eighties the field of Indigenous media production started expanding rapidly in a phenomenon that Marcia Langton titles as ‘a minor social revolution’ (Langton 1993, p. 23). With Indigenous communities across the country gaining greater access to telecommunications, television, and radio in the 1980s, a new market of remote and rural Indigenous communities appeared. This created new demand and new audiences for media content. Subsequently, educational and cultural TV and radio programs began appearing in Indigenous languages for Indigenous audiences. This was a big new step in Indigenous media development. The 1980s saw the rise of many Indigenous media corporations, such as Ernabella Video Television (EVTV), Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Media (PY Media), and Walpiri Media. These media corporations produced extensive materials for internal community consumption. Mostly created in Indigenous languages, these titles were in many ways experimental and designed to fill in missing representation in the mainstream media (Langton 1993, p. 17). As many of these corporations had to build unlicensed television stations, the Commonwealth

Government finally launched a new policy, Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS), that allowed remote communities to obtain satellite receiving equipment that could pick up the ABC television channel, relevant Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS), and gear required for transmission of their own TV and radio channels (ibid). Following requests from some communities, the Department of Education, Employment and Training offered relevant training for Indigenous communities who received these bundles.

CAAMA in particular has left a significant imprint on the diversity of Indigenous self-representation in the media. It established a radio station, commercial video and television centre that produced documentaries and TV series, and created music video clips and educational videos. As a result of Indigenous communities and organisations lobbying throughout the 1980s to establish dedicated Indigenous television channels, CAAMA was licensed to expand its broadcasting reach which led to the establishment of *Imparja Television* in 1988. It covered areas of Queensland, Northern Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and Tasmania. *Imparja Television* broadcasted local news, original programs produced by local community members, local sports, and so on. In 2001, Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) was formed broadcasting television programs produced by and for Indigenous people. It functioned until 2007 when National Indigenous Television channel (NITV) was established replacing ICVT. Being a TV channel produced largely by and for Indigenous audiences, NITV presents content from a wide range of topics featuring films, series, documentaries, news and sports coverage and targeting diverse age demographics. Since 2012, it became a free-to-air channel. With the wide variety of content it presents, NITV eventually became a channel that attracts Indigenous and also non-Indigenous audiences, securing the place for Indigenous television content in the mainstream television.

At the same time, in the late 1980s, the Indigenous Programs Unit (IPU) was formed within the ABC and SBS with the aim of supervising the creation of content on Indigenous issues. ABC and SBS both offered Indigenous training programs and employment policies that helped Indigenous specialists participate in media production. Beginning from solitary titles here and there, Indigenous media production grew into a budding industry with great cultural, social, and political potential. SBS TV was notably the first network to compile and publish guidelines on Indigenous representation in TV and film. In the 1980s, Eric Willmot, the Chairman of the Task Force on Aboriginal and Islander Broadcasting and Communications, was one of the first and influential proponents of making Indigenous media content a part of

the mainstream Australian media (Langton 1993, p. 21). However, despite these efforts, Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people representation was still practically absent from the content of the major commercial television networks in Australia by 1992 (Langton 1993, p. 21). Scarce resources, simplistic solutions to systemic problems, and poorly devised support policies are the reasons Langton lists as the reasons why Indigenous films, programs, and TV series were slow to develop and reach wider audiences beyond the dedicated channels (Langton 1993, p. 22). Screen Australia (2010) reports that by 2010 there were only sixteen TV series made by Indigenous filmmakers (people who were either producers, directors, writers, or director of photography) intended for the mainstream Australian audiences.

The visual and performative arts were always areas of strong Indigenous representation, even if recognition of their existence and value was initially delayed. Working across genres, styles, and traditions, artists such as Michael Nelson Jakamarra, Pansy Napangarti, Trevor Nickolls, Fiona Foley, Rovel Thomas, Gordon Bennett, Jimmy Pike, Sally Morgan, Ron Hurley, and Emily Nkgwarreye achieved artistic recognition and helped to push Indigenous representation through the power of aesthetic and public statements. Such musicians as Yothu Yindi, Roger Knox, Archie Roach, the Mills Sisters, Kev Carmody, and the Coloured Stone are considered as the most famous award-winning performers of the late-twentieth century, with some of them touring internationally.

In literature, the domain of written mass media, Indigenous people's voices have been present in published Australian literature since the early-twentieth century. Even though today there are hundreds of titles written across a multitude of genres that are authored by Indigenous authors, the development of Indigenous literature was gradual. Belinda Wheeler (2013, p. 1) explains that up until the 1970s literary scholars and the mainstream Australian public did not show interest in Indigenous voices in literature. David Unaipon's collection *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* published between 1924 and 1925 is considered the first known Indigenous publication in Australian history. Unaipon, a writer, an educator, a lecturer, and an inventor with expertise ranging from ancient languages to ballistics, was a prominent figure in the mainstream Australian society. In 1953, he received a Coronation Medal, and in 1985 he was posthumously awarded the FAW Patricia Weickhardt Award to an Aboriginal Writer.

Just like Indigenous culture, Indigenous literature was marginalised in mainstream Australian culture (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). However, even if Indigenous literature titles and works did not circulate in the mainstream literary market, Indigenous writing existed and circulated within

Indigenous communities for internal use. Created for the purposes of education, cultural record and popularisation, public health, and so on, written Indigenous works were actively used and distributed outside of the mainstream book shops. Major changes were stimulated by the referendum and the 1970s saw the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board. This representative body, led by Indigenous artists, educators, and traditional knowledge holders, was established with the purpose of supporting Indigenous performing arts, visual arts, filmmaking, and literature. Another push that helped Indigenous writers to find their place in the mainstream literary market was the 1988 Australian bicentennial celebrations (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). As the founding of the British colony of New South Wales celebrations started, Indigenous people from all over the country launched one of the biggest protest events in Australian history in Sydney. These protests and the publicity it generated with new Indigenous publications helped attract more attention to Indigenous literature and other types of Indigenous mass media. What followed was a rapid growth in literature written by Indigenous authors in various genres. This event marked another major shift in public attitudes towards Indigenous culture including Indigenous literature.

Major signs of the rising involvement of Indigenous writers in the mainstream literature and public interest in their works were reflected by the fact that publishers began either specialising in or inviting Indigenous publications. Mark Davis (2017) lists some of the most prominent publishers such as IAD Press established in 1972, Aboriginal Studies Press established in 1980s, and Magabala books established in 1987. Many independent general trade publishers began working with Indigenous authors, too. Specifically, Unwin & Allen made a significant impact in helping to publish Indigenous titles and books dedicated to Indigenous issues. Among smaller publishers, Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, established in 1975, and Hyland House, established in 1970s, contributed to the publication of books on Indigenous affairs and books authored by Indigenous people. Indigenous authors finally won recognition and created demand for their production.

However, initially public interest seemed to extend only to certain genres. While Indigenous writings in autobiography, politics, and culture attracted significant public and academic attention, the development of Indigenous fiction occurred more slowly. Up until the 1970s, literary fictional representation of Australia's First Nations was almost completely done by white writers (Goldsworthy 2000, p. 122). Autobiography, political perspectives, social issues discussions and such were valued for their 'truthfulness' and realism (Ferrier 2008, p. 38). But despite going under the radar for many Australian readers and scholars, Indigenous fiction

found its way to mainstream appreciation, creating a new dimension for Indigenous creativity and representation.

The first book of poetry published by an Indigenous author, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), was titled *We are going* and released in 1964. Some twenty years later, the first anthology of Indigenous poetry, *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, edited by an Indigenous writer Kevin Gilbert, was published in 1988. This was followed by the publication of the first anthology of Indigenous writing, *Paperbark*, edited by Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Adam Shoemaker, and Mudrooroo Narogin in 1990. From the 1990s on, Indigenous literature won recognition from literary critics. Kim Scott (first publication 1993) was the first Indigenous writer to receive the Miles Franklin Literary Award (2000) for his novel *Benang* (1999). Finally, the publications of *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* (2008) edited by Anita Heiss and Peter Miner, and *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* (2013) by Belinda Wheeler marked the recognised importance of literature of the Australia's First Nations. Covering different audiences, age groups, and genres, Indigenous literature has become an integral part of Australia's literature. In the last two decades, it has become easily accessible and appreciated not only in the domestic market but also overseas, being sold in Germany, Italy, Denmark, Canada, and the United States.

Venturing further into media production and casting a look at more recent times, Indigenous artists, storytellers, and animators found a new way of cultural and creative expression in animation. Indigenous creators and media organisations used animation to illustrate and re-tell their Dreaming stories. Series such as *The Dreaming* (1995-2001), produced by Aboriginal Nations Pty Ltd and broadcasted by ABC, involved Indigenous storytellers who shared stories that circulated in their communities and families. These animations were often narrated in Indigenous languages and used, produced and collected by organisations interested in linguistics and language education such as the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre. Monash University holds an impressive collection of animations made about the Dreaming stories of various Indigenous peoples as the focus of their project, Wunungu Awara: Animating Indigenous Knowledges. This project, co-led by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and animators, collaborates with Indigenous organisations, communities, and Elders in efforts to represent the original creation stories, songs, world explanation stories, and life events of the Dreaming heroes. By now, the project has almost thirty titles such as *The Song of the Tiger Shark at Manankurra (Manankurra Kujika)* (2008), *The Dreamings from the Saltwater Country (Narnu-Yuwa ki Anthaa)* (2010), *Winjara Wiganhanyin (Why We*

All Die (2015), *Nganu and Tjilbruke: a Tale of Two Heroes* (2018), and *The Sea is not Empty* (2021).

The main goal of this project is to preserve languages and oral cultural heritage. The production of these animations appears to put emphasis on the realism of representation – the landscapes featured in the films are stunningly realistic and, according to the project description, are developed based on real sites where the stories are said to take place. The designs of characters are also profoundly detailed and appear to be inspired by ethnographic content. Notably, today such works, especially earlier titles, often have restricted access for unspecified reasons. Generally, the access is granted either after purchasing viewing rights or with institutional permission. The later titles are commonly found in open access and often come with English subtitles included.

There are also animations which were made in Indigenous languages but do not represent the traditional Dreaming stories. Instead, these animations were made for children's entertainment and general learning. For example, *Wadu Matyidi* (Marjo Straud 2010), a story about three Indigenous children who live in pre-European contact Australia, is made in Adnyamathanha language. Another example is animation shorts by Jason Japaljarri Woods made between 2012 and 2019. Some of his shorts, such as *Bush Mechanics* (2013) and *Pinta Pinta Karlu* (2019), are in Walpiri language. These works represent stories and events from the lives of Indigenous people. These stories tend to rely on relatable aspects of human experience, emphasising the common human values and experiences across times and cultures. Overall, the field of Indigenous animation seems to have become increasingly diverse. Today, animation is used for education, cultural preservation, biographic storytelling, and entertainment.

Advocating for their rights to access media and participate in its creation, Indigenous people have been persistently expanding on their presence in media frontiers. Starting slowly, they have been building up a growing media industry that keeps innovating and expanding into new directions with an ever-accelerating speed. Hence, Indigenous people have been participating in mass media creation for over a century. Not always recognised and credited for their historic contribution, Indigenous artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, and animators took initiative and wove their voices into the mainstream media. Indigenous consumption of, collaboration in, and production of mass media products provides a historical trajectory and represents a socio-historical context for my study of the Indigenous media engagement.

It is important to note that the topic of Indigenous mainstream media production has attracted academic attention only recently and a much fuller picture of the history of Indigenous mainstream literary fiction, digital media entertainment, and creative digital arts will eventually emerge in the future. In this chapter, I outlined the development of Indigenous media content production from specialised and local to reaching major mainstream outlets. The next chapter will cover its expansion into the domains of global pop culture and entertainment.

Chapter 2. Indigenous characters in media entertainment production

Whether as consumers, collaborators, or producers, Indigenous people have been involved in the information exchange that media facilitates. Just like in arts, radio, and literature, Indigenous people impacted the field of pop culture and entertainment, too. A field that is arguably located closer to the casual and regular mass consumption, pop-cultural representation of Indigenous people is probably among the most impactful sources of the development of public discourses. In this chapter, I will outline the trends and milestones of American comic representation of Indigenous Australian characters, analyse their domestic Australian representation, and discuss the common pitfalls of representation.

Pop-cultural entertainment production that includes comic series, graphic novels, popular TV series, films, and other forms of media intended for mass consumption is created through and by commercial media that have the economic and technological capacity to reach large, diverse, and geographically dispersed audiences (O'Brien & Sczeman 2004, p. 7). It's popularity is measured by the pattern of consumption (ibid). While numerous franchises and fictional characters in the international, primarily US, mainstream media represent Indigenous people and cultures, the vast majority of them are created by non-Indigenous people. Most of these Indigenous characters and stories did not involve Indigenous consultants or were made by people unfamiliar with Indigenous cultures or specifically Australia as a whole. As Australia did not have the same history of comic book development as it is the case in other regions, for example, in North America and Europe, the Australian comic book market was dependent on US imports and some scarce local production efforts (Ford & Cass 2020, p. 53). This lack of local production and saturation of the comic book market with US representations of Indigenous characters resulted in people consuming these images of Indigenous people and cultures for decades. The representational 'diet' of the mainstream media entertainment impacted how Australian Indigenous people were perceived within Australia and overseas, and also impacted the way Indigenous Australians perceived themselves.

Indigenous characters in the US media

The most notable pop-cultural influencers in the domain of superhero comic books, films and TV series are DC and Marvel. These media entertainment companies have a surprisingly impressive lineup of Indigenous Australian superheroes, who started to appear from the early

1980s. Among the first such characters were Talisman (Marvel 1982), Gateway (Marvel 1988), the Wombat (Capital Comics 1986), Betty Clawman (DC Comics 1988), and Altjira and the Aboriginal Gods (Marvel 1989). The representation of Indigenous characters in the US pop culture of the second half of the twentieth century is impressive – comic writers and artists were searching for new unique cultures to showcase and to enrich their fictional worlds with diversity.

(Figure 6: Talisman in Mavel 1982. Image description: a dark-skinned man in a yellow loincloth and a yellow 'X'-shaped pain on his face spins a weapon.

<[https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Talisman_\(Australian\)__\(Earth-616\)>](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Talisman_(Australian)__(Earth-616)>))

However, despite featuring in these popular comic franchises, most of these characters have rudimentary and repetitive personalities, undeveloped beyond the fact that they are Indigenous. For example, Talisman, Gateway, and the Wombat, are either side- or secondary characters; they rarely or never speak. Their whole personality centres around being stereotypically (pan-) Indigenous in looks and outfits, and possessing powers which are somehow related to ancestors, the landscape, or the undefined Dreaming, to the extent that in most cases they have no real names, links to any specific communities, or even backstories. For example, one of the main characters, Rogue, described Gateway as a superhero who, '[n]ever says a word, just sits there an' watches the world go by' (X-Men, issue 229). Such characters usually function in stories as episodic situational allies or sidekicks with no distinct character development.

(Figure 7: Manifold in Marvel 2020. Image description: an Indigenous man sits and holds a staff. He is dressed in yellow X-Men uniform.

<[https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Eden_Fesi_\(Earth-616\)>](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Eden_Fesi_(Earth-616)>))

(Figure 8: Thylacine in DC 2020. Image description: in a battle scene, an Indigenous woman with curly hair fights with a staff. She is dressed in futuristic-looking red and orange outfit. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-13/aboriginal-superhero-thylacine-new-dc-comic-book-hero/12136148>>)

From the 1990s onwards, writers started to create more elaborate Indigenous superheroes, such as Bishop (Marvel 1991), Shard (Marvel 1994), Dreamguard (Marvel 1995), Dark Ranger (DC Comics 2008), Manifold (Marvel 2009), and Kaboomerang (DC Comics 2010).

The Indigenous superheroes of this period have names and speak standard English articulately as opposed to the mute or broken-English-speaking characters of the earlier period. They have personalities, backstories, and some character development. All of these characters have powers somehow rooted in the Dreaming or related to proficiency with their traditional weapons (usually a boomerang or a spear). Notably, every one of them has unspecified, nebulous Indigenous connections - sometimes a general area would be the only hint of their possible cultural links. Interestingly, Bishop and his sister Shard were revealed as Indigenous retroactively, in the early 2000s, well after they became well-known and well-loved characters. In fact, they appeared to be great-grandchildren of Gateway and they had no idea about this connection. Overall, while these characters were no longer intended to be nameless plot devices, they did not often appear as main or central characters in their stories.

A new era of Indigenous representation in the mainstream started in the 2010s. Indigenous superheroes now occupy positions of authority, function as main characters of their stories, and are depicted as related to specific ethnic origins. For example, Thunderer (DC Comics 2014), a Mowanjumbi man, is a leader who commands a team of superheroes. His superpower is that he is a Weather God. Thylacine (DC Comics 2020) is a Ngarluma woman. She has superhuman senses such as night vision, stealth, and combat skills. These characters demonstrate a move towards appreciation of characters' stories and the creative potential of Indigenous cultures, as opposed to being exoticised through their cultural attire, appearance, or features of religious beliefs. These characters seem to reflect the new demand for more international Indigenous characters with complex personalities who function as main characters in their own stories.

One of the most significant new factors in the representation of these characters is that the non-Indigenous creators now consider consulting Indigenous cultural knowledge holders during the creation of their characters. For example, the creators of Thylacine conducted 'careful consultations' with Shari Sebbens and Ryan Griffen, prominent Indigenous media creators (Tan 2020). It is also interesting that the name of this character refers to a native Australian animal that became extinct in Tasmania about a century ago, but has had occasional reported sightings ever since. This connection between an Indigenous superhero and the Tasmanian tiger suggests a complex symbolism implied by the comic book creators. While not a part of regular practice in media creation, such consultations with Indigenous experts or relevant knowledge-holders could mean that media creators have started to see the need to undertake cultural research before putting their Indigenous characters into the

international spotlight. It could also be a sign that this emerges as a part of authentication process related to Indigenous representation in media.

(Figure 9: Molo the Mighty and Willy Willy in Miller 1943. Image description: a gigantic man dressed in alien clothes punches men who surround him. A very small Indigenous boy stands on his shoulder. He is dressed in a red headband and a red loincloth.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Coming_of_Molo_the_Mighty_cover_Syd_Miller.jpg>)

Indigenous characters in Australian media

In Australia, there has been limited historical representation of Indigenous people in comic books and on the screen. As early as the 1940s, Indigenous superheroes appeared on the pages of comic books in Australia, including characters like Willy Willy from *Molo the Mighty* (Syd Miller, 1943). Willy Willy is an Indigenous boy who befriended Molo (an alien), taught him to speak English and accompanied him on adventures sitting on Molo's shoulder. Supposedly a child who is old enough to speak and teach English, Willy Willy is depicted as very small, resembling a toddler in a red diaper. Complete with a red headband and bright red lips, Willy Willy is a reflection of a certain stereotype that dominated Anglo-Australian society in the first half of the twentieth century. Willy Willy was a sidekick to a superhero – it took another thirty years for an Indigenous character to become a superhero in their own right.

(Figure 10: Superboong in *Basically Black*, 1973. Image description: a man dressed in a superman-style spandex costume with a cape stands in a doorway looking heroic.

<<https://kooariweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/blacktheatre/abctvdx.html>>)

Superboong, a caped Indigenous superhero who is superhumanly strong and can fly, appeared in Foley and Maza's satiric ABC series *Basically Black* (1973). He appears in a brief sketch comedy scene in the first and only episode that was ever aired. He is introduced to the viewers flying across the sky and landing in a city street accompanied by an off-screen narrator with this humorous text:

Is it a bat? Is it a crow? Is it a flying doctor? No, it's Superboong! A strange visitor from a northern tribe who came to the city possessing powers far beyond those of mortal Koories. Faster than a killer boomerang and able to

leap over tall gumtrees in a single bound. Superboong uses his secret identity as mild-mannered Aboriginal ex-boxing champion, Lionel Mouse, to fight a never-ending battle against racism wherever it may be found. [...]

(*Basically Black* 1973)

This is a parody on DC Comics' Superman and the famous Broadway musical '*It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman*' by Charles Strouse (1966). Embedding the narrative in the Australian context and emphasising the Indigenous identity of the superhero, the words 'bird' and 'plane' are substituted by 'bat' and 'crow', hinting to the dark skin tone of the character. Superboong is introduced as 'a strange visitor from a northern tribe' mimicking the well-known phrase 'strange visitor from another planet' description of Superman in multiple TV series episodes and comic issues. Northern tribes are jokingly equated to an alien planet because of the degree of cultural and social difference between these tribes and urban Australia. The hero's secret identity as a boxer and a social activist at the same time hints at the assumption that was popular at that time that Indigenous men typically go either into sports or political activism.

In the episode, Superboong flies across the city and lands on a street. He then walks along the street dressed in a suit and holding a suitcase with 'Superboong gear' and a Superman-esque 'S' inscribed on it. He approaches two Indigenous men sitting on a bench and asks them 'Hi, guys, seen any racism around?' They shake their heads and respond 'Not today, bud'. A sudden commotion in the pub nearby gets Superboong's attention and he runs off the screen intending to help. He returns back shortly looking dejected. 'What's up, bud?' asks one of the men on the bench. Superboong responds 'They don't allow blacks in that pub'.

Superboong was likely never intended to serve as an actual superhero narrative that inspires and empowers the readers but rather, as a parody. Named 'Superboong', this character adopts a denigrating racial slur, 'boong', and uses it with an empowering qualifier 'super'. This could be read as a comedic element which is also an expression of ironic pride in something he is being discriminated for. Despite *Basically Black* being a satiric comedy, Superboong is still perceived by Indigenous art historians, writers, pop artists, and comic creators as a celebration of a superhero who is Indigenous. Considered as the first superhero of Indigenous creation, he is introduced to the viewers with a narration positioning him in the context of the traditional Indigenous environment and culture. In his 'never-ending battle against racism', he faces obstacles few other superhero characters are depicted facing – the humour of the sketch

implies that Superman would be allowed in the pub where Superboong was refused entry. Yet, he remains ‘a mild-mannered’ fighter for justice who must work around societal limitations. This could be read as a comment on the standing of Indigenous people within Australian society in the mid-twentieth century. Depicted as a literal superhuman with extraordinary abilities and an altruistic devotion to protecting the weak and vulnerable, Superboong is still not deemed good enough to enter a ‘whites only’ pub. While being a comedic character, Superboong could be regarded as an expression of a sentiment of its time that no matter how smart, strong, kind, or helpful an Aboriginal person is, they will not be treated as an equal by the Anglo-Australian society.

(Figure 11: Condoman, poster, 1987. Image description: On a tropical background, a man stands dressed in red latex costume. He says: ‘Don’t be shame, be game’. Below there is an inscription that says ‘use frenchies!’). <<https://condoman.com.au/history>>)

Indigenous superheroes later emerged in the context of Australian public health campaigns. *Condoman* (1987), *Cuz Congress* (1980s), and *Murrilicious* (2009) became the memorable promotion staples of healthy behaviours, even though their primary function was education rather than entertainment. The use of superhero-type characters to communicate important health-related public messages points to the recognition of the power of the visually appealing and all-age accessible format of a comic book. Comics, being associated with entertainment, engaging narrative, and enticing visuals, are an easy-to-understand communication format that may interest people more than a hospital-style printed poster.

(Figure 12: Neomad art in Campbell 2014. Image description: a group of children dressed in futuristic tech gear are driving a vehicle.

<<https://www.bighart.org/product/neomad-the-complete-collection/>>)

More Indigenous characters (though not necessarily superheroes) created by Indigenous creative teams and independent authors started to appear from the 2010s. These included *Cleverman* (2016), *Zero Point* (2016-), and Maloo from *Australi* (2017), Love Punks and Satellite Sisters from *Neomad* (2013-2014), *Little J and Big Cuz* (ABC 2017-), Ubbly from *Ubbly’s Underdogs* (2011-2019), and Adam Hart from *Dark Heart* (2022-). These characters are representatives of a new generation of Indigenous mainstream media created by Indigenous authors or in close collaboration with Indigenous media creators and advisors. Depicted as complex and nuanced, they are the main characters of their stories. These

characters impact the world around them and have distinct personalities and backgrounds. They are supported by their families and friends, and it is their perspective on the world and events around them that matters. Created by or with the heavy involvement of Indigenous authors and writers, these stories no longer feel stereotypically repetitive. On the contrary, often experimental, avant-garde, or deeply imaginative, Indigenous books, TV series, comics, and animated shorts are set in different time periods (*Australi* in the distant past, *Neomad* in the distant future), regions (*Little J & Big Cuz* in a rural town, *Dark Heart* in Sydney), represent different historic events or are completely fictional (*Ubbys Underdogs* set in post WWII Broome, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* in magical fantasy), and feature a lot or very little cultural knowledge (*Zero Point* does not really explore the Indigenous background of the main character, *Dark Heart* is about reconnecting and unlocking cultural powers). The new generation of Indigenous representation, created by Indigenous authors or creative teams, taps into the immense creative potential of Indigenous stories and characters that go far beyond skin colour and body paint.

In my summary of historical representation of Indigenous characters in overseas mainstream media and domestically, in comic series, TV series, and in popular franchises in general, one can identify certain trends. First, it is possible to classify different types of representation according to different time periods, with the earlier providing the most biased and sometimes ‘negative’ representations of Indigenous people, and the latest being significantly more ‘positive’ and empowering. Geographically, overseas-written Indigenous characters are likely to be the least diverse – similar superpowers, superficial exploration of cultural identity, and a focus on what makes them different from other people rather than what makes them as human as everyone else. In Australia, Indigenous-created Indigenous characters appear as the main characters of their stories, reflect the wider diversity of First Nations characters, and focus on narratives that humanise them and make them relatable to Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers/viewers.

Although trends may present teleologically, as a simple progression from ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ representation, it is important to interrogate the intention, political and historic context, socio-cultural effect, and economic benefits of Indigenous representation in media. Two of the core problems of media portrayal of Indigenous people, as experienced by any minority represented by the dominant society, are *exclusion and tokenism*, and *cultural appropriation*.

Chapter 3. Problems of Indigenous representation: exclusion, tokenism, and cultural appropriation

Exclusion

Exclusion of Indigenous people from the mainstream media was common practice up until the sixties. It manifested in several ways. Firstly, it was the actual absence of Indigenous characters in media. While Indigenous filmmakers, writers, and artists created large amounts of material for the internal use within their communities, very few of these titles were known to the Australian mainstream audiences. Non-Indigenous media creators also did not focus on introducing many Indigenous characters into the mainstream media titles. As a result, Indigenous characters, stories, culture, and history was barely visible in the most parts of Australia for the mainstream audience contributing to the environment of Indigenous exclusion. Secondly, exclusion of Indigenous people also manifested as their stereotypical depiction in media that did not communicate the voices, hopes, interests, and opinions of Indigenous people and communities. I choose to classify such superficial representation as exclusion because it reflected the ideas and images non-Indigenous people had *about* Indigenous people. Thus, stereotypical depiction of First Nations and their cultures effectively excluded Indigenous perspectives from their media portrayal. One of the well-known tropes of such representation is ‘noble savage’.

The idea of romanticised ‘noble savages’, the uncivilised people who personified natural goodness uncorrupted by civilisation, was famously promoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His treatise *Discourse on the origin and foundation of inequality among mankind* (1761) is credited as a work that influenced the formation of this concept. First being articulated in historic, philosophic, and anthropological discussions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ‘noble savage’ trope made it to modernity and manifested itself in the political, artistic, social, and cultural discourses. Not always intended as a tool for oppression, the ‘noble savage’ trope was used by many authors, writers, and filmmakers with different intentions, from highlighting the unfairness of colonial policies to fascinating the mainstream audience with the images of exoticised cultural difference. However, the modern advances in civil rights and advocacy discredited the use of this trope, which is now regarded as insulting for Indigenous people.

In her article 'Nobles and savages on the television', Frances Peters-Little, a Kamilaroi filmmaker and researcher, offers an analysis of the history, uses, and varieties within the trope of 'noble savage' in reference to Indigenous media representation in Australia. Peters-Little argues that this trope is an 'ever present reflection in Australian film and television' that frames Indigenous representation (2003, p. 17). She offers a detailed classification of different faces of this trope (ibid, p. 19):

- 'patrons of nature's gifts'
- 'infantile creatures of innocence';
- 'black naked brutes';
- 'torn between two cultures', and
- 'doomed for extinction'.

The first two categories of Peters-Little refer to the Indigenous portrayal as innocent and nature-bound people. Peters-Little points that such trope is common for early documentaries such as *Walkabout* (1958), the first docu-series featuring Indigenous people and made by Charles and Elsa Chauvel. In *Walkabout* (1958), the author argues, Indigenous people were represented as having 'a natural affinity to land', and appearing to 'live like native flora and fauna, with very little need for anything that may exist in the modern world' (ibid, p. 22). 'Voiceless Aborigines' were sometimes used by many nature and wildlife documentaries as a backdrop, 'like other flora and fauna' (ibid, p. 22). Further, Indigenous people sometimes appeared in the media as infantile and child-like. From a toddler-looking Willy Willy in the twentieth century to the contemporary clips and pictures of smiling Indigenous children with face paint promoted by government and commercial agencies to advertise or encourage people to donate or support Indigenous causes, this trope seems to persist in some areas of Indigenous representation.

Peters-Little discusses the image of Indigenous people as 'black naked brutes' as another face of 'noble savage'. She argues that the lack of clothes and the emphasis on physicality have been the central theme of twentieth century documental films and photography related to Indigenous people (ibid, p. 26). As was common for the early historical records of many Indigenous societies, Australian First Nations people typically appeared on the pictures taken by ethnographers and explorers in minimal or absent clothing. It is also a fact that sometimes photographers and filmmakers deliberately asked their Indigenous participants to remove clothes to provide a more distinct civilised-uncivilised contrast (for instance, a photographer, Kolodny, directed Indigenous women to remove their tops and took their pictures, as the

photographer later explained, to accentuate racial differences (Peterson 1985, p. 176)). Peters-Little believes that such representation was a part of ‘noble savage’ trope that served to segregate Indigenous people from the European settlers.

‘Torn between two cultures’ is another trope of representation that focuses on the perceived inauthenticity of mixed-raced Indigenous people. There are many examples of such narratives in the twentieth century: Bruce Beresford’s *Fringe dwellers* (1986), Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda* (1955), Fred Schepesi’s *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), James Rickertson’s *Blackfellas*, and Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout* (1971). These stories explore the seeming incompatibility of Indigenous and Anglo-Australian identities and cultures, portraying people descended from both cultures as struggling to come to terms with their existence.

The last trope discussed by Peters-Little is ‘doomed for extinction’, a narrative that the ‘real’ Indigenous people are ‘dying out’ and disappearing (2003, p. 32). This idea used to be central for the early colonial policies regarding Indigenous affairs until the 1960s. It informed various initiatives designed to either protect, manage, or control Indigenous population in Australia throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods. Peters-Little (2003, p. 33) argues that this narrative is still present today and that it manifests by the overwhelming focus of the academia and media on remote and traditionally living Indigenous people. She reports that at the time she was conducting this research, she found an asymmetric representation of traditional Indigenous communities in various national archives and collection as opposed to much less represented urban-based, non-fundamentalist Indigenous individuals (ibid, p. 33).

Overall, Peters-Little’s research provides a useful look on the variety and complexity of the ‘noble savage’ trope that she views as underlying a variety of different images of or narratives about Indigenous people in the Australian society. The types of representation she discusses do exist in the history of media and many of them indeed somewhat linger in the imagination of the wider Australian public. However, Peters-Little tends to place the agency for Indigenous representation solely in the non-Indigenous authors, media creators, photographers, and academics. As I have discussed in the earlier chapters, many Indigenous people and communities did advocate for and negotiate their representation with non-Indigenous media creators. It is also important to remember that the representations discussed above were not always intended as instruments of social control or cultural erasure, as Peters-Little tends to suggest. Often non-Indigenous media creators lacked knowledge of or experience in Indigenous daily life, culture, religious beliefs, and customs. As a result, early

representation of Indigenous stories and characters in media was limited, lacked diversity, and was often stereotypical. Yet, regardless of the intentions of media creators, such images of Indigenous people in media affected public's perceptions and had the power to challenge the sense of identity of Indigenous people. As a result, social exclusion does not necessarily mean a lack of representation. What it could mean is that representation of the excluded people reflects and perpetuates a narrative that could be interpreted as promoting separation and serving the dominant society, while bringing little or no benefits to the represented minorities.

Tokenism

Tokenism is an artificial and non-genuine gesture of inclusion. Tokenism could manifest across many areas of life, not only media. Kanter (1977), in her research about discrimination of women in workplaces, lists the following features of tokenised individuals: (a) heightened visibility; (b) overemphasised differences between them and the dominant society; and (c) a societal expectation to fit social roles that correspond to their associated stereotypes. It is common for individuals tokenised for their gender, race, social class, and so on, to be openly celebrated and promoted by companies that are mostly governed and owned by representatives of the dominant society. These characteristics of tokenism can be identified in many mainstream media representations of Indigenous (and other minority) characters. For example, Marvel's Talisman and Gateway both fit these definitions by being depicted visually as visibly different from the main set of characters – having ethnic-looking body paint, wearing loincloths, and either not speaking or occasionally dropping cultural remarks such as 'By the eternal Numbakulla!' (Contest of Champions 1982, no. 2, p. 2). Among hundreds of white characters, particularly for Marvel at that time, Talisman and Gateway constituted a small handful of Indigenous (not necessarily Australian Indigenous) characters, functioning mostly as nominal representatives of the First Nations. While their presence did inform the readers of the existence of Indigenous people in Australia, their cultural uniqueness, and gave some impression of their culture, such representation was not created for Indigenous people, but rather for the mainstream audience.

Arguably, one of the most used forms of tokenistic representation is '*cultural ambassadors*' trope. Cambridge Dictionary (2024) defines 'ambassador' as 'an important official who works in a foreign country representing his or her own country there, and who is officially accepted in this position by that country'. In line with this definition, characters who function as representatives of their minority culture in the gaze of the dominant culture are 'cultural

ambassadors'. In art and media, such characters are portrayed in several ways. First, they can be represented in an extremely positive light: they typically come from modest backgrounds but manage to achieve incredible success through their dedication and intelligence while also displaying the qualities of wisdom, morality, kindness, humbleness and otherwise appearing as 'better' than ordinary (mainstream) people. One such example is the graphic novel *Reg Saunders, an Indigenous War Hero* (Dolan & Threlfall 2015). This graphic novel is based on a real story of the first Indigenous army officer, Reg Saunders. This is a story of his life and military service and it is meant to be a celebratory account about Reg Saunders' accomplishments. While this is meant to be a biographic account, it is framed as a glorification of an extraordinary man, a pioneer and a role model, with 'soldering in his blood' who became a 'unifying symbol for all Australians in an era when too many of us held prejudiced views about Indigenous Australians' (Dolan & Threlfall 2015). It is important to note that this graphic novel represents a narrative of national pride and also a wartime narrative, both of which customarily employ language of glorification and patriotic celebration. It is also published in 2015, at the time when there appeared a heightened interest to seek out Indigenous role models for the mainstream Australian audience. However, I propose that this title could also be studied as an example of veiled tokenism.

Framed in an exceedingly-positive light, represented as an individual who started from humble beginnings but was able to achieve exceptional results, singled out as an icon of patriotism and morality, this graphic novel represents Reg Saunders as a 'cultural ambassador'. Indigenous people have been serving in the Australian armed forces for more than a century. During World War I, around three or four hundred Indigenous people actively participated in military actions, but their involvement was not fully acknowledged by the defence forces or the government at that time (Hall 1997, p. 1). They were often omitted from the heroic narratives. Further, due to the small numbers of Indigenous people who participated in the military actions, they also could not use this experience to form a distinct identity based on their military actions due to being dispersed in the armed forces (ibid, p. 2-3). In the interwar period, many Indigenous service people were disappointed by the lack of change in Indigenous policies (ibid, p. 3). In fact, this period was marked with the increased repression of Indigenous people in Australia: segregation in schools, removal of children, moving of Indigenous people between reserves, and the loss of Indigenous land to the 'soldier settlement' scheme (ibid, p. 3). Even with greater numbers of Indigenous people who joined Australian forces during the World War II, their service received little public

acknowledgement. Hall writes: '[t]o this day, the galleries of the Australian War Memorial – the national shrine to the 'digger myth'-reveal no hint of Aboriginal military service' (ibid, p. 190). It is important to point that today this seems to be changing and the increasing number of military and government officials begin to include uncomfortable military history and its place in colonial regime. However, due to the fact that historically, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, Indigenous military service received little recognition and yielded little practical benefits for the Indigenous soldiers, a 2015 graphic novel celebrating Reg Saunders could be studied as an interesting case of unintentional tokenism. Seeing a graphic novel that singles out one Indigenous soldier as an exceptional example of Indigenous military service people fits the criteria of minority tokenism.

(Figure 13: Umbaluru and Batman in DC Comics 1988. Image description: a face-off between Batman and an Indigenous man covered in white paint who wears a loincloth and a red headband. He holds a boomerang, ready to strike.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/australia/comments/18x5xvs/aboriginal_man_in_a_batman_comic_in_1988/>)

One of the 'cultural ambassador' features is that such characters often consciously or unconsciously communicate the image of the whole culture, identity, or social layer. Not necessarily written as 'perfect', 'cultural ambassadors' could be depicted as displaying some stereotypical features of their minority group in their personality and behaviour. One example is Umbaluru, a one-off character who appears in a Batman comic (Detective Comics, no. 591, 1988). Technically neither a villain nor a hero, Umbaluru is an Indigenous man from a 'tribe near Uluru' – his name is possibly a derivative of Uluru – who came to seek justice and return a stolen artifact back to his people. Dressed in a loin cloth, a red headband, and covered with body paint from head to toes, he has no superpowers but is proficient with his boomerang. Despite having no other equipment rather than his wooden boomerang, Umbaluru manages to best Batman, a superhero who is famous for having cat-like instincts and a technological solution for every problem. Umbaluru could be regarded as an illustration of the 'cultural ambassador' trope. He appears only once in this single story; he is depicted in entirely cultural attire, as if about to perform a ceremony; he outperforms Batman and disappears, victorious, having survived a fall from a great height, never to be seen again. It is notable that this depiction is not 'negative' – Umbaluru is represented as a highly capable man with the strong sense of justice. It is highly likely that the writers and artists of this story had the best

intentions at heart – to celebrate Australian Indigenous culture and people, to educate their readers about the problems of Indigenous artifact removal, and to showcase the different ways to live and act in the world. However, Umbaluru could also be interpreted as visually, physically, and culturally separate from the rest of the society. His appearance in the series seems inconsequential. His depiction, story, and actions feel as if they are designed to create the impression of Indigenous Australian culture in the imagination of the non-Indigenous readers. This all makes Umbaluru a ‘cultural ambassador’ character that serves to represent all Australian First Nations people.

Pitfalls of tokenism

In the recent decades, many academics and members of the general public leaned towards the argument that tokenism is primarily used as a conscious or unconscious tool of repression, despite the fact that in reality representation of minority people in media is much more complex than that. Judith L. Laws (1975, pp. 51-52) states that tokenism, while appearing to benefit the tokenised individual, endeavours to ‘restrict the flow of outsiders into the dominant group’. Childress, Nayyar and Gibson (2024, p. 33) argue that from business to art, tokenism serves to mask systemic discrimination. While some media and other companies could potentially employ tactics of tokenism to appear more diverse than they are, it is worth noting that often writers, producers, and other media creators genuinely want to diversify their stories and products, but lack the knowledge to accomplish this. As a result, media representations of Indigenous characters and stories made by non-Indigenous creators is often criticised for the following pitfalls.

Criticism of ‘cultural ambassadors’ that appear as too idealised and ‘flawless’ is concerned with the de-humanisation of these characters who do not feel relatable, engaging, or representative of any group of people, not even to the people these characters were supposed to represent. Such romanticised take on a minority character who is depicted displaying the best human qualities might be viewed by some, or intend to serve as a ‘proof’ that discriminated minorities can be among the most valued members of the society. ‘Cultural ambassadors’ are often portrayed as doing their jobs better, by contributing to society better, and by having stronger moral values than the members of the cultural and racial majority. Frequently depicted as almost devoid of mistakes, weaknesses, and, thus, character development explored in their stories, these characters might be seen as creating unrealistic expectations of what is needed for minority peoples to gain social acceptance. The message

communicated is that only the best and brightest people, who spend their every waking moment accomplishing social, professional, and moral goals, can dare to ask to be treated with the same respect as the dominant members of the society. Such conditions for social acceptance are unrealistically high. They also enforce exclusivity as only people who outperform everyone else can achieve this. Such conditions also point to a clearly discriminatory environment that signifies that minority people are judged differently than the dominant society whose members possess the rights and privileges automatically.

That said, there are benefits to the ‘artificially’ positive representation of Indigenous people or other minorities. Such portrayal may contribute to changing individual and broader societal attitudes towards them. Benefits of the positive representation may be that it could help counter-balance other negative stereotypes around Indigenous people and contribute to the creation of new or promotion of already established positive stereotypes that exist among the predominant society.

A second criticism is that ‘cultural ambassadors’ fail to engage audiences. The argument here is that the audiences would not be able to learn anything useful by being exposed to idealised tokenistic characters. The authors do not show how idealised characters overcame their problems, grew internally and emotionally, or find ways to contribute to society. The flawlessness of ‘cultural ambassadors’ could even be demotivating for people. Depicting someone who has had it rough, yet ultimately managed to turn out a well-rounded person possessing virtues of morality may be perceived as an act of shaming those who had experienced a similar or less adverse upbringing but never managed to become a well-adjusted and successful person. As the audiences cannot follow these characters along on their journeys of self-development, it may feel that there is no practical or philosophical advice present in these stories on how to achieve this. Stories where ‘cultural ambassadors’ are represented as idealised often offer no or very little explanation of what shaped them to be as they are.

While some people might argue that there are benefits to the ‘positive’ tokenistic representation of Indigenous characters, there are people who strongly believe that disadvantages outweigh possible benefits. The question that could be relevant here is who is benefiting from such representation and how. If tokenism is considered by many as an instrument of covert oppression, what would a genuine celebration of cultural diversity look like? Can we, as people, enjoy each other’s cultural ‘fruits’ and tell each other’s cultural

stories because we truly like them? These questions lead me to explore the issue of cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation

The most effective and possibly the most discussed example of cultural appropriation is hip hop. While this is an example from the US, the example it sets is valuable for the research that focuses on Australian First Nations. When hip hop became a widespread cultural phenomenon in the US (and subsequently around the world), a wave of criticism emerged from the black scholars accusing the music industry of cultural appropriation. How could this widespread appreciation of originally African American music be cultural appropriation? Rodriques (2006) explains that while the music and culture associated with its musical performance have found popularity among the white Americans, it was sanitised, disconnected from its cultural roots and meanings, and repurposed for the political and economic agendas of the dominant society via the ideology of colour-blindness, the promotion of essential 'sameness' that unites historically, culturally, and socially disjoint racial and ethnic groups (Frankenberg 1993 in Rodriques 2006, p. 645). Stripped of cultural and social codes informed by the historical life experiences of the African Americans, hip hop became just another genre of American music. Powered by the ideas that culture has no meaning in hip hop and that the skill is what determines the quality of music, the US dominant society and its institutions perpetuate the absorption of hip hop into the white culture (Rodriques 2006, p. 662).

For many people it may seem that the mainstream American (and global) society is showing appreciation to an Afro-American musical tradition and placing high value on it investing into musicians. It is also a fact that products that target mass market reflect the agency of performers and producers who are interested in expanding their audiences. At the same time, members of the audience exercise their agency by choosing to consume these products. However, it could also be argued that popularisation of hip hop falls short of being an act of cultural appreciation; rather, being often discussed as a case of cultural appropriation.

Hall (1997, p. 32) explains that it is the act of 'separating art from the people' and its subsequent commodification that removes its original cultural meaning is what constitutes cultural appropriation. Rodriques (2006, p. 664) studies hip hop, its shifting demographic of concert goers and performers, and analyses the peculiarities around the race rhetoric of his white American respondents. He concludes that the growing number of white American hip hop performers who attract bigger audiences, funding, and produce songs oriented at white

American demographic is a sign that African hip hop tradition was never integrated in the white dominant society, but rather taken from African American culture and appropriated by the white dominant society. Pointing at the notable absence (or in some cases avoidance) of any racial, cultural, or social discussions or acknowledgements among white concert goers that he observed during his fieldwork, Rodriques (2006, p. 664) concludes that colour-blind ideology can be employed by the members of the dominant society to decontextualise cultural objects (in his example, hip hop music) from their original histories, cultures, and experiences (in his example, African American). While Rodriques presents a view that could be interpreted as being distinctly academic in his criticism of white American engagement with hip hop, his argument represents the sentiment of many black American people. As illustrated by the example of hip hop, cultural appropriation is viewed as the denial of connections between the cultural expression and the culture from which it originated. Often justified by rhetoric that obscures institutionalised inequality, cultural appropriation could be seen as protecting the status and power of the dominant society.

That said, it is worth noting that the concept of colour-blindness has a different place in the perception of Indigenous art in the Australian context. The US and Australian socio-political developments diverge significantly being informed by different colonial histories, especially concerning racial and settler-colonial relations. Most notably, the relations between white and black American communities lay outside of the issues between the American First Nations and colonisation. Yet, the example of hip hop illustrates the complexity of adopting and integrating elements of other cultures into the dominant culture. Indeed, in certain cases it is possible to point out that cultures represented in this way do gain some recognition and celebration, but this does not always happen. This is because representation done by cultural outsiders often leads to exoticised or misunderstood interpretation or to the disconnection of the cultural products from their cultural roots. If that happens, cultural insiders whose culture or identity are being (mis)represented can feel excluded as audiences or as people, despite supposedly being at the centre of such representation. Hence, they can feel like passive ‘objects’ of depiction rather than active ‘subjects’ who find equal standing in the media arena. It is important to state that anthropologically cultures are not fundamentally bounded, but that boundary maintenance is a cultural phenomenon. Hence, exclusion, inclusion, tokenism, and cultural appropriation are related to the politics of identity. The dynamics of exclusion and inclusion are based on the rights to exclude or to be included. In the case of artists, musicians, and media, their engagement with audience inevitably leads to such dynamics. These

ambiguities are relevant right across Indigenous media. Further, it is important to remember that cultural change and progress often stem from ‘cultural appropriation’ (Bonniol, Gordien & Streiff-Fénart 2023, p. 6). People have been borrowing ideas, technologies, and goods from each other for millennia. The notion of cultural appropriation as something negative and damaging comes as an aftermath of the postcolonial critique of Western imperialism (Yuniya & de Jong 2022, p. 105). According to this critique, cultural appropriation is a way of taking the agency away from the people whose culture is appropriated. This reading is a result of the ‘post-colonial’ anti-racist movement and arises from the context where culture becomes a determinant of cultural belonging, singularity, and self-awareness (Bonniol, Gordien & Streiff-Fénart 2023, p. 6). On this level, cultural appropriation is viewed as a tool of disempowerment that is almost equated to cultural robbery. It could be perceived as an act of oppression even if it produces positive representation.

Despite the scholarly interest in this topic emerging at the end of the twentieth century and focused primarily on art and literature (Yuniya & de Jong 2022, p. 103), criticism of cultural appropriation rooted in political, social, and cultural inequalities existed long before post-colonial scholarship. Langston Hughes, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, wrote a poem titled ‘Note on Commercial Theatre’ (1940) where he encapsulates the difference between cultural appropriation done by the dominant culture and genuine representation accomplished by the cultural insiders:

You've taken my blues and gone
You sing 'em on Broadway [...]
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*
And in everything but what's about me
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk to me,
And write about me [...]
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

(Hughes 1982, p. 13)

Hughes has effectively (and artistically) summarised what is appropriation and how it could be masked as cultural appreciation: taking and using cultural elements of another culture for financial and social gains without attributing these elements to the culture it originally came from, while at the same time subjecting the members of that culture to discrimination. Genuine representation, on the other hand, is depicted as rooted in self-representation, authentic cultural expression, and centring cultural insiders as the ‘subjects’ of representation. From the artistic point of view, marginalisation of the voices of minorities leads to a lack of artistic development. Aaron Rahsaan Thomas (2018), an American filmmaker and screenwriter writes ‘the lack of inclusion from diverse voices in storytelling tends to limit the possibilities of what stories might be told’ (Medium 2019). Indeed, when Indigenous characters are written by non-Indigenous people who do not have corresponding life experiences on which to base something relatable, engaging, and original, the result is characters such as Willy Willy or Gateway. But what if non-Indigenous media companies do put effort into representing and celebrating Indigenous cultures?

Chapter 4. Disney and representation of Indigenous people

Now that I have looked into the nature of the problems with exclusion, tokenism, and cultural appropriation, I will investigate how the ‘superpower’ of the mainstream media, the Walt Disney Company (Disney), represents Indigenous people and other minorities, and why despite their efforts to be advocates for diversity, inclusion, and cultural celebration, they are still accused of tokenism and appropriation.

The Disney conglomerate consists of numerous companies, movie and animations studios, music record and media distribution companies; it owns dozens of brands, franchises, entertainment parks, stores, and many more business and media entities. Their reach stretches across the whole world and one can hardly find a person who has never heard of Disney. Emphasising the strong link between Disney and global media exchange, Wills (2017, p. 3) states that ‘[t]he rise of Disney reflects the rise of both visual culture and consumer culture in the twentieth century’. Having so much power to produce and distribute their products, Disney’s operations span a wide array of sectors, underscoring its role as a provider of entertainment and as a dominant force in shaping perceptions, values, and societal norms through its extensive media and cultural products (Giroux & Pollock 2010). This much power places a huge responsibility on Disney. Consequentially, it is compelled financially and culturally to dedicate a lot of effort to their media and entertainment products. However, many critics say that Disney has built its financially successful empire by appropriating myths and fairytales from Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world (see Wills 2017; Davis 2019). Disney has been specifically blamed for misrepresenting Indigenous characters and stories by portraying Indigenous people as ‘noble savages’ and framing the narratives to reinforce the colonial status quo (Wills 2017, p. 119; ho‘omanawanui 2008, p. 8; Pewewardy 1996/1997).

Pocahontas

Historically, Disney’s record in representing Indigenous people and generally non-Western cultures has been unflattering. Disney’s racist depictions include reinforcing racist stereotypes in their animal and human characters, such as ‘American jive crows’ as caricatures of black people in *Dumbo* (1941), Siamese cats as stereotypical Asian people from *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), and American First Nations as buffoons in *Peter Pan* (1953) (Wills 2017, p. 119). *Pocahontas* (1995) is probably the most famous example of Disney culturally appropriating American First Nations’s culture and history.

(Figure 14: Pocahontas on a boat, *Pocahontas* 1995. Image description: Pocahontas stirs the boat and looks in the distance. <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114148/>>)

A romantic and adventurous story, *Pocahontas* (1995) is about a Powhatan woman and an English man who help stop a war between English gold prospectors and the Powhatan tribe. Apparently based on a real story, the story of Pocahontas is a case of cultural appropriation, monetisation, and the heavily edited re-telling of a story about a real person. The members of the Powhatan Nation expressed their harsh criticism of the film. The Chief of Powhatan Renape Nation, Roy Crazy Horse, accuses Disney of rejecting any creative or historical input from the Powhatan Nation into Pocahontas' production:

The film distorts history beyond recognition. Our offers to assist Disney with cultural and historical accuracy were rejected. Our efforts urging him to reconsider his misguided mission were spurred.

(Chief Roy Crazy Horse 1996)

The Chief writes that their attempts to consult or advise Disney's team on *Pocahontas* were met with rejection, as were their protests on the misrepresentation of historical events. Retelling the story of the real historical figure of Pocahontas was a problematic decision by Disney for many reasons. This story is now so fictionalised and contested that it is difficult to distinguish between facts and myths. Multiple versions of what happened contradict each other and inevitably lead to political debates between the proponents of different versions. The decision of Disney to produce the film despite this controversy and the vocal opposition of the Powhatan people demonstrates that the celebration of the First Nations cultures was not the company's main goal.

(Figure 15: de Passe, Simon 1616, *Pocahontas*. Image description: an oval engraving depicting a woman dressed in an elaborately embroidered gown with a large lace collar. She wears a tall hat adorned with a feather.

<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pocahontas>>)

However, it is important to note that despite such criticism, *Pocahontas* was among the very first attempts by Disney to depict representations of minority cultures. A high-budget film made by an internationally acclaimed animation studio with a global audience, that celebrated and revitalised the story of a real historical Indigenous woman on an international scale, was a

step for Disney towards diversity. Disney consciously employed American First Nations voice actors for the characters of Pocahontas (an Iñupiaq actress, Irene Bedard), her father, Chief Powhatan (an Oglala Lakota activist and actor, Russell Means), her friend, Nakoma (a Wampanoag actor and director, Michelle St. John), her fiancé Kocoum (an Indigenous actor and playwright, James Apaumut Fall) and the tribe's medicine man (a Cree and Stoney actor and director, Gordon Tootoosis). Stunning visuals of un-urbanised American nature as well as distinct environmental and anti-violence messages permeate the film, making it an educational (although in no way historical) resource and a conversation starter about the problematic parts of American history. Pocahontas is also considered one of Disney's first strong and proud female characters. Referred to as a 'feminist' princess (Perez 2019, p. 71; Wills 2017, p. 123), Pocahontas makes her own choices and is an active actor in her life, not a passive one like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. Disney repeated this trope of empowerment in their subsequent princess films such as *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Frozen* (2013).

Yet, one of the major goals of Disney's *Pocahontas* production was financial gain.

Newspapers reported that even before the premiere of *Pocahontas*, the film's merchandise was already available in massive numbers:

'She's [Pocahontas] the hottest image to adorn everything from fast-food packaging to pocketbooks [...] Already, you can play with the action figures. You can collect the puppets [...] You can dress your kids from head to toe in "Pocahontas" paraphernalia by day, and bed them down in "Pocahontas" pajamas at night. You can even let them sleep inside a small "Pocahontas" tent... [...] There are toys galore, clothes and more. Umbrellas, pencils, notebooks, dolls, luggage, stuffed animals, bed sheets, puzzles and adventure sets – all featuring "Pocahontas" and her forest friends. That's just for starters...

(McCarver 1995)

Using every opportunity to capitalise on the problematic history of an Indigenous teenager who was paraded around Europe as an example of a 'civilised native', Disney made millions in revenue from *Pocahontas* merchandise which can still be found in toy shops around the world. The film's release worldwide made Disney \$346 million in ticket sales (IMDbPro 2014), covering the film's \$55 million production costs (The Numbers 2024) more than six

times over. The focus on financial gain, the lack of consultations with the Powhatan Nation featured in the film, the lack of attention on contested historical details, and the romanticised retelling of the colonial history to appease the non-Indigenous American audiences, build a strong case for viewing *Pocahontas* as an act of cultural appropriation.

Moana

It has been decades since Disney's controversial *Pocahontas*. Since then, the media giant has released other films inspired by Indigenous history and mythology. The most notable example is *Moana* (2016). Inspired by the Pacific cultures and nature, this film tells a story about a Polynesian tribal Chief's daughter, Moana, from an imaginary island called Motunui, who defies her father and leaves her home island to save her people. Moana is an example of Disney putting a lot of effort to demonstrate respect, good will, and appreciation of Polynesian cultures.

(Figure 16: Moana and Māui in *Moana* 2016. Image description: Moana and Maui stand together. Moana holds a paddle and Maui holds his fighting hook. There is a great blue wave in the background. <<https://www.disneyplus.com/en-au/browse/entity-e8896bfa-1052-41f7-ae2e-00255d77cf05>>)

To achieve a respectful and authentic representation of Polynesian mythology, lifestyle, customs, and cultural details, Disney established the Oceanic Story Trust, a consultative body that assisted Disney in the creation of *Moana*. It consisted of Samoan, Tahitian, Hawaiian, Tongan, and Fijian anthropologists, archaeologists, filmmakers, choreographers, ethnomusicologists, master tattooists, master fishermen, natural historians, a chief, navigators, and linguists. Dionne Fonoti, a Samoan anthropologists and filmmaker on the Trust, and A Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira, a Māori anthropologist, report that the establishment of the Trust and its involvement in the creation of *Moana* was a significant step forward towards a more authentic representation of Indigenous stories and characters (Tamaira & Fonoti 2018, p. 298). They believe that *Moana* embodies the commitment of large international media corporations to seeking genuine collaboration with local communities (ibid).

Tamaira and Fonoti (2018) report that the Oceanic Story Trust was a consultative body with real influence. They report that several major changes in the film were, in fact, directly influenced by the Trust and were done with the aim of more accurate representation of traditions, mythology, and customs. For example, the character design of Māui, the trickster-

demigod of the Polynesian mythology, was initially featured with a bald head. As Tamaira and Fonoti (2018, p. 315) explain,

...when the Tahitian contingent visited the studio and were shown the latest version of the story, they were unsettled by images of a hairless Māui and quickly demanded that he be redesigned with hair, and lots of it. According to spokesperson Hinano Murphy, in French Polynesian lore, Māui is completely coiffed; he had to be, because his mana (power and prestige) was connected to his hair.

(Figure 17: Early concept art of Māui in Julius, J, Malone, M, Lasseter, J, Clements, R & J, Musker, 2016. Image description: different renditions of Maui's design, most of the images feature him as bald. <<https://conceptartworld.com/books/the-art-of-moana/>>)

On another occasion, Fonoti made the creative team reconsider using a Samoan *tuiga*, a ceremonial headband, as an equivalent of a European crown (ibid, pp. 315-316). Interestingly, it was harder to get Disney to make this change. Disney insisted on Moana wearing *tuiga* on a daily basis to signify her status as a future leader, but Fonoti repeatedly tried to explain them that *tuiga* is purely ceremonial and is never worn as part of daily attire. Fonoti, an anthropologist, was not initially listened to and she had to enlist help from another Samoan, a master tattooist, to exercise their collective influence on Disney's creative team. In several months' time, they made Disney listen and appropriately limited the use of *tuiga* to one ceremonial scene of the film. Despite the resistance of the creative team, the members of the Oceanic Story Trust were able to have the final word. As the result of these and other smaller changes to the film, and due to the fieldwork visit of the creative team to Fiji, Sāmoa, and French Polynesia, *Moana* ultimately represents an idealised but recognisable image of Polynesia. Vaimoana Tapaleao (2016), a Samoan writer of New Zealand Herald, writes:

The Polynesia depicted in the film is an animated yet mirror image of our backyard. The glittering see-through ocean looks like the one the village kids splash in behind my mum's family fale [house] in Savaii [...] I felt a deep sense of recognition of what I was seeing on the screen. [...] The people on screen actually look like us.

Just like in *Pocahontas*, the environment protection message is strong in *Moana*, but this time Disney acted on its proclaimed values and, in partnership with the Samoan Voyaging Society, funded an ocean conservation education program in Samoa (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, p. 304).

Overall, *Moana* signified a turning point for Disney in representing Indigenous mythology and characters. As a ‘catalyst for change’, *Moana* embodied the desire of international audiences to see authentic Indigenous stories. In addition to featuring authentic-feeling locations and nature, the educational and cultural value of *Moana* are enriched by the representation of real Polynesian practices such as star navigation, wind sailing, and so on. The practices related to navigation and sailing are real and are still in use today (Finney 2003; Genz 2018; Howe 2007). The film’s full cast of voice actors was Polynesian, too, consisting of actors of Hawaiian, Samoan, and New Zealand Indigenous descent. All the small inputs into the film’s production from cultural knowledge holders, the efforts of animators and creative team leaders who became familiar with the locations and people, and the respectful treatment of the original myth of Māui made *Moana* an international success and an example of the merits of intercultural collaboration.

Yet, *Moana* was still the object of critique with numerous people around the Pacific, including many prominent academics, criticising *Moana* even before it was premiered. Circulating in social media and perpetuated by authoritative academics and culture holders, the backlash concerned Disney’s stereotypical representation of Pacific communities:

The critiques they leveled included but were not limited to the alleged offensive stereotyping of Māui as an obese, arrogant buffoon and the misrepresentation of the Hawaiian goddess Pele as a villainous “Lava Monster” (ie, Te Kā). Other criticisms were aimed at Disney’s commodification of Pacific identity, especially the Māui character Halloween costume—a brown, tattooed “skin suit” with faux grass skirt and wig—which sent a wave of collective outrage across many Pacific communities, academic and nonacademic, and sparked accusations that it was a blatant example of “brown facing”.

(Tamaira & Fonoti 2018, p. 298)

The Māui Halloween suit caused a big push back, in the Pacific region and overseas. Newspapers, such as Chicago Tribune, quoted Twitter comments that read ‘This might be the

creepiest thing Disney has ever done. Wear another culture's skin!' or '...other people's skins are not costumes' (Stevens 2016). Disney removed that suit from sale and issued an apology shortly after the appearance of complaints.

(Figure 18: Māui costume screenshot in Stevens 2016. Image description: a screenshot from official Disney store that features 'Maui' Halloween costume. The costume looks like brown tattooed skin with inflated muscles, a faux grass skirt, and a curly black wig. In the screenshot, it is worn by a child model. <<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/the-wireless/374243/sorry-but-disney-s-maui-costume-is-simply-not-ok>>)

Another wave of targeted criticism from the Indigenous Pacific voices was targeted at the Oceanic Story Trust members who were involved in *Moana*'s production as consultants (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, p. 299). Called 'Pacific Mouseketeers', 'sellouts,' and 'Dis-Mo-Loving-PIs' (meaning Disney-Moana Loving Pacific Islanders) (ibid), the members of the Trust were blamed for assisting Disney in cultural theft with the goal of cultural monetisation. Fonoti (ibid, p. 317) comments that the push back on *Moana* was very intense and that despite her and her colleagues' efforts to advocate for *Moana*'s representation of Pacific cultures, they were personally attacked for engaging with Disney:

...academics that I had admired and looked up to over my own career, many of whom I have known personally for decades, were calling me a sellout on social media and it was, quite frankly, shocking. I naively tried to engage in online discussions on two separate occasions, once on my own Facebook page, and once on the "Mana Moana" [full page name 'Mana Moana: We Are Moana, we Are Māui'] page, and both times I was immediately attacked and everything I said was twisted and taken out of context, so after that I disengaged from the discussions.

Such reactions indicate the high level of distress that communities experienced. The fact that Disney, a company with a history of misrepresenting and appropriating other cultures' mythology and people, was using the myth of Māui as the inspiration for its new movie set in the Pacific, was perceived as a frightening act of cultural theft.

While intensive criticism of *Moana* was circulating prior to its release and could be explained by the anxiety and uncertainty towards Disney's end product, the eventual release of *Moana* did not stop the backlash. The leaning of Disney into the 'Pacific Paradise' trope is a

symptom of the old trope of Pacific exoticisation. Depicted as '[A] realm outside of time', as described by David Spurr (1993, p. 127), the Pacific lifestyle, nature, climate, and people have been idealised and stereotyped as tranquil and stagnant by Hollywood since the early twentieth century. Representation of Indigenous people as unchanging and stagnant is presented to the viewer from the very beginning of the film. The song that is used in the montage of daily life on Motunui contains such lyrics as:

'The village of Motunui is all you need / The dancers are practicing, they dance to an ancient song / Who needs a new song? This old one's all we need' [...] / 'This tradition is our mission' [...] /

(*Moana* 2016)

While Motunui's people are undoubtedly depicted as happy, content, and self-sufficient, is it necessary to emphasise the lack of innovation in their society? Even later, when the plot reveals that people who now settled the island used to travel among the Pacific Islands in the past, the return of this nomadic tradition still implies that their society did not invent anything new but merely reverted back to their old ways.

Some people find that the 'cultural bricolage' of *Moana's* Polynesian representation (Tamaira & Fonoti 2018, p. 305-306) is not a positive feature of the film. Richard Pritchard, a Samoan co-author of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* book series, shares that he found the film wonderful and approved of Disney's efforts to educate its international viewers on Polynesian cultures and mythology (Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023). However, Pritchard did not agree with the studio's decision to create an imaginary island of Motunui that practiced an intermixed version of Polynesian cultures (Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023). Pointing to many elements of cultural fusion such as the patterns on characters' clothes, the Pan-Pacific origins of the voice actors, mixed dancing traditions, and the fictional nature of Motunui, Pritchard expresses his disappointment that no one culture was properly or specifically celebrated in *Moana*. 'Don't create a mish-mash of whatever you want', he says in disappointment about Disney's lack of commitment to grounding their film in a real culture (Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023). Pritchard further comments on the series of concept arts made of the character of *Moana* and disagrees with the designs:

'...it ranges from completely off, almost elvish fantasy - green leaf elvish designs, to what they ended up with, and I am like: 'I've never seen a Polynesian Islander representing any of those... any of that combination!'

Like, it looks it, but you can also translate it into Polynesian and into Indonesian, and any of that non-Polynesian cultures and you'd think it's the same thing'.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023)

In Pritchard's view, the 'bricolage' of Polynesian cultures strips individual nations of their unique identity, history, and mythology. Cultural 'mish-mash' takes away the opportunity for individual Pacific cultures to receive recognition, celebration, and profits associated with job opportunities with Disney, possible tourism income, and so on. It could be argued that creating a fictional island is beneficial primarily for Disney as inventing a new Polynesian island removes responsibility from them to act responsibly and represent specific Indigenous cultures recognisably.

Pritchard's sentiment expresses his frustration with the fact that Disney decided not to go with cultural specifics in *Moana*. He views Disney's representation as tokenistic and suggests that the lack of distinct cultural representation impedes the recognition of minority cultures. This example demonstrates that despite the conscious and seemingly genuine efforts of Disney to promote diversity and inclusion in their media products, Disney still faces a lot of criticism from academics, media critics and professionals, and the public. Pritchard believes that better authenticity and less political and cultural controversy could have been achieved by Disney if the studio focused on one Polynesian culture while working on *Moana* (personal communication, 15/06/2023). Pritchard does not believe that this would have caused friction (or, at least, more friction than it already did) between different Polynesian cultures.

Indeed, there could be an argument that Disney's 'cultural bricolage' in *Moana* saves the company a lot of money and effort by creating one character that ticks all the boxes of diversity while at the same time taking up the least amount of narrative space. There could, of course, be many other reasons for adopting 'compilation' representation. Representing whole cultural regions could be a genuine attempt by the media creators to let different groups of people see themselves at least partially represented in stories that are seen all over the world. It is true that the contemporary global audience is advocating for higher diversity of representation and stories that empower and celebrate people who used to be overlooked by the media production in the past. However, despite the attempts of Disney and other global media corporations to add to the diversity of representation, they are often accused of creating tokenistic characters and stories.

Historically, the inclusion of Indigenous cultures into international capitalist structures entailed misappropriation and commodification of traditions, images, and customs. Disney's production of *Moana* for mass consumption and their subsequent profits from the movie screenings and merchandise can undoubtedly be interpreted as exploitation and cultural appropriation. However, considering the position of Disney as the world's biggest exporter of media influence which reflects liberal values, its creation of *Moana* suggests a more complex entanglement of motives and goals. Financial motives intermix with the commitment of the company to represent and celebrate diversity, empower women and girls, and promote the values of inclusion, compassion, and unity. As Disney has reached international success as the producer of top-quality media, wholesome and family-friendly content, its responsibility in acknowledging and honouring its international audiences who consume Disney's production and merchandise has grown. In this context, *Moana* could be seen as assisting in the revitalisation of Pacific oral folklore and its elevation to the global trove of myths. Tamaira and Fonoti write (2016, p. 305):

Stories are not simply hermetically sealed archives of the past; rather, they are dynamic cultural "truths" that change over time as a result of human intervention, as we see in the case of *Moana*.

Moana's plot is a modified retelling of the real myth of Māui, a Pacific trickster demigod who is credited with helping people to accomplish important milestones of development such as bringing fire to people, creating islands in the Pacific, and so on. Retelling, adding or subtracting from folk stories is a normal occurrence. Dégh argues that 'folklore is integral inseparable constituent of culture striving in contemporaneous social groups to serve as meaningful and creative expressions of relevant ideas' (1988, p. 67). Adjusting long-existing stories to fit contemporary values repeatedly as the society changes is what makes folk tales a valuable part of culture. Zipes (2015, p. 10) goes further and adds that infusing folk tales with twenty-first century Western values, is, in fact, Disney's attempt to return the folk tales 'frozen' in time back to the 'people'. Yet, the people Zipes refers to are either Americans or people in other Western-minded societies. While I believe that updating traditional stories is in many ways beneficial, it is evident to me why many members of Pacific communities felt defensive about Disney's cultural appropriation of *Moana*.

The criticism of Disney's attempts to represent the Pacific Indigenous Nations reflects the high level of contradictions in people's perception of Disney's products. Firstly, it seems that

while some people perceive such movies as *Moana* as tokenistic and see them as cultural appropriation made with the goal of monetisation, others see them as signs of recognition and celebrations of diversity. The attitudes towards the ‘cultural bricolage’ of *Moana* is interpreted as the cultural lumping for the ease of production, while also being seen by others as a helpful way to showcase as much of cultural diversity and representation as possible within one movie. These debates and struggles in value production is a sign that the Pacific communities are engaged in the active and ongoing cultural creativity, formation of the identity that captures traditional heritage and contemporary innovations, and the strong desire by many to maintain cultural distinctiveness. People want to be represented as being part of the contemporary dynamic changing world, yet at the sometime have a sense of ownership of the material manifestations of their past. This manifests itself in different ways in part according to the injustices of history, power relations, identity politics, and so on. How images from the past and representations of the past affect people within their communities depends in part on what their present engagement with that material cultural heritage is. Hence depictions of the traditional past can be very polarising especially if they are made by non-cultural insiders. As a result, people may fail take account of each other’s motivations and the complexity of the issues involved in the production and reception of the Indigenous representation in media.

Indeed, the mixed reception of *Moana* confirms that Indigenous peoples are not a homogeneous group. Their political views, attitudes to cultural authenticity and innovation are very disparate. Trying to appease the Pacific communities, Disney has established the Oceanic Story Trust, but this not only failed to prevent controversy, but also fuelled the ideological divide within Indigenous Pacific communities. The views of cultural and academic authorities, public figures and writers, journalists and ordinary movie goers diverged drastically causing heated debates not only about the film itself, but also about the expression and preservations of local Polynesian cultures. Societies experienced rifts: ‘While some Indigenous stakeholders choose to adopt separatist strategies, others form strategic alliances with powerful actors to ensure a degree of control over how culture is represented,’ write Tamaira and Fonoti (2018, p. 299). Criticising the proponents of historical authenticity, Tamaira and Fonoti (2018, p. 300) cite the paper of Albert Wendt, the poet, ‘Towards a New Oceania’ (1976, p. 53) where he argues that the obsession with cultural authenticity and rigidity does not help cultural survival: “[cultural essentialism] is a prescription for cultural stagnation, an invitation for a culture to choke in its own body odour, juices, and excreta”. Yet

it is important to remember that Disney was notorious for misrepresenting minority cultures and exercising ‘colonial erasure’ of uncomfortable history in their historical works, such as *Pocahontas*. It is understandable why Disney’s first attempt to represent Indigenous cultures, since its deeply problematic *Pocahontas*, was met with hostility.

There two Disney examples are complex cases of Indigenous representation that is trying to negotiate a balanced way to move away from the stereotyped or tokenistic depiction of people, cultures, and stories. However, there is no clear path to where exactly the representation should move. Identifying the balance between truth-telling, respect, authenticity, positivity, dramaticism, heroism, ordinariness, uniqueness, struggle, and success that suits everyone is not an easy task. But, amidst these debates around what constitutes the appropriate way to achieve Indigenous representation, Indigenous creators emerge as the most important players in the field.

Part II. Case study analysis. *Wylah the Koorie Warrior and Zero Point*

Chapter 5. *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*, marketing and social impact.

‘In over 200 years Australia has never seen
a hero like Wylah before.’

(Wylah Facebook, 6/07/2023)

In Part One of this thesis, I analysed how non-Indigenous attempts at Indigenous representation in media may be perceived as tokenistic, stereotypical, or as a culturally appropriated depiction of Indigenous cultures. I did not expect that even when influential media corporations like Disney (who have resources and desire to conduct historical and cultural research, consult numerous groups of people, and send their production teams to do fieldwork on Pacific Islands) try to produce informed and culturally-sensitive Indigenous representation, they still face harsh criticism and stir political polemics around their media products. I asked myself – could it be that the political and cultural tensions around Indigenous characters and stories in media can be avoided if they are written by Indigenous people and organisations? In Part Two, I will study the work of two co-authors, Richard Pritchard and Jordan Gould, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* (2022-) (*Wylah*) to explore the difference in public perception of an Indigenous story written by independent Indigenous authors as opposed to by an international media conglomerate like Disney. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that this particular case is intriguing because of its’ public reception and the amount of support it receives from the readers and the publishing industry. Before going into closer details, I will first outline the place *Wylah* occupies in the fields of Australian mainstream media, Indigenous media, and children’s literature to demonstrate why this project is important for the development of Indigenous media as a field.

Wylah’s success

Wylah the Koorie Warrior (2022-) is a book series for children written by Richard Pritchard, a Samoan person with IT, media, and educational professional background, and his former TAFE student Jordan Gould, an Indigenous Australian from Peek Whurrong tribe of the Maar Nation (Victoria). I got in touch with them via their business email listed on their official website shortly after I encountered their concept art on Instagram. They responded promptly and stayed a part of my research for several years showing me their continuous support.

Wylah book series (that at the time of my data collection had two parts) is set in a fictionalised Australia some 40,000 (as initially claimed) to 80,000 (as later amended by the authors due to recent archaeological discoveries) years ago. It follows the adventures of Wylah, a Peek Whurrong teenager. In book one, Wylah is presented as a young art teacher who is anxious about her first day teaching children to paint with ochre. As she started her very first lesson, she was interrupted by a sudden attack on her tribe perpetrated by the overseas invaders, Dragon Army. By luck, she and her students Merri and Po survive. Accompanied by Merri and Po (and also her animal friends and mythical tribal guardians) Wylah gathers courage, seeks allies among other Indigenous tribes, mythical creatures, and animals, and embarks on a long journey to rescue her abducted family and friends. In the second book, Wylah meets Jayden, a boy from the Dragon Kingdom who came to Australia with the Dragon Army. He initially tells her that he was also abducted and offers his help in rescuing Wylah's tribe. Eventually, they secure all support they can and reached the base of the Dragon Army where abducted people are made to dig for gold. Unexpectedly, Jayden leads Wylah, Merri, and Po into a trap. It is then revealed that Jayden is a son of the captain who commands the Dragon Army. Jayden is instantly regretful of his actions and he helps Wylah to flee, regroup and prepare for the final battle. This is the end of the second book. *Wylah's* story is intended to continue further with the talks held between the authors and their publisher about a ten-book series.

Published with Allen & Unwin, a large and wide-reaching organisation, and marketed by the authors, the publisher, and several advertising agencies that offered them free billboard spaces, *Wylah* became a bestseller within the first week of sales across multiple bookselling platforms. In Australia, *Wylah* series has been shortlisted as 'Book of the Year for Younger Children' by ABIA Shortlist 2024, 'Top 50 Kids' Books' 2023 by Better Reading, 'Best Books of the Year So Far' by Booktopia, 'Top 20 Kid's Books' 2023 by Target, 'Indie Book awards' 2023, 'Yabba Shortlist' 2023, 'Top 50 Books' (becoming number fifteen of all books of all times) by Better Reading, and many more (Wylah 2025). With such a favourable reception, Pritchard and Gould pushed the production of the second book and decided to expand on their business by launching an original *Wylah* trading card game. They started to invest in merchandise: bookmarks and stickers that can now be purchased as a part of the book bundle online. They plan to expand and sell colouring books, posters, plush toys, and action figures in the future.

Shortly after launching their first book, Pritchard and Gould started appearing in public. They began holding cultural workshops in collaboration with Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative for children where guest experts taught them to weave, dance, make badges, draw, and learn local Indigenous languages. The authors were invited for numerous interviews to talk about *Wylah* and Indigenous culture with major network channels such as ABC and SBS, as guests on podcasts like Australian Writer’s Centre, talk shows such as Studio 10, and to schools such as Sacred Heart Primary School (Pymble, NSW).

The impact of *Wylah* can be measured by the fact that many teachers around Australia report integrating the books to their teaching content and adding the book to their classroom library. The following user comments on *Wylah*’s social media platforms are an indication of this practice:

‘I’ve placed my order. Can’t wait to have *Wylah* a part of our classroom’¹

‘[C]an’t wait to receive it and start reading with my students’²

‘Are they going to be in stores. I want to get a whole class set for my year 4’s’³

‘I’ve just planned a Term 3 ‘*Wylah*’ book study with my Stage 2 students! They are super excited!’⁴

¹ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 2/03/2022, viewed 11 July 2024, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCamdgbhBnXl%2F%3Figsh%3DMXc1MDExOW9uZ2d1eg%253D%253D&h=AT2Y6twkZyiar4jvHqkUWdprYGj-FChb7hobtv4jCLotB_5kOtaCizZ6CEL2oR5O_cUI7x0eYz224JdEtm8JgH2gP4s7ytxCzc7h6OA-HC-GQBYHyxpw0eKCKFf068i>.

² Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 18/05/2022, viewed 11 July 2024, <<https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCdrDTHoh7vN%2F%3Figsh%3DbDMzZHprMXlmemh5&h=AT3ojSSJF6SHecYn-kpdzNFFhCJuGrDqw64axBESSMeIXfQrg6zbcPeS5tGdSyJMcp6BmvkuRDUNNso8SWXTFCwZ6cy1rhnrtVl8frHMyDQDPoqEfvbbpf1ssLFLleN>>.

³ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 27/05/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCeButxehqjA%2F%3Figsh%3DMW9yZG1lYz14eTdheQ%253D%253D&h=AT2nTbaCmjXjRGbc0mIDilcSWBBWeamLZ_AjX5HLP4YMERtpAiX8Xyjb5HgxJyaQALUaN6_8QDT7nFlerUXkxzm13N96GqkSQY_hWzxuoUav3s4YjZrS4Tbr9ZxVcDI>.

⁴ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 16/06/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCe26hu_h-zZ%2F%3Figsh%3DaXp6dWlmYnM1Y2to&h=AT1XcpiffYaAf8-5aTG7AARA5LzZCcOCTDYKxSBSLA-Dikevu89zTZAwwfSIP96ORQafCnAfV1Bwk1o1cIhKG9UfL9MlkB3jJwdAn6t38M95lwUk1q3I_R55YbkGrMoBRnCUUg>.

‘They [class] love Wylah. We’re about halfway through Guardians at the moment and I can’t wait for them to meet Tulna [giant wombat character]!’⁵

‘we will read this and use the activities next term. Thanks’⁶

‘Looking forward to getting a class and using it in our reading program for dual coding.’⁷

‘My daughter told me this week that it’s one of the books the class (grade 4) is reading.’⁸

As Indigenous knowledges and culture are part of the mandatory national curriculum, these and other teachers seem to be willing to use *Wylah* as their classroom reading material.

As a consequence of the high visibility of *Wylah* and the fact that the book series featured the Indigenous Maar Nation of Warrnambool (Victoria), the local city council became interested in the idea of constructing the Warrnambool Dreamtime village, a tourist centre with an Indigenous thematic that could feature *Wylah* characters as hosts (this is a point that I will return to in chapter 7) (Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 23/03/23). As a result of intensive online and public space marketing campaigns that started years before the book was first launched, *Wylah* became known overseas and, by the time of the interview, the first book of the franchise was purchased by multiple readers from five different countries (from Singapore in the Asia-Pacific region to Chile in South America) (Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 23/03/23; Sydney Opera House Education 2023). Pritchard and Gould participated in the International Author Talk organised by the Australian High Commission in Singapore in 2022. *Wylah* was also referred to as ‘one of Australian children’s biggest role models’⁹ and has been spread by Australian Embassies in Brazil and Morocco who posted

⁵ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 8/05/2024, viewed 11 July 2024, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Ffree1%2FC6s-a4QrJBe%2F%3Ffigsh%3DOTVoNDhranFXYWQ0&h=AT1XcpiffYaAf8-5aTG7AARA5LzZCcOCTDYKxSBSLA-Dikcvu89zTzAWwfSIP96ORQafCnAFv1Bwk1o1cIhKG9UfL9MlkB3jJwdAn6t38M95lwUk1q3I_R55YbkGrMoBRnCUUg>.

⁶ Facebook user (a), Wylah post comment, Facebook, 13/06/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15YwNXX26y/>>.

⁷ Facebook user (b), Wylah post comment, Facebook, 13/06/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15YwNXX26y/>>.

⁸ Facebook user, Wylah post comment, Facebook, 19/08/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AWYADP9Mp/>>.

⁹ Australian Embassy in Morocco 2022, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior, an Indigenous hero*, Facebook, 3/08/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15X9Yf1EAt/>>.

endorsements of *Wylah* on their social media pages¹⁰. Finally, to underscore how much cultural impact *Wylah* has made, in 2023 a family named their daughter Wylar in honour of Pritchard's and Gould's character. Looking at how much public and media attention, funding, and opportunities for business expansion *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* has attracted, it is crucial to understand why and how it became so successful.

Wylah the Koorie Warrior has grown into a successful franchise in an impressively short time. Commonly, it is difficult for new authors to achieve local, not to mention international, success. So how did Pritchard and Gould, both being new to writing, launch a new children's book franchise with such success in sales, audience responses, and book ratings? There are several intertwined factors that may have contributed to their success.

Marketing media diversity

After decades of Indigenous characters being mostly written by non-Indigenous authors in the mainstream media, the demand among the educational and cultural institutions for cultural diversity in media, Indigenous empowerment movement, and representation has grown significantly in the past fifteen years. This shift is particularly felt in Australia with many Indigenous media and cultural initiatives appearing across the country. In the field of Indigenous literature, there exist funding and support initiatives on local and federal levels. Since the 1970s, the Aboriginal Arts Board was supporting Indigenous initiatives including the development of Indigenous literature.

In recent years, the Australian Government's arts investment and advisory bodies such as Creative Australia have offered several grants for Indigenous writers, poets, illustrators, journalists, and so on. In 2024, they launched Elevate: First Nations Storytelling and Literature Fund. Creative Australia also supports Indigenous cultural preservation and popularisation via their Storytelling and Recording: First Nations Project Fund. There are other initiatives and support programs intended for Indigenous media production. For instance, First Nations Media Australia launched several initiatives and platforms for Indigenous people to boost their participation in and engagement with digital media: InDigiMob (launched in 2016) is a digital inclusion program that provides Indigenous people in remote areas with 'equitable and affordable access to appropriate communications services and skills that enable them to achieve their full capability and aspiration' (First Nations Media

¹⁰ Embaixada da Austrália no Brasil, *She's a girl, she's an Australian Indigenous* [translated from Portuguese], Facebook, 30/07/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Bc4WDFVvJ/>>.

Australia 2024); IndigiTube (launched in 2018), ‘[t]he national media platform by and for First Nations people’ (First Nations Media Australia 2024); and FNMA News Initiative (launched in 2021), designed to train new Indigenous media workers, and facilitate news sharing between other Indigenous media organisations (First Nations Media Australia 2024).

There are similar programs, grants, strategies, and projects that aim to bring more Indigenous voices and faces into Australian mainstream media (such as Beyond 3% by NITV, Screen Australia First Nations support programs, Indigenous Media Mentoring program by AusSMC, etc). This increasing rate of support for Indigenous content on a local and national level reflects the demand for more Indigenous media and the movement of Australian mainstream media towards diversity, inclusion, and recognition.

(Figure 19: Wylah the Koorie Warrior poster in Better Reading 2022. Image description: Wylah stands with a glowing boomerang in her hand. In the background, it is written: ‘Meet Wylah the Koorie Warrior. A hero 40,000 years in the making’. <<https://www.betterreading.com.au/news/book-life/meet-wylah-a-hero-40000-years-in-the-making/>>)

Pritchard and Gould’s *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* was first announced in 2020, during this rise in Indigenous media involvement. Marketed early on as an Indigenous project led by two Indigenous authors, *Wylah* is advertised as the pinnacle of Australian First Nation’s cultural celebration and recognition in the mainstream media. Their slogan ‘a hero 40,000 years in the making’ implies that the history of Indigenous activism and Indigenous rights movement has culminated in the creation of the *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* book series in 2022. Undoubtedly an impactful and emotion-provoking marketing slogan, it succeeds in connecting *Wylah* to the idea of Indigenous empowerment and self-determination.

Wylah’s advertisement campaign was intensive – it first started as social media campaign, then they launched a Kickstarter public funding campaign. Later, they got on the radar of local and national news who reported about their project and future plans to the general public. In the end, their marketing campaign involved immense billboards, building-high posters, paid social media marketing across multiple platforms, newspaper and magazine articles, and national news and radio coverage. Pritchard and Gould started their marketing campaign very early on, at a time when they were not affiliated with any publisher and only had their main character and a general plot in mind. As the authors started advertising their project while it was at the early stage of creation, they created official Wylah social media

pages and a dedicated website. Soon, they started filling them with updates on how *Wylah* was progressing. Snapshots of real locations of Indigenous historic significance, illustrations of extinct native animals, and pictures of Indigenous cultural artifacts from museums started appear on Wylah's Instagram and Facebook accounts regularly. This publicity campaign that targeted mainstream audience via mass advertising pathways gradually reached a large number of people, arguably more than a typical book launch advertisement usually reaches.

The evidence of their immense reach is the fact that I first learned about *Wylah* from an Instagram advertisement while at home in Siberia, thousands of kilometres away from Australia. *Wylah*'s international sales, multiple publishers' offers the authors received, the stream of invitations to talks and book events nationally and internationally, and the number of readers who voted for *Wylah* to appear in the Top Books shortlists two years in a row all prove that Pritchard and Gould managed to reach a significantly large audience. Overall, the intensity and the outreach of *Wylah*'s marketing strategy is remarkable. Very few books are advertised with the same vigour and even less could claim to be the zenith of Indigenous agency and self-determination.

Massive billboards were advertising *Wylah*, at no cost, to show Pritchard and Gould their support^{11 12}. Advertising agencies as Sleeping Duck, Ooh! Media, Full House Media Co., and Total Outdoor Media provided Pritchard and Gould with space to advertise and celebrate *Wylah* by expressing their companies' appreciation and celebration of Indigenous culture and Indigenous creative people. The ability of Pritchard and Gould to assemble so much support behind their project reflects two major points. First, the authors use their cultural and social affiliations with the Peek Whurrong tribe of the Maar Nation to legitimise their expertise in the field of Indigenous culture. Richard Pritchard, while a Samoan man, has long and warm relations with the Wunjit (chief/senior Elder) and the Elders of the tribe – Pritchard taught at TAFE Warrnambool and worked closely with the Peek Whurrong people. Jordan Gould is a member of the Peek Whurrong people who is involved in performance and leading of cultural

¹¹ @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 5/06/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCeaMFmKhy-t%2F%3Ffigsh%3DMTA4Z2dzeGNsbHkwaA%253D%253D&h=AT3sWM6GRoh0ghRLUKxeWZMEu8SixYGpy7apdVsuC7Gijaeigl5jckiCa7heyPIX7skYU3dJOWCZ72Oikg1EeuY0ugdBlf-t5CdxAkg4tuOxuA-T0dB8qnMVCpdqndi8>>.

¹² @ WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 27/05/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCeButxehqjA%2F%3Ffigsh%3DMW9yZG11Yzl4eTtheQ%253D%253D&h=AT2nTbaCmjXjRGbc0mIDilcSWBBWeamLZ_AjX5HLP4YMERtpAiX8Xyjjbb5HgxJyaQALUaN6_8QDT7nFlerUXkxzm13N96GqkSQY_hWzxuoUav3s4YjZrS4Tbr9ZxVcDI>.

practices. Gould is also a former student of Pritchard. Their collaboration helps them to have insights into the media industry while also being connected with the actual Indigenous community who supports them. Secondly, Pritchard has professional experience and knowledge that helped him to successfully identify and tap into a powerful rise in Indigenous media support facilitated by major corporate and government-supported organisations. Thirdly, Pritchard and Gould successfully created an association between *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and the idea of Indigenous empowerment and cultural celebration. This link aims to create a sense that supporting *Wylah* means supporting Indigenous people. This might have made it easier for Gould and Pritchard to unlock support and attract public attention.

The authors not only integrated the message that supporting *Wylah* equates supporting Indigenous empowerment in the sales pitch but also used it in framing of their story. In the acknowledgements of book one, Pritchard spelled out the intended function of the book series:

To all indigenous and non-indigenous people of Australia, may *Wylah* be a vessel to start a conversation of love, acceptance, unity and empathy.

(Pritchard & Gould 2022, Acknowledgements)

Promoting the book series as a symbol of unity in Australian society, empowerment for Indigenous children, and the pathway to a new era of empathy and acceptance, the authors built a strong public image that helped them seek support for their product. This tone resembles the rhetoric around the Voice referendum, capturing the moods of the society and positioning the *Wylah* franchise as a relevant and contemporary media product. These themes permeate practically everything around *Wylah* – its marketing, book series' plot, and the authors' public statements. I return to this discussion in a later chapter where I juxtapose *Wylah* against the wider political context in Australia.

(Figure 20: *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* billboard in @TotalOutdoorsMedia 2022.

Image description: a large horizontal billboard featuring the *Wylah* book ad 'A hero 40,000 years in the making.' <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeiJI9fM1_-/?img_index=3>)

Richard Pritchard's close familiarity with the business of marketing and publicity is one of the key factors that contributed to the marketing success of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. He previously worked on such international movie hits as *Pacific Rim* (2018), *Mad Max: Fury*

Road (2015), *The Great Gatsby* (2013), *Prometheus* (2012), *Happy Feet* (2006), and *Happy Feet 2* (2011). He was also involved in creating more than a dozen commercials with such high-profile clients as Honda, Pepsi, CommBank, Qantas, and more. While Pritchard mostly worked on those projects as a Visual Effects artist, he explains that he grew familiar with the conventions of marketing (Pritchard, personal communication, 23/03/2023). His background, professional and personal, dictates how he approaches *Wylah*'s marketing.

(Figure 21: *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* book one cover in Gould & Pritchard 2022.

Image description: *Wylah*, dressed in brown fur clothing with uncovered shoulders, looks confident and holds a glowing boomerang in her right hand. Behind her stands a large black and red cockatoo. <<https://www.betterreading.com.au/book/wylah-the-koorie-warrior/>>;

Figure 22: *Moana* movie poster, *Moana* 2016. Image description: *Moana*, dressed in red linen bandeau top and a skirt, looks confident and holds a wooden oar in her right hand. Behind her stands Maui. <<https://www.disneyplus.com/en-au/browse/entity-e8896bfa-1052-41f7-ae2e-00255d77cf05>>)

Wylah is a media franchise that bears a resemblance to Disney's *Moana* in terms of the visual style, plot, and characters. Drawn by Pritchard, the art style of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* promotion poster with its high-quality art strongly resembles the CGI-rendered character design of recent Disney characters. When looking at *Wylah* and *Moana* posters side by side, the similarity reflected in the poses of the respective main characters of *Wylah* and *Moana*, the traditional tools they hold in their right hands, similar colour palette of subdued natural colours, and clothes that leave arms and shoulders uncovered suggests Pritchard and Gould's conscious aim to draw association between the two characters. The similarity continues beyond visual likeness. Both stories represent coming-of-age tales about strong-willed and proud Indigenous teenage girls who embark on dangerous journeys accompanied by allies (in *Moana*, Māui; in *Wylah*, Po, Merri, and Jayden) and animal companions (in *Moana*, a piglet and a chicken; in *Wylah*, giant koalas, a thylacine, a possum, and a thunder bird) to save their tribes from cataclysmic dangers (in *Moana*, the wrath of Te Ka, the lava goddess; in *Wylah*, the invasion of a fire-breathing dragon army). During their travels, *Moana* and *Wylah* both face dangerous and friendly creatures from their cultural mythologies (in *Moana*, kakamora; in *Wylah*, bunyip, yowie, Tiddalik, Yara-ma-yha-who, and Ngarparut) and fight giant animals local to their geographic habitats (in *Moana*, a giant crab Tamatoa; in *Wylah*, a giant emu and

a giant fire hawk). During their journeys, they learn responsibility, moral and spiritual strength, and experience the loss of their grandmothers who then appear to them in spiritual forms and give vital advice. In the end, they both win by learning empathy and kindness and succeed in helping their people and those who they first considered villains (in *Moana*, the villainous Te Ka appeared to be an angered Te Fiti, the goddess of life; in *Wylah*, Jayden, the son of a man leading the invasion turned out to be Wylah's closest ally who helped her defeat the dragon invaders).

It is worth pointing that the comparison between *Wylah* and *Moana* should be taken with the grain of salt. It is problematic to compare a media franchise that mostly relies on literary medium and created by two writers to a film produced by a multinational media conglomerate with one of the biggest distribution networks in the world. While *Wylah* might be sold overseas and nominated to various awards and shortlists, it does not mean that this franchise has reached mainstream and Indigenous markets in their entirety. It is likely that in many Indigenous communities outside of urban and suburban Victoria and New South Wales people are unfamiliar with *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. *Moana* has reached billions of people across the globe. Each title Disney releases comes under scrutiny by the film critics, the general public, the academics, and so on. However, this comparison is necessary to study the reception of both franchises on a more local level. I am not interested in *Moana*'s reception outside of the Oceania region – I am specifically interested in how Indigenous groups around Australia and wider Oceania reacted to the Disney's representation of Pacific characters and cultures for the mainstream international audiences. The similarities the stories share are profound. Yet, the responses to them have been drastically different.

While *Moana* caused a wave of conflicting reactions that divided the Indigenous Polynesian communities which it was supposed to unite and represent, *Wylah* is enjoying almost universal approval and celebration in the state media, social media, and within the fields of school education and children's literature. There are no persistent and public vocal protests related to *Wylah* (apart from a few individual social media comments which I examine below), no calls to withdraw the books from the shelves, or public criticism targeting the authors. Months before *Moana* was released in the cinemas, it received mixed reactions from people with some anticipating the film, while others accused *Moana* of being a case of Disney's cultural appropriation driven by financial gains. On the other hand, two full years before *Wylah* was released, or even well before its story was confirmed, the project received

an immense amount of public, financial, and professional support (as was illustrated above in relation to marketing help, inclusion to school curriculum, and public donations).

Wylah started gathering support from its very conception in 2020 when Pritchard and Gould launched a Kickstarter campaign (Kickstarter is an online crowdfunding platform for creative projects) to gather funding and also to test the market at the same time. Their Kickstarter page opened with the full colour illustration of *Wylah* and the cockatoo (the same image that was used on their Instagram promotion), under the image they provided a brief description of the story they planned to tell:

Wylah is about a young Peek Whurrong girl from the Gunditjmarra [Maar] Nation who discovers her family has been taken by the invading Red Rock Dragon Empire, she must go on a journey to reunite the Guardians and save her people.

(Wylah Kickstarter 2020)

This is followed by the brief remark on *Wylah*'s character where she is described as 'strong-willed, independent, passionate, funny, smart and always willing to go above and beyond to help and care for animals' (Wylah Kickstarter 2020). The authors then state that their project is inspired by the real Indigenous culture of their region:

Wylah was inspired by young Aboriginal people and culture in South West Victoria which is part of the Maar Nation. The story is part fantasy, part alternate history, using current history has a parallel to shine a light into the themes of hope, strength and courage of the Indigenous people.

(ibid)

This statement projects the goals that the authors had when they were conceptualising their book series. Their intention to use real historical events in their otherwise fictionalised world to tell an empowering story signals their values as Indigenous authors who want to do good by their local Indigenous community and culture. In the section titled 'Why fund it', the authors invite the public to join in and contribute to the celebration and empowerment of Indigenous culture:

Wylah should be funded because Australian Indigenous culture has so much to offer. We want to blend Indigenous storytelling with Western writing

structures so that we can share *a universal story with the world*. The hope is that *Wylah* can be a conversation starter for many schools, communities and social groups to learn and celebrate the traditional owners of the lands they live on.

([emphasis added] *ibid*)

Hence, *Wylah* is promoted as a story that mixes the best of both cultures – Indigenous creativity and Western story structure and formatting, to help promote unity and comradeship in Australia and popularise Indigenous culture internationally. Pritchard and Gould envisioned and promoted their story to be used as educational material in schools and homes early on.

Wylah's Kickstarter page introduced the authors along with other members of their creative team. Interestingly, while Jordan Gould was described as 'a Proud Peek Whurrong man', Richard Pritchard was initially defined as 'a Visual Effects Artist'. As he explained to me, he later decided to identify as 'Indigenous Samoan' (I will return to this later). Uncle Robbie Lowe, 'Peek Whurrong Elder & *Wylah* mentor', is presented as part of their creative team. His contribution is credited as part of the project's cultural sensitivity:

Uncle Rob is our historian and main Indigenous authority on *Wylah*. We are very sensitive to the local tribes and want to ensure that the culture is respected in the story, whilst being a work of fiction and fantasy. If we need to get permission or advice on sensitive Indigenous subjects Uncle Rob is always very generous with information and more than happy to support us.

(*Wylah* Kickstarter 2020)

By having an Indigenous Elder on their team, Pritchard and Gould aim to demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment to respecting and upholding Indigenous cultural values. Robbie Lowe's involvement also establishes the credibility and cultural expertise of *Wylah*'s creative team. The list also included two illustrators who were subsequently removed from the team. As Pritchard explained to me, there were scheduling issues that prompted Pritchard to take on the role of illustrator himself (Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023).

Pritchard and Gould's promotion of *Wylah* on Kickstarter thus was built around two major points. First, it was projecting the authors' commitment to Indigenous cultural popularisation and empowerment. They persuasively articulated their respect for Indigenous values and history and promoted their funding campaign as an opportunity for the members of Australian

public to make a difference for the Indigenous cause. Secondly, they presented their story as universally appealing. Overviews of their story not only emphasised cultural specificity, but also its universal relatability for Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike. It is a coming-of-age story about a teenage girl who has to grow up fast and save her people. From *Harry Potter* (Joan Rowling, 1997-2007) to *Telemachy* (Homer, 8th c. BC), the trope of a young person who has to grow up fast and embark on a high stakes journey to rescue their family or their people is probably as long as storytelling itself. By mixing a recognisable story structure with uniquely imaginative Indigenous cultural context, Pritchard and Gould tapped into an intriguing source of creativity that evidently sparks reader's interest.

As a result of their Kickstarter campaign, Pritchard and Gould received numerous donations in a very short time (Wylah Kickstarter 2024). The authors' initial goal to gather \$10,000 to self-publish their book was unexpectedly hit within the first three days (Studio 10 2022). Next week yielded them another \$11,000. With twice the expected budget on their hands and proof of a viable market, Pritchard and Gould's confidence in their book series grew. Gould shared that initially he doubted if *Wylah* would be received positively by the broader Australian readership:

I just felt like an immense pressure. Will it actually be good? Will it be a flop? Will we have to deal with all this political stuff? Will people just hate it? Will people just shun it? Will I be called a n*** on the street? Just like an absolute.... All this target, there is so much hate... But honestly... Like, the closer and closer that we got to the book, and after the Kickstarter - it went absolutely amazing! That kinda just relieved a lot of pressure. I was like, 'Oh! People actually want this!' Seeing the comments how people would love this, their kids will be growing up on this, that just relieved a lot of the pressure...

([censored] Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

While feelings of anxiety prior to publishing their very first book are common for new authors in general, Gould's specific fears that *Wylah* might provoke negative reactions from Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for its portrayal of Indigenous culture reveal deeper concerns around Indigenous representation in media. The complexities of Indigenous representation in Australia and overseas, weighted down by historical misrepresentations and fuelled by contested definitions of Indigenous identities, may sometimes make artists, writers, and media creators feel that making Indigenous stories and characters is akin to walking a

tightrope. For example, *Moana* had a budget of \$150 million (IMDb 2024), a team of cultural and academic advisors from Polynesia, and the legal, marketing, and distribution powers of Disney behind it; yet, this film was unable to avoid damaging scandals and controversy.

Of course, while the two cases are comparable, they are not identical. However, what this comparison reveals is that *Moana*'s and *Wylah*'s Indigenous cultural representation was received differently. The authors report having Kickstarter donors from all over Australia and also from overseas with some people supporting them from Singapore in the Asia-Pacific to Chile in South America (Sydney Opera House Education 2023). The success of their Kickstarter campaign eventually helped Pritchard and Gould to attract the attention of seven different publishers from whom the authors eventually received two respective offers. The social media pages of *Wylah* gathered followers who left affirming and encouraging comments. For example, during Book Week (a yearly event that encourages children to celebrate their favourite books by dressing up as characters) *Wylah*'s social media pages shared pictures of children who dressed up as characters from *Wylah*. Social media users such as the one quoted below left comments under these posts expressing their joy and appreciation of seeing children eagerly dressing up as Indigenous heroes:

[...] Must make it all hit home a bit to the authors, the visible impact you're making, bringing Koorie culture and representation to the forefront for kids, our future leaders. Hats off guys, I purchased 6 copies of *Wylah* and donated to my daughters primary school here in Warrnambool. My daughter told me this week that it's one of the books the class (grade 4) is reading. Little steps conquer mountains.¹³

This Facebook user remarks on the sense of impact for representation they felt after seeing children loving and celebrating an Indigenous story. They report purchasing six copies to donate to a local school which, in this context, feels like their attempt to personally contribute to the popularisation of Indigenous culture overall, almost as if they perceive *Wylah* as an embodiment of Indigenous culture. Two other people commented:

¹³ Facebook user, *Wylah* post comment, Facebook, 19/08/2022, viewed 11 July 2024, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AWYADP9Mp/>>.

So excited that she could go as a character of colour .. so not just meaningful for Indigenous kids but also Indian/Sri Lankan/brown Aussie kids¹⁴

This is incredible. I love seeing so many kids of all different ethnicities embracing Wylah and our proud, beautiful indigenous heritage.¹⁵

These two comments reflect the sense of empowerment *Wylah* seems to give to Indigenous children and also to children of other cultures and ethnicities who might relate to Wylah due to visual similarities with her. Wylah also resonates with children who share personal characteristics with her. For example, a news article reported this:

Gunditjmara pupil Shayla Chatfield, 9, is the only Indigenous student at Woodford Primary School and she said she was proud to dress up as Wylah.

“It represents my culture and my family”, she said. [...]

“Me and Wylah have a lot of things in common because she thinks she can’t do things but she can do it – and that’s what I feel like.”

(Prema 2022)

This pupil shared that she relates to Wylah not only because she is Indigenous, but also because Wylah represents empowerment for her. Wylah seemed to help this pupil to find confidence to dress up as an Indigenous character for a school Book Week event. Comments like this, mixed with general expressions of approval such as ‘[h]ow incredible! Just so moving to see proud indigenous culture celebrated [hands and heart-shaped eyes emojis]’ (Wylah Instagram, Instagram user 5/09/2023), outline an overall impression of general agreement that *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is a beneficial and positive initiative to promote and represent Indigenous cultures in the mainstream media.

The similarity between Moana and Wylah impacts people in several ways. For some, it works in favour of *Wylah*, capturing the imagination of the prospective readers and suggesting a

¹⁴ Instagram user (a), @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 31/08/2022, viewed 13 September 2023,

<https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCh6yKrrBXmo%2F%3Ffigsh%3DZ3U3MnM5ZzlsYm04&h=AT3KqgaGf0msmJSv-eIWxuZieHWVPLlvtM9cDn_uyHz45NB9-zWOye0eAi-lSK5-HNdTwpYSuW6hEeJ27RkYSfURo2O_SQnpMYDISricWaqUmALhuE_50yjhdZUiiivMG>.

¹⁵ Instagram user (b), @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 31/08/2022, viewed 13 September 2023,

<https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCh6yKrrBXmo%2F%3Ffigsh%3DZ3U3MnM5ZzlsYm04&h=AT3KqgaGf0msmJSv-eIWxuZieHWVPLlvtM9cDn_uyHz45NB9-zWOye0eAi-lSK5-HNdTwpYSuW6hEeJ27RkYSfURo2O_SQnpMYDISricWaqUmALhuE_50yjhdZUiiivMG>.

Disney-level (meaning high) level of production effort went into Pritchard and Gould's book series. *Wylah's* story and visuals indeed prompted several Instagram and Facebook users to remark under *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* official Facebook and Instagram posts: 'Pitch it to Disney!'¹⁶. These two Facebook users wrote similar messages under a video shared about *Wylah* by SBS Australia:

'Should be pitched to Disney [smiling emoji] I just finished watching Moana with my daughter and said we need Australian Indigenous stories, good luck, it looks amazing!'¹⁷

'To be honest, we need an aboriginal version of Moana in the main stream. Give the culture some global standing, every other culture has had a turn. Plus the aboriginals have some epic cultural and spiritual stories'¹⁸

Their argument for supporting *Wylah's* production is that Australian needs more Indigenous stories and that *Wylah* has the potential to be as successful as *Moana*. They both express their approval of popularising Indigenous cultures in the mainstream media. Another user wrote this:

'Your beautiful book, should be turn into movie too, hopefully [pray emoji] Disney pictures will see this amazing response to it & reach out to ya's! Cause It's about time we have our culture and inspiring characters like Wylah on big screen shown all over world! So wonderful to see our young mob, dress up as Wylah & her friends embracing your wonderful story [clap emoji] well done & great work the Wylah team are doing & creating for representation for Indigenous children [black, yellow and red hearts emoji] too Deadly as'¹⁹

¹⁶ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 2/03/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCamdgbhBnXI%2F%3Figs%3DMXc1MDExOW9uZ2d1eg%253D%253D&h=AT1gOzsmgOMeqK8ApeQInod0Ols_dIqNfKLG1SaB5bKlhtjdEFIZsSGEZ7xXoijwX5V4zkkoV7M4PBcKN0JEHmfljrlUjNezsvVfwFqMsII60L28drXXdkp2Z8PP7O3>.

¹⁷ Facebook user (a), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

¹⁸ Facebook user (b), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

¹⁹ Instagram user, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post comment, Instagram, 23/08/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FChmZiEUB6Q5%2F%3Figs%3DMWIzdjYyemJhM25seg%253D%253D&h=AT3T2YqzgRhwQoutmlAaAjmELYgUiPP47FwFwNx4JKQz-J1HI_Tdtvc-5njwAhRyVnwCgUjVY4f4NyTqGtBeazhb1SG7a7l-pM2VRZqgGkxeKmJNidWJNPGvYEy4neDY>.

These responses that connect *Wylah* to Disney and point to the hopes of seeing *Wylah* on the ‘big screen shown all over world’ (sic) reflect the potential of Pritchard and Gould’s character to succeed internationally. The character trope of a young feminist female protagonist has been successfully used by Disney for the last two decades in movies like *Moana* (2016), *Frozen* (2013), *Raya* (2021), *Brave* (2012), *Mulan* (1995), *Princess and the Frog* (2009) and more. The success of such characters as demonstrated by Disney over many years gave Pritchard an idea of how economically viable this trope can be in storytelling. The portrayal of *Wylah* as a local Indigenous and Australian character who can rival the success of Disney makes *Wylah* look like a symbol of a new turn in Indigenous cultural expression.

Another way in which the parallels between *Moana* and *Wylah* impact people is that it makes them aware of the differences how Indigenous and non-Indigenous creative works and initiatives are perceived. For example, the response of this Facebook user illustrates the dissatisfaction some people may have with the double standards of evaluating media in Australia:

‘So stealing a base story. This is culture appropriation. But that's OK if done by indigenous people [laugh emoji]’²⁰

A number of comments repeat this sentiment:

‘Sorry but that’s Moana from Motuni’²¹

‘Looks like they ripped off Moanna.’²²

‘Literally Moana with face paint’²³

These comments, especially the first one, might point to people’s frustration about different public attitudes towards the works of non-Indigenous authors and Indigenous authors. *Moana*, *Pocahontas*, and a list of other characters and stories that were written by non-Indigenous people inevitably caused some backlash from people who had problems with how they were represented. After years of such criticism, seeing a story resembling *Moana* so strongly in

²⁰ Facebook user (c), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

²¹ Facebook user (d), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

²² Facebook user (e), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

²³ Facebook user (f), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

looks, plot, and character design gathering so much support might cause some people to question what exactly makes *Wylah* better. However, it is also possible that some of these comments could point to people essentially seeing a dark-skinned Pacific Islander character and a dark-skinned Indigenous Australian character as indistinguishable due to *Moana*'s and *Wylah*'s visual ethnic coding. The nature of CGI animation, artistic fashions, and trending looks could make it difficult for creators to come up with truly visually unique characters. Thus, in the media market where Polynesian and Australian Indigenous characters are underrepresented, *Moana* and *Wylah* could seem like a repetition of a character trope. Yet, even in Disney, many princess characters, for example, Ariel from *Little Mermaid* (1989) and Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010), also represent the same trope of 'fish-out-of-the-water' stories featuring naïve and energetic protagonists whose facial features look similar.

While *Moana* and *Wylah* are distinct stories, their similarities make it possible to compare their reception and gain insights into how people perceive an Indigenous-produced creative project. Comparing *Moana* and *Wylah* already suggests people hold different attitudes towards Indigenous and non-Indigenous representations of Indigenous stories and characters. While *Moana* was criticised in online public forums, among Pacific Islander cultural communities, and academics, *Wylah* was supported and promoted by private individuals, schoolteachers, local Warrnambool cultural authorities, some Indigenous organisations (such as Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative) and marketing corporate bodies. Despite the controversy surrounding *Moana*, this film made a significant profit for Disney and general international public opinion responded to it very well. *Moana* received 22 wins and 90 nominations from various professional film industry bodies, including the Academy Awards, Critics' Choice, and more. In comparison, how well did *Wylah* do from the professional literary point of view?

Critique of Indigenous art

Wylah collected an impressive number of literary nominations and was repeatedly shortlisted among the most popular and successful books. Yet, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* book franchise is the first literary attempt of Pritchard and Gould. Having no previous writing experience, the authors expected to receive constructive criticism upon the publication of their first book that could help them to improve. The publisher helped them to connect with Kevin Brophy, an author, poet, and a professor of Creative Writing in the Melbourne University. Brophy agreed

to write a review on *Wylah*. His review publicly available on Readingtime website reads very complimentary. It first recaps the plot of the first book and concludes with this statement:

This highly professional production will appeal to anyone interested in an Australian native backdrop to an exciting magical tale of dragons, heroes and villains. It is an epic tale in the making, one that cannot be contained in a single volume, so be warned young readers, you will be flying on from this book to the next.

(Brophy 2022).

Brophy's review is highly complementary of Pritchard and Gould's representation of Indigenous Australian culture. He praises *Wylah* to be a captivating fantasy adventure story that sets off an entire new franchise. As Brophy is a professional whose literary criticism is respected in the Australian literary world, he was expected to provide a fair review of book one of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. However, the only literary evaluation he passes is a remark that *Wylah* is a 'highly professional production'. Hundreds of positive responses from children and the sale of 30,000 copies of the first and second books (Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023) point to the fact that *Wylah* is an appealing story with likeable characters. However, as both writers are first-time published authors, Gould and Pritchard do not yet perceive themselves as professional authors and they could benefit from feedback to learn how to improve further and write better. The lack of criticism from Brophy came as a surprise for the authors. Gould expressed his disbelief when he first read Brophy's review:

With this book... we had one of the best critics read it, and critique it. He first off gave us like, 4-stars [out of 5], and we were like, OK, there must be some criticism that we can learn from. We had a read – there was no bad stuff in it! I was like, 'why!' [laughs]... [later the critic] said, 'Oh, I went back actually gave you a 5 star!'

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Gould's disbelief in the generous rating and a commendation from Kevin Brophy point to his confusion about the lack of criticism. On one hand, such response could be explained by the fact that Gould and Pritchard are publishing a children's book series. Stories intended for young audiences are often discussed in terms of their educational and entertainment potential. On the other hand, the reason might be rooted in a different issue. The discomfort of passing

criticism about Indigenous art, or the lack of knowledge of how to express it or what to comment on, was discussed by Michaels in his book *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons* (1994).

Michaels studied Indigenous fine art that was sold or commissioned from Indigenous Warlpiri artists, cases of Indigenous rock art restoration, and Indigenous murals commissioned for public buildings, finding that almost none of these examples were ever evaluated as ‘bad’. Instead, he states that Indigenous art was often ‘falsely judged’ along the lines of ‘traditionalism’ and ‘authenticity [...] that, by avoiding definition, seeks to avoid aesthetic controversy and suppress possible alternative "nonexpert" judgments’ (Michaels 1994, p. 146). This behaviour of avoiding passing aesthetic judgements on Indigenous art out of an anxiety of appearing ‘nonexpert’ and sparking controversy around an Indigenous creative project seems to be reflected in the hesitancy to offer criticism of *Wylah*. Instead, readers and reviewers point out the value of traditional culture represented in *Wylah*, essentially connecting the quality of Pritchard and Gould’s writing to the ethnographic data that is present within the text.

To investigate the readers’ feedback on *Wylah*, I decided to resort to studying online book reviews and public endorsements the book series received. It should be acknowledged that it is difficult to ascribe motivations to online comments and star ratings. However, in the absence of formal literary book reviews beyond Brophy’s recommendation (that was also posted on a literary review website), online responses from *Wylah*’s readers were the best pool of opinions available. Moreover, this provided me with the opportunity to view what people considered appropriate to express publicly and how they chose to phrase it.

The patterns I found align with Michaels’ argument – most of the reviews, both critical and praising, agree that *Wylah*’s representation of Indigenous characters and culture is a major benefit to the book. As of July 2024, Goodreads, one of the biggest book review online portals founded by Amazon, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior book 1 Guardians* has scored 3.88 out of 5 stars based on 178 reviews. In 5-star, 4-star and 3-star reviews (there are eight 2-star and two 1-star reviews, but they feature no written feedbacks, therefore, I leave them out of analysis), the readers overwhelmingly praised Pritchard and Gould’s representation of Indigenous culture. For example, these three reviews praise *Wylah* for its Indigenous cultural content:

‘[...] Clearly delineated character voices tell of an adventure through an ancient First Nations culture, based on Jordan Gould's own people of the Maar Nation and sprinkled with their Language, Peek Whurrong. [...]’²⁴

‘A fantasy book based around Indigenous mythology and spirituality, a great concept and a fun way to introduce kids to this culture and history. The use of megafauna creatures is fabulous’²⁵

‘A fantasy based on First Nations history, with a young female warrior. What is not to like about this rather unique middle grade novel. I loved the illustrations, references to traditional lifestyle, and the wit. Unfortunately I felt that the quality of the writing was not consistent and at times rather slow. Regardless, I'll be recommending this.’²⁶

Among reader reviews on Goodreads, the introduction of First Nations’ culture, language, imagery, mythology, and characters was cited universally as a positive and beneficial feature of the book. This is most notable in the last quoted review, where the reader pointed to some technical writing problems, but still left a recommendation and praised the book’s representation of Indigenous cultures, lifestyle, and knowledges.

Occasionally, 3-out-of-5-stars reviews featured no criticism at all, instead reading entirely positive. For example, this reader wrote: ‘7/10, a very interesting fantasy book, with an Indigenous twist’ [even though the text indicated 7 out of 10, the actual score was set as 3 out of 5]²⁷. This reader did not include any explanation for deducting two stars, but did provide praise. Another illustrative example is this 3-star review. It starts with a short general recap of the book’s plot and ends with this statement:

²⁴ Reader’s review (a), Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1 review post, Goodreads, 28/12/2022, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

²⁵ Reader’s review (b), Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1 review post, Goodreads, 27/07/2022, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

²⁶ Reader’s review (c), Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1 review post, Goodreads, 27/03/2023, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

²⁷ Reader’s review (d), Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1 review post, Goodreads, 18/04/2024, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

‘[...] As well as being a non-stop adventure story for middle grade readers, this book is also a great teaching tool for all of us to learn more about First Nations history, culture and traditions [...]’²⁸

There is no explanation included to justify the intermediate rating this reader awarded the book. Instead, this review highlighted *Wylah*’s educational potential. Among the reviews, there is one which has no star rating attached (to clarify, not zero stars, but the absence of any star rating), but still featuring a text comment. This is a very lengthy critical review which remarks on *Wylah*’s narration flaws (‘The book finishes half way through the mission’), some unsubtlety in metaphors for colonisation (‘The themes are as subtle as a sledgehammer, for example, the white man (villain) says: ‘Our powers are far superior to yours’’), the explicit use of plot devices (‘Nearly everything happen merely to further the plot’), and disagreement with the story logic (‘all the adults send her into danger instead of themselves’)²⁹. In the very end, the review ends with this statement:

‘There are some excellent things about the book including having an Aboriginal girl as a protagonist, lots of important information about Aboriginal lives, and lots of references to various Aboriginal dreamtime narratives, such as the seven sisters and Tiddalick the frog. I loved all those references. This is a starting point, I hope to see many more super hero books with Aboriginal children as the protagonists.’³⁰

This example stands out because it lists specific narrative and writing flaws within the book, something only a few other reviews did. It is impossible to establish the motives of this reader with certainty, but I could not help it to ask whether this reviewer decided not to allocate the star rating to the book to avoid skewing the overall public rating that is shown next to the book title?

If that is the case, this might indicate the reader’s wish to support the promotion of Indigenous cultures by pointing to flaws that could be improved and praising the idea behind the book. This might be further reflected in their concluding remarks that focus on the positives of representing Indigenous culture. This expression of approval adds to the pattern of praising

²⁸ Reader’s review (e), *Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1* review post, Goodreads, 11/06/2022, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

²⁹ Reader’s review (f), *Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1* review post, Goodreads, 15/03/2023, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

³⁰ Ibid.

the inclusion of Indigenous culture and mythology. The sentiment that there should be more books with Indigenous protagonists is echoed in several other reviews such as ‘[...] We need more of these kind of books for young readers [...]’³¹ or ‘[...] If anything, it was great to see Indigenous characters sporting their traditional dress - again, something I never see and hope to see more of. [...]’³².

The fact that most of the reviews and social media comments repeatedly emphasise praise for featuring Indigenous characters, cultures, languages, and extinct megafauna animals suggest that the wider Australian audiences react this way to *Wylah* because this is an Indigenous creative mainstream media project. The sentiments of encouragement and the wish to see more Indigenous stories in the mainstream media market seems to capture people’s perception of *Wylah* as an Indigenous story first, and then as a fantasy adventure book.

The general lack of public or literary criticism baffled the authors. Gould shares his disbelief that *Wylah the Korrie Warrior* has no room for improvement:

The fact that this book has barely ... little to no bad criticism, of just like, you know, of the ways that the book can improve itself. It made me be like, ‘Yay! It’s almost... It’s a perfect run! But also, I can’t improve!’ [...] ...comments I wanna see now is how can the book improve, and I am keeping a keen eye on that and have not seen one yet [laughs] which is like... come on...

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Gould’s feeling that the reviews are intentionally overly positive caused him to suspect that his and Pritchard’s work is judged differently by the public and literary professionals. Gould joked that maybe if they make the book ‘purposefully bad’, then they might finally receive ‘some proper criticism’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023).

Back in 1993, Marcia Langton pointed at the problem that existed in the field of Indigenous art and media. Despite the growth and experimental development of Indigenous TV and media production in the twentieth century, there was a distinct lack of critical theory on or knowledge of such production which impeded the ability of critics to discuss and evaluate

³¹ Reader’s review (g), *Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1* review post, Goodreads, 30/06/2022, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

³² Reader’s review (h), *Wylah the Koorie Warrior #1* review post, Goodreads, 4/07/2022, viewed 26 July 2024, <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61150507-guardians>>.

these works (Langton 1993, p. 23). Specifically, there was very few titles of literature on anti-colonial critique of media production about Indigenous people. Lalene Jayamanne, a Sri Lankan filmmaker, and Ann Kaplan, a US film theorist are among the few people who provided reviews on works of Tracey Moffatt, the famous Australian Indigenous filmmaker, photographer, and artist. In the twenty first century, the critique of Indigenous art still remains weak and the ability of media and art professionals to discuss and evaluate Indigenous media and art production remains somewhat limited. The problem that Pritchard and Gould are facing might be an extension of the issue Langton and Michaels outlined.

Michaels (1994, p. 143) notes that in art, the identity of the artist often contributes to the assigned value of their artwork: '[a] "bad" Picasso will probably cost more than a "good" Sidney Nolan'. In the case of Pritchard and Gould, *Wylah* is their literary debut; therefore, they cannot be judged based on their previous creative oeuvre. However, if the quality of their work is judged based on markers of 'authenticity' and 'traditionalism', it would make sense if their Indigenous and Pacific Islander identities contribute to the reception of their work. Perhaps, in the future, when there are more Indigenous mainstream media titles available for consumption and evaluation, the media and literary criticism would be passed easier. But in the meantime, it is important to investigate how was the association between 'authenticity' of representation and the authors' Indigenous identities was constructed. Could it be that the authors perpetuate this perception themselves? The study of the marketing campaign of *Wylah* could help to understand the relations between traditional First Nations culture, Indigenous identities of the authors, and their book series.

In this chapter, I have outlined the scope of *Wylah's* apparent success, compared its reception to a similar non-Indigenous media project, *Moana*. I then analysed how people's reviews reflected their perception of *Wylah*. In the next chapter I will study specific tactics Pritchard and Gould used to establish the value of *Wylah* and how it ultimately relates to their Indigenous identities.

Chapter 6. Wylah: Indigenous business vs. Indigenous culture?

Wylah's advertising is strategic and it is built around several selling points of the book series. The first being practical uses of the book, and the second – Indigenous cultural elements. In this chapter I will explore how such marketing strategy helps Pritchard and Gould's business development, what complications and risks it creates, and how the authors mitigate these risks.

Cultural educational material

To distinguish *Wylah* advertisements from other mainstream book advertisements, the authors simplified their message, focusing on two key points: educational potential and Indigenous culture. Messages emphasising these two points appear in practically every advertisement for their first book. For example, Pritchard and Gould commissioned a number of radio commercials, advertising their book series as 'inspired by the First Nations history and grounded in culture' (KIIS 1065, n.y.). Major radio stations like Nova 106.9, 3AW, 3GB, iHeart Radio, Nine Plus and KIIS 1065 supported Pritchard and Gould by playing *Wylah* advertisements on air. The text of these commercials represented derivatives of this example:

Are you a parent? A grandparent? Or maybe a teacher or librarian? Then listen up. Go to the bookstore and grab yourself a copy of the new Indigenous fantasy book – *Wylah the Koorie Warrior!* Australian kids are loving this book, making it a Booktopia and Readings best-seller *and* it showcases Indigenous culture in a way you've never seen before. That makes me really proud! [...]

(*Wylah Radio Mix*, n.y.)

This advertisement is voiced by someone with a distinctly youthful voice to emphasise the target audience of the book series, but speaks directly to parents, grandparents, teachers, and librarians, addressing the people who would realistically be the ones purchasing the books. The statement that 'Australian kids are loving it' signifies the wider Australian audience the authors envision as their readership. This makes it clear it is a book for a mainstream audience, as opposed to being mostly targeted at an Indigenous cohort. It sparks curiosity by claiming that *Wylah* shows Indigenous culture in a new or unusual light, different from how others have previously represented Indigenous culture. It concludes with the statement that

such representation is making the voice actor proud, connecting *Wylah* to the Indigenous pride sentiment that has emerged as one of the main trends in framing Indigenous identity. Such targeted messaging that focuses on the practical benefits of the book as a cultural and educational resource promotes *Wylah* as a new and unique cultural phenomenon that has hit the mainstream Australian market. This advertisement encapsulates *Wylah*'s primary appeal to the public – it is an engaging story for children that is also educational; it represents Indigenous cultures in a somewhat unusual way that is novel and celebratory.

Pritchard and Gould market their book series as a resource for teachers that can fit into the primary school curriculum. They include Instagram media posts that suggest the best use of *Wylah* as study material, emphasising cultural practices that are depicted in the book series and the inclusion of 'near extinct' Peek Whurrong language^{33 34}. The authors also flag *Wylah* as a more general educational source, pointing to moral and ethical lessons in the story. Allen & Unwin, *Wylah*'s publisher, released Teacher Tips resources discussing themes and activities teachers could draw on when using *Wylah* as class material. Scholastic, the largest publisher and distributor of children's books in the world (Scholastic 2024), also released Teacher Essentials (2022) outlining the educational potential of *Wylah*. On *Wylah*'s official website, the authors have a separate 'resources' tab that has teaching activities such as colouring sheets, language workshops, character fact sheets, and questionnaires for teachers in open access. It is clear that Pritchard and Gould intentionally market *Wylah* as an educational resource that can be used for learning about Indigenous cultures.

(Figure 23: 7 things inside the book, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior 2022. Image description: a cover of *Wylah* book One. Text around the cover says: '7 things inside the book: extensive glossary of Aboriginal words translated into English and pronunciations; Endorsed by local Aboriginal Elders; One of the characters has autism; *Wylah* is 14 years old, strong-willed and independent; Kids will love the

³³ @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 24/05/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <[³⁴ @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 25/05/2022, viewed 13 September 2023, <\[111\]\(https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCd8YuxnhoUn%2F%3Ffigsh%3DMWxkZDhjYTdydXZkZQ%253D%253D&h=AT0i1wPXy4dT3kH3pCPYZjGIaGD_9g4jS1-0FpMFr6k-_ROeB2szmxNaFsuJg3fkYrT0ssFZxbzphzDg4FUdyAfRyuW0Syun2dtvxeVO9zL_DSqwXm8hvdqy0yC0LzLH>.</p></div><div data-bbox=\)](https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCd6xSEGBDf_%2F%3Ffigsh%3DMWUwOWwzYzhlcjR3NQ%253D%253D&h=AT3Holio6DOYTAoGhsainq0zrMWagF7DYG1c2L1pUfZwG_zj6j4G7YFgEPa5HwFfxP53YauIsU4fhovvR9bF-iPKNCTdAztXF6_RfZA6hTKdyK1pV15-hzdihGcLt3D_>.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Megafauna Guardians; Non-stop action chapters; Contains near extinct Aboriginal language Peek Whurrong’.

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(Figure 24: 7 things inside for teachers, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior 2022). Image description: a cover of Wylah book One. Text around the cover says: ‘7 things inside for teachers: First Nations cultural and conservation practices; Engaging, humorous, heartfelt and exciting for readers; Historical fiction genre; Aboriginal language: Peek Whurrong; Strong coming of age character arc; Diversity in characters, autism represented; Themes of courage, responsibility, friendship, loyalty, and many more’.

https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCd8YuXnhoUn%2F%3Figsh%3DMWxkZDhjYTdydXZkZQ%253D%253D&h=AT0i1wPXy4dT3kH3pCPYZjGIaGD_9g4jS1-0FpMFr6k-ROeB2szmxNaFsuJg3fkYrT0ssFZxbzphzDg4FUdyAfRyuW0Syun2dtvxeVO9zL_DSqwXm8hvdqy0yC0LzLH>.

Gould and Pritchard state that they designed *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* to be one of the first up-beat, family-friendly, and educational fantasy adventure stories based on Indigenous culture written for the wider Australian audience. Set in the distant past of Australia, a setting that is rarely showcased in the works of children’s adventure fiction, featuring extinct Australian megafauna (diprotodon, thylacine, *dromornis stirtoni*, etc.), and introducing Indigenous mythical creatures (such as *Tiddalik*, *bunyip*, *yowie*, and more), *Wylah* presents Australia to the readers from a different angle. In their ample promotion materials, Pritchard and Gould invite the readers to experience Australia before it was colonised and urbanised, while also expanding it by adding magic, spiritual beings, and mythological creatures. Through the pages of the *Wylah* books, the reader can imagine travelling through the lands of south-east Victoria, meeting local Indigenous tribes, and picking up some limited basic vocabulary from the Peek Whurrong (Warrnambool) language. The book series also leans heavily into questions of ethics and morality, responsibility and vulnerability, and explores the importance of kindness and forgiveness. Such content can potentially help children to learn something about pre-colonial Australia, awaken interest in Indigenous cultures and languages, and delve into some of the common complexities of growing up such as taking on responsibility and discovering your personal values.

As a result, it seems that Pritchard and Gould's marketing campaign that focuses on promoting *Wylah* as an educational resource on Indigenous culture helped them to generate initial interest in their first book's concept, while the actual educational and entertainment value of the content seemed to help them secure readership numbers who proceeded to buy their subsequent books. Using advertisements and marketing slogans, Pritchard and Gould are tapping into the sentiments of Indigenous pride, targeting the mainstream Australian book market, and promoting *Wylah* as a teaching resource that can help educators to initiate conversations about Indigenous cultures and history. Initially this might feel contradictory, because Indigenous cultural celebration and Indigenous pride are often positioned as protest movements. However, what Pritchard and Gould claim they wanted to create was a character that could bring Indigenous pride and empowerment as a part of mainstream, a sentiment that could gather Indigenous and non-Indigenous people behind it. In the wave of the heightened public support for Indigenous self-determination, initiative, and cultural revival that followed the Uluru Statement from the Heart, Pritchard reported that he saw the opportunity to help the cause and create a monetisable character. Mainstream market gives *Wylah* access to a wider cross-section of Australian audiences which could help the authors to boost their sales and find new opportunities for business.

Indigenous business

While such financially and strategically driven actions are an integral part of practically any business project, a company's straightforward prioritisation of profit is usually frowned upon by the public. Big financial companies like Disney are often accused of a 'mindless cash grab' or 'shameless' self-promotion when they try to connect marketing of their products to real social issues. For example, the marketing of *Moana* as a film that promotes environmentalism and Indigenous cultural celebration was criticised by some members of the Samoan community as ingenuine, performative, and, essentially, as cultural commodification (Tamaira & Fonoti 2018, p. 298). Pritchard and Gould's project, as an attempt to introduce Indigenous cultural representation to the national and international mainstream media, is at risk of attracting similar criticism. In fact, Gould and Pritchard are conscious of these risks and they mitigate them by trying to be transparent about their goals, motives, and finances. When talking about *Wylah* publicly, on interviews, talks, and podcasts (Studio 10, 6 June 2022; Australian Writers' Centre 2023; Sydney Opera House Education 2023; *Wylah* Kickstarter 2022), the authors share details of *Wylah*'s production such as the sources of their project's

finances, inspirations they used in creating *Wylah*, and, most importantly, their motive of promoting Indigenous culture to the mainstream media in an open manner.

Pritchard and Gould both insist that their project's ultimate goal is not related to personal enrichment. In a podcast where he was invited as a guest, Pritchard shared that popularising Indigenous culture is his goal regardless of whether it will bring him income or not:

We wanted to get the book out to as many people as possible. We don't care about if we make any money from it. Aboriginal culture in mainstream media is our goal.

(Pritchard in Australian Writers' Centre 2023)

Similarly, while reflecting on what does 'success' means for *Wylah*, Gould states that financial gains was never the main parameter of success for him either:

I never had money on my mind. Like, I knew... that is something I could make money off, like yeah, absolutely, but the main focus was getting my culture out there, reinventing the culture on mass media, mainstream media, and having my name remembered down generations. That has been my main goal ever since Richard approached me with *Wylah*. It hasn't change and it will never change.

(Gould, personal communication, 12/10/2023)

Based on these statements, for Gould, success is not inherently tied to profitability of business. Rather, he says it is tied to community contribution in the form of revitalising Indigenous culture and building personal relations with the members of his different overlapping communities.

The authors seem to put emphasis on the fact that they do not view profitability as the main motivator for their work on the *Wylah* project. Pritchard told me that while *Wylah* has been nominated to numerous awards, shortlisted at book competitions and included in the top ratings, it is not (yet) a profitable business. Pritchard explains:

Although this series is a best-seller, a known best-seller now, it hasn't made a lot of money. Because it's just in Australia. Even though you have sold 30,000 books, after you take away all the other expenses [related to publication process, marketing, printing of merchandise, etc.], you end up with like...

2,000 bucks. So, financial award is like, zero. [...] So, success is not financially good motivator. If you thinking money is a term of measurement of success, um... it has failed [laughs].

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

At the time of the interview, Pritchard claimed that their profit so far, after all business and production expenses, was around \$2,000. As Gould mentioned to me in one of our earlier interviews, Pritchard and Gould would usually redirect most of their profits from *Wylah* back into their business to uplift the quality of their products (for example, to print their book covers with metallic textures, and so on) (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). This might be what Pritchard means by saying that they paid themselves only \$2,000 after ‘all other expenses’. As I cannot confirm this information, it is difficult to evaluate Pritchard and Gould’s financial success. Despite noting that financially their project might not have been very successful, Pritchard states that *Wylah* has been an enormous success from other points of view. Pritchard feels very emotional about the fact that a baby girl was named after *Wylah*:

That... that is massive, I would never ever in my wildest dreams consider this! Think of this ever happening! [...] But this happened, someone did it! And I am like, ‘I don’t know anything that can top that experience of thinking that someone has gotten your character and named a human being after someone you created!’ That is... unheard of... that’s the kind of success that you don’t even see large Hollywood movies achieving. So, in that way, it is more successful that I have ever imagined. That level of engagement.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

For Pritchard, the naming of a baby in honour of their character signifies the utmost level of community engagement. He mentions that such occurrences are rare even in Hollywood blockbusters. Thus, he believes that *Wylah* book series succeeded in being appealing to the readers and that their character is being successfully perceived as a positive role model.

Another measurement of *Wylah*’s success according to Pritchard is professional recognition. Pritchard reports that he was invited to review someone else’s book:

I reviewed it and endorsed it and they put my name at the front cover. [...] I have never reviewed a book before. And to choose my quote and to put it on the front cover kind of is a little bit of legitimacy.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

Wylah's popularity helped the authors to establish their reputation in the literary world. As a known author, Pritchard can now endorse and review books, influencing the readers' views and opinions. This makes him perceive himself as a legitimate author, which could be a powerful realisation. Concluding his thoughts, Pritchard connects these indications of success to the good relations that he and Gould have established with Indigenous communities, among the writers, and with their readership overall:

All the good will that comes back to you. Reviewed the book – you get your name on the cover, that's an achievement. You do your best in the book and so a child gets a name after you [your character], that's another successful moment. The book becomes the number sixteen on the list of fifty – you're in the top twenty books in Australia, of all books for kids on that particular list – that's another level of success. The kids are engaged [...], that's another type of success. So, it's those sorts of things that gage your success.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

'All the good will' that Pritchard and Gould receive for their efforts is a general indication for them that *Wylah* has succeeded. Sensibly, the authors admit that they do not completely discount the role of business profitability. Both say that earning enough to work on *Wylah* full-time is their vision of 'ultimate success', their 'end goal' (Gould, personal communication, 23/03/2023; Gould, personal communication, 12/10/23; Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023). There is certainly good will in Pritchard and Gould's approach to their business that is evident in the impact they achieve on their local community and many readers who feel connected to *Wylah*'s characters. Whether or not *Wylah* is or will be profitable, the authors seem to value making a positive impact on their local and nation-wide communities.

The authors consciously juxtapose their commitment to do good by Indigenous culture to the financial motivations of big multinational media corporations. When discussing Indigenous cultural representation done by such media giants as Disney, Pixar, DreamWorks, and others, Pritchard commented that such companies prioritise financial gains rather than appropriate representation:

Hollywood doesn't really... they see it differently. They see a product that they are trying to design for the mass market, culture comes second.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023)

In this statement, Pritchard refers to 'Hollywood' as a synecdoche for major international media creators and distributors. But by saying that in Hollywood, 'they see it differently', Pritchard brings up the contrast with his and Gould's business goal to help spread Indigenous culture. Effectively, the perception of this distinction is akin to the perception of difference in the business practices of any small business and large company. Crudely put, smaller scale production businesses are often regarded as having means and incentives to contribute to local communities and engage in responsible business practices. Conversely, businesses that produce goods on an industrial scale and to a wide cross section of consumers would be more focused on achieving faster and larger production numbers while seeking lower costs. However, in reality the distinction is never that simple.

Large companies with international influence often participate in or initiate social impact programs. Disney, for example, self-reported to donate more than \$235 million USD for charity and invested \$145 million USD into programs that benefit underrepresented communities in the 2023 financial year (Disney Impact 2024). In its conservation efforts, Disney has directed more than \$125 million USD towards wildlife and habitat preservation since 1995 (Disney Impact 2024). Even if these sums might represent small percentages of the company's profits, such donations can make a difference in social impact programs. Few small businesses can afford to donate or raise such significant amounts of money. These and many other Disney's non-for-profit initiatives make it a company that does put value on community development and social responsibility.

However, despite the efforts of Disney to uphold social responsibility, it is still criticised for being profit oriented. Certainly, Pritchard and Gould feel supported because they are Indigenous creatives who have a social license to say they are contributing to spreading and reviving Indigenous culture. They run a small business, they have support of their Indigenous community, they donate their books to their local libraries – these gestures could seem compelling for the public. The evidence of the impact that Pritchard and Gould make comes in the forms of Book Week events where children of different backgrounds dress up like Wylah and her friends. It comes as reports from teachers who share that their students love reading *Wylah* in the classroom and enjoy recreating some of the cultural practices outlined in

the book. On the other hand, if Disney said that they help represent Indigenous cultures, their motivations would be under scrutiny.

As Pritchard and Gould also target ‘the mass market’ much like Disney, this poses the question of how to maintain a balance between business profitability and cultural representation. Such thoughts linger on the authors’ minds, causing them to fear being blamed for making money off culture. Gould told me that he thinks some Indigenous people might react negatively to their business:

We have put in consideration that some people, especially the rural Aboriginal folks they might see that we are just trying to make the profit off the culture. We continuously try to make it obvious that we are not here for the money. Money is nice, we need money to live, and also to keep this [project] alive and keep it going. But that’s not our main focus. Obviously, the main focus is to get the culture out there and the story. And make it a fun story so that people could grow up on it.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Anticipating push back from rural communities for ‘making profit off the culture’, the authors consciously included their social impact goals into their marketing and public statements about *Wylah*. This statement also reveals Gould’s positionality as an ‘urban’ Indigenous person, an important point to which I will return in the subsequent chapters. During the same interview, Gould conveyed his concern about being judged by someone from Indigenous missions:

It’s just, a lot of people, especially people on the mission, they don’t really get it. People my age, they are just ‘Oh, you’re just doing it for money, and all that’. It’s like, ‘I am trying to get the story out there, I am trying to live!’

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Here Gould expresses his anxiety that Indigenous people from missions might accuse him of profiting off culture. Even though this statement suggests that Gould has had such exchanges with people, he told me that no one has actually said this to him. On the contrary, Gould reported that people expressed their joy about him and Pritchard bringing an Indigenous story to children across Australia:

We hadn't had any people coming up saying 'Oh, you're only doing this for the money, this and that'. A lot of people... We even had some rural [Indigenous] people, come out and say: 'Oh, you're doing something fantastic, you're bringing the culture back alive... even people from the missions feel so comfortable bringing out their culture and, like, teach people the language because of you'.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

There is indeed little to no evidence of readers criticising Gould and Prichard for taking the opportunity to earn money by selling their books featuring Indigenous culture. However, even though Gould's fears do not seem to be manifested, he still dwells on them and puts effort into avoiding such criticism:

...but we still wanna make it obvious that we are not doing it [writing and selling *Wylah* book series] just for the money. And usually, like, the merch sales and all that - that just gives us a lot more money that will enable us to do *Wylah* stuff full-time. You know, be able to pay ourselves a wage, pay for bills, food, and rent and all that stuff and be able to spend a lot on *Wylah* as well, to get more products out there, and make it 'stay alive' essentially.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

This quotation indicates that despite having little to no criticism or resistance to *Wylah* using Indigenous culture as part of the sales appeal, Gould feels obligated to explain why earning money from the sales of *Wylah* is something that he would like to accomplish. He lists bills, food, and rent, something that could be seen as the bare minimum for living, as how he would spend the sales money. Gould implies that the rest of the money will go back to their project to cover production costs and other related business expenses:

Every cent that we got from the Kickstarter just went straight into the *Wylah* account, and so far we haven't even used all the Kickstarter money yet... We got so much more than we thought...

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Defensively approaching the hypothetical issue of being accused of capitalising on Indigenous culture points to the authors' anxiety about mixing Indigenous culture with business. Gould has internalised some of the political and cultural dynamics that exist within Indigenous communities which shape questions of sharing benefit and exploitation or greed. These internalised dynamics shape his approach to business and readers' interactions.

In the context of Indigenous culture, the word 'business' is often used differently from its meaning in Western Eurocentric cultures. For example, Foley (2013, p. 25) explains:

Funeral and mourning practices are commonly known as 'Sorry Business', financial matters are referred to as 'Money Business', and the secret-sacred rituals distinct to each gender are known as 'Women's' or 'Men's Business'.

It leans into the meaning of a communal activity rather than a specifically commercial activity or profession. In her book *Aboriginal business: alliances in a remote Australian town* (2009, p. 96), Christen argues that the main reason for why Indigenous businesses could struggle or be slow to emerge is the discrepancy between the Western and Indigenous understandings of what a 'business' is and what are its functions. She explains that Indigenous people's understanding of business is closely connected to the acknowledgement of community needs, association, and accountability to kin and country (Christen 2009, p. viii). As a result, community development seems to be directly or indirectly found at the heart of most Indigenous organisations that operate in Indigenous communities, reports Christen (2009, p. 85) in the context of her study in Tennant Creek. For example, the workers at Papulu Apparr-Kari, an organisation that deals with language maintenance, find themselves performing tasks that go beyond their roles on a daily basis, for example, helping members of their community to deal with issues like healthcare, housing, financial issues (ibid.).

This reveals a complex set of relations Indigenous people in Tennant Creek have with business organisations and service providers in their community. On one hand, these organisations are able to maintain trust and connections with people, gain insights into the real pressing needs and wishes of people, and be able assist them in meaningful ways (Christen 2009, p. 86). On the other hand, Christen (ibid.) reports that such organisations in Indigenous communities find it challenging to focus on their core functions, corporate values, and organisational goals: workers often reported that their relatives or community members in general would come to them asking for money, transportation, access, favours, and so on, and the refusal to these requests would sometimes trigger accusations of disregarding social

responsibility or threats of violence (ibid.). Another challenge of Indigenous organisations that operate in communities is that the decision-making process and organisational management often does not depend on the official representative structure, as people within and outside of these organisations are able to find other avenues of influence to advocate for their interests (Christen 2009, p. 91). It is, thus, evident that the discrepancy between a Western vision of a business defined through the lens of market logic differs significantly from an Indigenous understanding that is related to connections and accountability.

As a result of this cultural clash, many Indigenous organisations experience problems from the very start: they are often intended to deliver services or advocate for non-uniform communities who have a variety of needs, wishes, and agendas; they are built on Western principles of organisation and function that does not always account for the ways communities operate; staff may not be sufficiently trained to perform assigned tasks; administration and management structures may be unreliable and weakly established; which, in return, may lead to problems with accountability (Christen 2009, p. 96). However, while these issues may arise for various Indigenous organisations, this does not mean that Indigenous people across the country are unable to set up and run successful businesses.

In regards to business in the Western sense, Indigenous entrepreneurs have been setting up their services, trades, and start-ups with steady progress. Since the 1990s to 2011, the number of self-employed Indigenous people rose from 4,600 to 12,500 (Foley 2013, p. 25). In 2021, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2025) reported that there were total of 17 907 registered Indigenous people who managed their businesses with top leading industries being listed as construction, other services, health care and social assistance, administrative and support services, professional, and scientific and technical services. Notably, businesses related to mass media, publishing, or entertainment are yet to attract significant entrepreneurial interest. In 2003, a telecommunication company Message Stick Communications Ltd that is owned and managed by the Indigenous majority of stakeholders was founded. This company provides IT and communications services for the government and enterprise sectors (Message Stick 2025). Another notable business in this field is Magabala Books. Magabala Books is Indigenous-owned and led publisher based in Broome, Western Australia. It is an independent, non-for-profit organisation led by Indigenous educational, creative, and business professionals. Magabala Books is prominent in the publishing business for its dedication to provide professional development opportunities to emerging Indigenous writers and illustrators and for advocacy it provides in relation to copyright and cultural intellectual

property. In 2019, it was named the fastest growing independent small publisher in the country and awarded Small Publisher of the Year at the Australian Book Industry Awards in 2020.

Today, there are a number of national (and state) Indigenous business representative and advocacy bodies that promote Indigenous business development such as National Indigenous Business Chambers Alliance, the First Nations Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), or the Indigenous Business Council of Australia ('IBCA'). Indigenous support programs aimed at helping more Indigenous people participate in sustainable business have started to appear in recent years. Such initiatives as the nation-wide Reach Out program by the Australian Government (ATO 2024) or the state-wide Aboriginal Business Advisory Initiative by the NSW Government (NSW Government 2024) have only appeared recently and there are relatively few well-known and established Indigenous businesses, especially in media and entertainment, that could be regarded as a model for Indigenous business.

With culturally different understandings of business, the history of Indigenous cultural heritage being used, misrepresented, removed, or sold without appropriate consent or via deception, it is unsurprising that many people might feel hesitant approaching Indigenous cultural representation, starting an Indigenous-owned business, or selling Indigenous-themes goods. The increasingly complex and region-specific set of regulations and protocols applied to Indigenous cultural heritage preservation adds to the confusion and uncertainty around how to share, recreate, or teach Indigenous knowledges, skills, and spirituality. Despite the anxiety Pritchard and Gould hold in being seen as 'ripping people off' coldheartedly to 'make money', they seem to have found a way to set up their business without upsetting Indigenous culture-holders or the general public (at least, without triggering public disapproval and damaging criticism). If that is true, then how did they manage to accomplish this? Could the answer be in their business model?

'Warm business' vs. 'Cold business'

Contemporary Australian business practices and conventions that are rooted in the principles of capitalism are foreign to Indigenous cultural and social customs. Like Christen (2009), Pearson (2014) states that the concepts of individualism, business ownership and control, accountability and financial reporting are somewhat at odds with the Indigenous identity that is centred in family and kinship responsibilities and connections to the land. While today it looks like Indigenous business projects are starting to take off and begin to expand into such

areas as fashion, fine dining, skin care, and more, the literature from the 2010s points to the fact that Indigenous engagement with business started slow. For example, in their study of the development and the state of Indigenous tourism, Ruhanen and Whitford (2016, p. 16) point that the ‘Indigenous tourism entrepreneurs must contend with the challenges of participating in the ‘white fella’s business world’’. That is, the authors explain, the challenges of setting up Indigenous tourism business could be rooted in the fact that the Indigenous tourism providers have to be aware of the needs and preferences of the prospective tourists in Australia and overseas, be able to market their products and services across Australia and overseas to maximise their reach, build infrastructure, and have a proactive business mindset that enables Indigenous financial and industrial empowerment (Ruhanen & Whitford 2016, p. 14-16). Relevant not only for the development of tourism, these challenges most likely affect other Indigenous business start-ups. It seems that Pritchard and Gould managed to overcome these challenges ensuring the successful launch of their business, while at the same time appearing to stay close to the Indigenous values of community obligations.

Pritchard and Gould call their business model ‘warm business’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). Gould explains that ‘warm business’ makes the commitment to be mindful of the community. Gould explains:

I guess the way how we try to... counteract that, of... ‘trying to make money’, is that we try to give stuff away for... through events, like, especially like... books and eventually merch as well. I guess that’s our way to try to give a lot.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Giving away their books and merchandise during public events, meetings with readers, and as prizes in competitions is one way how Gould and Pritchard give back to the wider Indigenous community they aim to represent. As a practical way to share their product with some of their audience and symbolic ‘proof’ that the authors are not purely chasing profit, this practice helps them to maintain a ‘warm business’ while still being able to continue their business operations.

The idea of community contribution seems to be a central focus of the ‘warm business’ model. But what is a community? During an interview, Gould and I discussed what it means for him to identify as Indigenous in the context of his business:

I reckon it's just our culture, how it's like almost... I want to say nearly dying, but it's on... it was on the point of extinction and we are the second generation after this near extinction to kinda revive it after forty to sixty thousand years. If we just let it die then these sixty thousands years' worth of culture, of language, of experiences, stories and all that would just be for nothing. And it's a big part of Australia's history gone. It's more... identifying ourselves. For me, identifying myself as an Aboriginal it gives me a sense of pride as well as almost doing a favour for our country. [...] the fact that I have a hand... adding my few cents to the mass richness of Australia...

(Gould, personal communication, 12/10/23)

Gould shares that by using *Wylah* as an instrument to popularise and 'revive' Indigenous culture he makes a meaningful contribution to the wider Australian community. Resembling the stance of some classic nineteenth century anthropologists, Gould's vision of Indigenous culture as 'dying' and in need of preservation or popularisation is notable in his statement. Possibly reflecting the motivations of the Elders he worked with or the discourses that exist in the southeast Australian Indigenous communities (to which I will return in the subsequent chapters), this quote, nevertheless, suggests that Gould feels responsibility for the state and function of the entirety of Indigenous culture in a pan-Indigenous sense. Furthermore, Gould clearly delineates that he is a member of the Maar Nation, specifically the Peek Whurrong tribe, as is evident from previous interviews and public statements. These statements of association with different groups of people that Gould mentions demonstrate that Gould has layered community and identity affiliations.

As Morphy (2009, p. 115) explains in his paper, the concept of community is complex. It refers to collectives that can be defined on different or multiple levels. It can be as small as local communities (a social club) or as expansive as wider communities (a global community). Being fluid and flexible, communities can overlap and subdivide into sub-communities. Importantly, what defines the community and the moral force behind it is the identity that community encapsulates (Morphy 2009, p. 116). In the case of Gould, his local identity is Peek Whurrong and his national identity is Australian, while his national sub-identity is Indigenous. By writing a book series about a Peek Whurrong character, Gould feels that he contributes to popularisation of his Peek Whurrong culture and language. By making the story generic and relatable enough, Gould contributes to the wider Indigenous community

to prove that Indigenous stories and characters have creative potential and a viable market of consumers. He also believes that he does this by representing Indigenous people nationally and internationally and by inspiring other Indigenous artists and creators with his career journey. On a national level, Gould helps to preserve Australia's national cultural diversity and assist with its growth. Overall, by helping popularise Peek Whurrong and other pan-Indigenous cultural elements, characters, and stories, Gould trusts that he benefits all communities that he affiliates with at once.

The question of the relations between community benefits and the business profitability is an interesting one. To understand how Gould and Pritchard navigate between these goals, I looked at what they understand as 'cold' business that solely focuses on profits and what they think can help them to run a 'warm business' that is accountable before their community. As I interviewed Gould, I understood that he believes that prioritisation of profit, no matter the cost to the people who are affected by it, is 'cold business'. Talking about his views on earning money and how he thinks he might be seen doing so, Gould shares:

Me, personally, I don't see just making money as bad. But a lot of people outside would see it as... as me being greedy, because, obviously, greed is heavily tied to money. They would see me like, Jeff Bezos and all that stuff. Like, the stuff he is doing... instead of giving away to like poor and whatnot. People see it as greedy. Obviously, one man can only do so much.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

In this statement Gould again mentions that he thinks he is being perceived as greedy by some and even compares himself to Jeff Bezos, the founder of the international online shopping company Amazon and one of the wealthiest people on Earth, using him as an example of someone completely driven by greed. Bezos' Amazon has been widely criticised for employing lucrative but unethical business strategies to increase its sales, such as creating cheaper knock-off goods of popular products, manipulating search results to promote their stock (Kalra & Stecklow 2021), bullying its sellers into cheaper prices and unfavourable contracts, and high storage space rent (Weise 2019). Seen as being fixated on profits and not prioritising the wellbeing of its sellers or customers, Amazon and its creator, Jeff Bezos, represent the ultimate cold corporate business for Gould.

It is important to point out that not everyone perceives billionaires negatively. Millions of people consider Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Bill Gates as role models who exemplify 'self-

made men'. Their business models are studied in colleges, their business advices are published in reputable business magazines, and many dream of following in their footsteps to success. Icons of capitalism, they inspire people to pursue new business ventures. Certainly, there are also many people who are sceptical of such admiration for business tycoons. Gould is one of them. Gould's belief that 'one man can only do so much' meaning that one person does not really need an overwhelming amount of excessive wealth (especially if that wealth is made with the help of exploitation and unfair business practices) might communicate Gould's concerns over unethical business practices, perpetuation of economic inequality, rising corporate power, or environmental sustainability. Instead, Gould and Pritchard believe that business can be a vehicle to achieve their goals of popularising Indigenous culture and leaving a positive impact on Indigenous communities and the wider Australian society.

That afternoon, Gould and I connected via Zoom (as we always did) and talked about the fact that, practically, we all need money to live in contemporary Australia. Running a business is one way Gould sees to make a living and also to express himself creatively. Gould explained that while he and Pritchard have a sober outlook on how profitable business operates, they believe that ethical conduct and goals of cultural revival and popularisation make a difference on how business impacts the society:

What Richard like told me, when I was still learning business stuff [...] that there is going to be a lot of 'cold business' stuff [...] he just told me all about how business is just really cold... and like... cold-hearted and everything and they only see numbers and all that, and after like... put in things so I don't get screwed over and just be very careful just so I don't get ruined and whatnot. I feel like a lot of people see that... people that are not in businesses kinda see that and like, 'all businesses are the same and whatnot and it's all capitalist'. Like you said, we live in a capitalist world, everything runs through money and a lot of people see that as very negative. But, I guess, depends of how you make money. Depends on people's outward views, if that makes sense. Because we try to make it through culture and we need money to put the culture even more. [...] I guess it's just the way of how you make money how you go by it in the cold business world.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Gould explains that all businesses that aim to succeed have to use ‘cold business’ practices, strategically focus on numbers and be suspicious of financial risk. However, he emphasises that upholding moral values, pursuing community-rooted goals, and adhering to fair business practices make a difference in what impact business leaves. The impact of business could also be personal. Gould explains that he wishes *Wylah* to be his legacy that he leaves behind:

Once I am gone, I just wanna make sure that there is a lot of stuff out here, you know, *Wylah*, and the cultural side, and also the trading card game, and the merch and everything. I just want people to, you know, have this and know that I made those. Me and Richard made those. And it’s in the memory of us... just to make things last and the memories is one of the main things that last the most. ‘Cause if you live life just to make money it’s gonna be a shitty life.

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Thus, Gould explains that it is the human side of business that matters the most to him, rather than the financial side. The impact he hopes to achieve through *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is the cultural and moral development of its young readers, popularisation of Indigenous stories, characters, and knowledges among a wide cross section of Australian society, and the building of a more united society through a shared love of *Wylah’s* story. Pursuing these Indigenous community-based goals, Pritchard and Gould believe that this makes their business ‘warm’ and negates any ‘cold’ business practices that they have to employ.

Interestingly, the need to somehow ‘give back’ to the community that is repeated in Pritchard and Gould’s statements could be linked to Indigenous cultural values that tend to spill over from social and cultural spheres into business. While Gould has emphasised that a negative perception of ‘greed’ and profit-oriented business goals is not necessarily an Indigenous view by saying ‘[i]t’s definitely not just in rural areas, it’s just like pretty much anywhere in the world’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023), community collaboration and community benefits are often mentioned among Indigenous cultural values. Likewise, many Indigenous businesses or business initiatives, such as Indigenous Business Australia (an Australian government body), list community investment and maintaining relationships with members of communities among their core business values. University of Melbourne’s Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0 tracked Indigenous entrepreneurial activity and found that Indigenous community engagement seemed to be among their major shared values. As one of the authors, Associate professor Michelle Evans, states:

A large percentage of these [Indigenous] businesses—56% of sole traders and 78% of partnerships— are in rural and remote communities. This is important because it is evidence of Indigenous people using business to provide employment opportunities for themselves and their communities whilst remaining connected to Country.

(University of Melbourne 2024)

Connections to Indigenous communities and Country often seem to become business guidelines and aspirations for many Indigenous people. Similarly, Gould and Pritchard advertise community contribution as their central business value echoing Evans’ findings.

(Figure 25: Uncle Robbie Lowe Snr and Wylah Co-Creator Richard Pritchard, in *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* 2024. Image description: On the right, Robbie Lowe stands next to Richard Pritchard. On the left, there is text: ‘Elder Support: ‘As an Elder, I support this project and we will watch it grow into the future. – Uncle Robbie Lowe Snr – Peek Whurrong Elder and Wungit (Chief)’’. <<https://www.wylah.com.au/>>)

Pritchard and Gould market their book series as a project that has been created with the help and blessings of Indigenous Elders to emphasise the community-oriented nature of their business. *Wylah’s* official website has a disclaimer reassuring the users that *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is a project supported by the Indigenous Elders (see picture above), continuing the narrative of the Elders’ support. The very first page of the book one of *Wylah* series opens with these two statements:

When young people read the story of Wylah they will all have a better understanding of the language and history thanks to Richard and Jordan

Uncle Robbie Lowe Snr Peek Whurrong Elder, Wungit • Chief

-

This book was written to bring our people and the past together, to show what life may have been like thousands of years ago in a fantastical way. Aboriginal Cultures were strong and well developed. Aboriginal Communities were self determining and Aboriginal Children were nurtured and protected.

Watta Wylah mittako teein puurpa. Follow Wylah on her journey.

Uncle Locky Eccles Peek Whurrong Elder

(Gould & Pritchard 2022, Preface)

Designed to be visible immediately when a potential reader picks up and browses the book in a bookstore, these statements work to frame the book series as a positive story that is politically and culturally ‘safe’ for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, meaning it is free of cultural appropriation or misrepresentation and beneficial for young readers. Educational benefits highlighted by the Elders emphasise the book’s ‘appropriate’ reflection of traditional cultures, lifestyles, and societies. The second statement, emphasising the vitality and validity of Indigenous cultures, seems to imply a defence against certain stereotypical historical narratives that portrayed Indigenous cultures as unsophisticated, their societies as not governed logically, and their children as not cared for. Pritchard and Gould confirmed their goal to help promote positive representation of Indigenous peoples and cultures in an interview:

...it’s really about making Aboriginal culture popular in mainstream media and *presenting a different narrative that everyone has. And making sure that people see this amazing positive side to Aboriginal characters in stories that doesn’t exist. Well, it does but not like this.*

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 23/03/23)

In this quote, Pritchard signals his and Gould’s intention to counter negative stereotypes, interrupt the disempowering and victimising narrative, and focus public attention on the creative potential of Indigenous cultures. While many businesses and products claim to support and benefit Indigenous people, having public statements of endorsement from specific Indigenous Elders could add credibility and legitimacy to a business in the eyes of public. This, together with a ‘Welcome to Country’ statements written in both Peek Whurrong and English in their front material of the book series (see below), works to ground their media product in the adherence to Indigenous cultural protocols and signal its affiliation with the Maar Nation. This helps Prichard and Gould to build consumer trust in their book series and assure Indigenous people of community benefits this project brings. The focus on such endorsements as part of their marketing assists the authors in promoting their product as culturally sensitive, Indigenous-approved, and generally trustworthy.

The desire to foster more Indigenous community engagement and sharing business returns with them motivated Gould and Pritchard to seek Indigenous creative collaborators in other Indigenous Nations across Australia and among Pacific Islanders. In 2023 and 2024, when I was interviewing Gould and Pritchard to collect research data, they were actively working on connecting with various Indigenous Elders and other cultural authorities with the aim of collaboratively creating representatives of other Indigenous Nations for the *Wylah* book series. Gould and Pritchard initially wanted to include characters that would represent other Maar Nation tribes. They kept trying to negotiate with these tribes as they wrote the first and the second books. They even included ‘placeholder tribes’ in the narrative (the unnamed tribes with some geographic hints to who they might be) in hopes of formally identifying them at a later stage (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023).

(Figure 26: Welcome to Country in Gould & Pritchard 2022. Image description: text extract from the book in two languages. English version says: ‘Welcome to Marr Country. We pay our respects to the Marr Great Spirit, Ancestors, Grandmothers and Grandfathers. From the Marr Grandmothers, Grandfathers, and Families. Welcome. This here is our Country. Thank you.’)

Alas, the negotiations were not successful. Pritchard and Gould did not receive any communications or news back after initial conversations they had with representatives of other Indigenous Nations (Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 8/06/2023; Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/2023; Gould, personal communication, 16/06/2023; Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 11/07/24). Despite the efforts of Pritchard and Gould to share their business success with other Indigenous communities and community members, they were unable to engage others to join them. It is possible that the hesitation of other Indigenous community members to participate in Gould and Pritchard’s project somehow connected to the uncertainty related to mixing Indigenous culture with money-making and all the social, political, and cultural complexities that come out of that.

Pritchard and Gould grew frustrated after their failure to engage other Indigenous collaborators as participants in their venture. While this would have helped them to achieve community engagement and possibly assisted many other Indigenous creatives with publicity and career opportunities, the lack of responses revealed an important issue. Pritchard and Gould engaged into a very complex contemporary and historical dynamics of cultural expression and representation. Their success stemmed from a relatively local but fuzzy-

boundaried community that Gould is a member of, but it is also linked to a wider Indigenous community ethos of positive engagement across Indigenous Australia and a generous sharing of their knowledge and history with all Australians. The wish to share their business success with a wider Indigenous population seems more like an ethical position rather than a basis for practise, as it is a much wider systematic process that is bigger than one book franchise.

The ethos of wider Australian unity and fraternity is perhaps a part of Pritchard and Gould's secret to success that hinges on their keen entrepreneurial senses and their own strong vision of what Indigenous empowerment should look like. It is possible that Pritchard's familiarity with business, marketing, and funding helped them to embody the ideal of a 'successful Indigenous business' that the state wants to achieve. Pritchard and Gould's wish to acquire collaborators across multiple Indigenous Nations links directly into the general pan-Australian nature of state national funding bodies that are open equally to all Indigenous people. However, other Indigenous communities, collectives, creative individuals, and organisations have different ideas of what is the best for their culture. Therefore, Pritchard and Gould find themselves in the position where they are encouraged and celebrated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and organisations, yet no one wishes to join them in their business project.

In this chapter, I have examined the interplay between the profit-oriented nature of business and community-oriented Indigenous culture. It seems that Pritchard and Gould's anxiety around mixing Indigenous culture and business demonstrate the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social reasons that led to unclear boundaries between cultural preservation, popularisation, and culture-related business ventures. The 'warm business' model stems from Pritchard and Gould's aim to contribute to their local and national communities by popularising Indigenous cultural appreciation, setting an example of a successful Indigenous business, and sharing publicity opportunities with other Indigenous creatives. Elders' endorsements, book giveaways, and collaboration invitations that they issue to other Indigenous communities represent the authors' effort to focus on community benefits as a way to negate the 'cold business' practices such as analytics, marketing, and so on. In the next chapter, I will analyse how the authors rely on their Indigenous identities to signal the quality of their representation of Indigenous cultures in their books and how they position themselves in the complexity of Indigenous politics.

Chapter 7. *Wylah*: how to represent diversity?

In the previous chapters, I outlined how Pritchard and Gould's positively-rated book series is mostly judged along the lines of Indigenous 'authenticity' and 'traditionalism'. I have also studied their 'warm business' model which, despite using Indigenous culture as a selling point, seems to resonate well with *Wylah*'s readership, Indigenous communities, and wider Australian audiences. It seems that the key factor that contributes to their success in both business and public reception could be the Indigenous identities of the authors. As *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is marketed as an Indigenous business, it is important to examine what 'Indigenous identity' is, how it reflects the complexity of Indigenous politics, and how cultural credentials are acquired.

Who is Indigenous?

Indigenous identity is a political field. To understand how and why Pritchard and Gould choose to highlight their cultural credentials to engage with their audiences, it is crucial to first understand the state of Indigenous identity today and its long and complex history. 'Indigenous identity' is a term that aims to define something particular, while at the same time being vague and general. The need to define, document, and measure Indigenous identity has become a matter of importance since European colonisation of Australia and elsewhere. Before that, the Australian continent was home to more than two hundred self-identifying autonomous groups connected and divided by millennia-long political relations. To European colonisers in the eighteenth century, they became known as 'a singular group – the Aborigines' (Carlson 2016, p. 19). Throughout history and up until the second half of the twentieth century, Indigenous identity in Australia was repeatedly measured and re-assessed by colonial authorities, leading to its definition and redefinition in state and federal legislation over sixty times across 180 years (McCorquodale 1986 in Paradies 2006, p. 355). The process of continuous redefinition often went back and forth created increasing confusion around Indigenous identity among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Carlson 2016, p. 22). Historian Peter Read famously wrote a vivid snapshot of the ridiculous level of confusion the inconsistency of the definition led to in his paper '*Whose citizens? Whose country?*' (1998, p. 169):

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...

This fragment illustrates how different legislative and government bodies throughout the twentieth century had different and contradictory policies concerning Indigenous Australians, and how these policies were deeply disruptive for many people. While the motives for coming up with new definitions of Indigenous identity stemmed from a multiplicity of reasons ranging from the best efforts of cultural and community preservation to the attempts at ‘redefining the other out of existence’ (Read 1988, p. 173), this practice has led to identity fragmentation. By the second half of the twentieth century, Indigenous people’s activism and the changing political situation in Australia finally resulted in the government ditching limiting externally-imposed definitions in favour of the one based on self and community recognition. The new definition formulated in 1980s states:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.

(Parliament of Australia 2018, para. 13)

Looking highly inclusive and uniting, this definition in fact creates new problems at the same time as it solves the old ones. Criticised as being too loose and consisting of three interrelated components of descent, self-definition, and community acceptance, it has been agreed to threaten the integrity of Indigenous identity (Yamanouchi 2010, p. 225; Creamer 1988, p. 48). The job to sort out Indigenous status of people was practically shifted to Indigenous organisations (Carlson 2016, p. 9) and certain branches of the government that deal with Indigenous affairs. Different communities and Indigenous organisations in different states had to come up with strategies to evaluate people’s Indigenous status. This resulted in several ways in which people can ‘prove’ their identity.

People can be considered Indigenous if they fit the government definition, that is if they are of Indigenous descent, identify as Indigenous, and accepted by their community as such. Jordan Gould is one of these people. Gould is a student of Peek Whurrong Elders and his cultural knowledge is recognised in his community through his work as a Welcome to Country speaker. Identifying now as an Indigenous man, Gould confesses that he grew up oblivious to

his Indigenous connections until he was a teenager (Gould, personal communication, 23/03/23). When Gould learnt that his father is a Peek Whurrong man, he accepted this as an opportunity to ground himself in that culture – he said, ‘this gave me something to identify myself as’ (Gould, personal communication, 12/10/23). Gould decided to re-connect with his culture and contribute to its preservation and popularisation (Gould, personal communication, 23/03/23). It was easy for Gould to prove his Indigenous status because he was born and raised in Warrnambool, the territory of Peek Whurrong people and his father is well-known among the people in town, so Gould had no problem in acquiring community acceptance (Gould, personal communication, 23/03/2023). He wished to identify as Indigenous and, having proof that he is a descendant of an Indigenous person, his local community recognised him as one of their members.

Yamanouchi (2012) documented the process of Indigenous identity confirmation in south-western Sydney. She interviewed Nadine, an Indigenous government worker who shared her insights on how Indigenous identity status is confirmed. She reports: ‘the first thing I would do is ask their name. And if I'm not familiar with the name, I would say: ‘Who is your mob and where are you from?’ (Yamanouchi 2012, p. 67). The worker explains that if a person cannot answer this question, then their case becomes complicated:

But, then you get these other people who say: ‘Yes, we're Aboriginal’ and you ask who their mob is and they can't tell you. So we become a bit suspicious and say: ‘Oh, you don't know who is your mob? You know, you must know!’

(Yamanouchi 2012, p. 67)

People who do not know their tribal affiliations are then perceived as ‘suspicious’. Nadine explains that they are encouraged to do more research and produce a written confirmation from their supposed community members proving their acceptance:

So, if we don't accept them, we'd say: ‘Well, you know, you need to go back to where you're from and ask someone for a letter, you know, to say you are Aboriginal.’

(Yamanouchi 2012, p. 67)

Nadine outlines a step-by-step process of how Indigenous status is confirmed in different circumstances from her professional experience. While the process seems justified and

straightforward in theory, it is sometimes less linear in practice. In her book *The Politics of Identity* (2016, p. 9), Bronwyn Carlson shares:

Theoretically, the Confirmation of Aboriginality process is a nationally instituted mechanism and should allow individuals or families from a cultural group originating anywhere across Australia to be recognised as Aboriginal wherever they live, as long as the veracity of lineage, connections, histories and recognition can be satisfied in the confirmation process. In practice, interpretation of what is meant by ‘community’ recognition of an individual is subject to varied and variable interpretation at the local level, over time, and with little regard for any official process.

Supposedly a process designed to help reconnect people with their historic roots and fight Indigenous cultural and social fragmentation, it can sometimes be interpreted subjectively and vary significantly between different regions and Indigenous Nations. Thus, looking at it analytically, reveals that Indigenous identity could be viewed as a field where people with opposing views on Indigenous identity struggle for the right to represent and define. This is evident in the analysis of the process of Confirmation of Aboriginality. Carlson (2016, p. 9) writes that in some Indigenous organisations:

[i]t also comes to be about insider/outsider tensions, about personal perceptions, about how the ‘newcomer’ thinks and behaves, and about the degree to which an individual or family accepts and conforms to local values and practices.

For example, Carlson (2016, p. 10) mentions that one client was denied because the people responsible for evaluating her claim to Indigenous status concluded that ‘[s]he has lived white all her life so she may as well continue’. The insider/outsider tension Carlson discusses is a result of uneven historical effect of colonisation on Indigenous people in different regions of the country. Carlson explains that these and similar cases of Indigenous identity scrutiny within Indigenous communities are the results of long history of grouping, regrouping, and ungrouping of Indigenous people which led to people forming localised cliques and regional differences (ibid, p. 23). Such nuances made it difficult to find consensus on how exactly to define Indigenous identity.

Sometimes, struggling to draw a line around the fuzzy boundaries of identity, people can rely on easily distinguishable parameters. Carlson (2016, p. 11) reports that for some people skin

colour, facial features, language, behaviour, and mindset could be used as reasons to confirm or reject people's Indigenous status:

...establishing community acceptance can be fraught for those without kin connections, a history of residence in a local area, the visible physical markers of Aboriginality or a particular colonial experience.

Nadine, the Indigenous government worker, offers an insider view into this issue. She explains that at times she works with people who have little proof to present for their case: 'Some of these people don't give you anything - they just claim to be Aboriginal. It's hard to accept them - they never really get accepted.' (Yamanouchi 2012, p. 67). Nadine's statement illustrates how people at the margins of Indigenous identity, those who might have lost connections with their communities as a result of different historical circumstances, experience the most difficulty being accepted back into communities. Nadine explains further:

...But the ones you seem to have problems with [confirmation of their Indigenous status], who you can't connect to anybody, are the real fair ones. They are really fair, and I can't tell you who they, who their black family are... They might say that they were adopted as babies and they don't know who their family are. But when you've got dark skin, you can sort of ah, get talking to women and you can find out who their people are. But when they are light skin, it's very hard to find who their people are, and... So, these people do have a lot of difficulties.

(Yamanouchi 2012, p. 68)

Just like Carlson, Nadine mentions that visual indicators of appearance, specifically skin colour, are something that organisations notice when working on status confirmation.

Gould reports that he too initially believed that visual markers are the key signifiers of Indigenous identity. He explains how astonished he felt upon the realisation that despite his paleness, he was in fact Indigenous:

'without the skin colour, I was still as black as them, through blood [...] You don't have to have fully dark skin like up in Darwin to be Aboriginal'

(Gould, personal communication, 23/03/2023).

This quote highlights Gould's past assumption that people 'up in Darwin' who have darker skin are more Indigenous than people in the southeast with lighter skin. Such assumptions about people's appearances, lifestyle, and closeness to Indigenous communities reflects a certain stereotypical division between the 'settled south' and 'remote north'.

It is true that the 'urban' and 'rural' categorical binary is often invoked in the discussion of Indigenous identity. It is important to establish outright that Indigenous cultures are diverse and pluralistic, and '[t]here is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community' (Langton 1993, p. 11). However, certain historical, political, cultural, and geographical differences justify outlining some regional characteristics. Langton (1993, p. 11) states the line dividing 'urban' or 'settled' Australia from the 'remote' or 'rural' Australia could be drawn 'from Cairns around to Perth in a broad arc'. In this sense, southeastern and Western Australia could be generally considered the 'urban' or 'settled' region (Morphy 2009, pp. 125-126; Langton 1993, pp. 11-12). All the major cities, institutions and a vast number of diverse Indigenous communities are located there. These communities have varied colonial histories and cultural integrity. On the other side of the arc there are northern and Central Australia which are often referred to as 'remote' or 'rural' and which could be characterised as more tradition-oriented (Morphy 2009, pp. 125-126; Langton 1993, pp. 11-12). Despite what the terminology might suggest, people from both sides of this geographically defined arc could live in cities, provincial towns, or other types of Indigenous settlements and have varying degrees of their connections to culture.

The effects of colonial regime have different effects on southern and northern regions. While Sydney was settled in 1788, colonial expansion only reached some regions of the northern Australia in the 1930s, affecting the southeast and Western Australia with colonial policies disproportionately longer and more intensely (Langton 1993, p. 12). While in the 'settled' Australia, the policies were targeted at Indigenous individuals, in 'remote' regions the administration was dealing with Indigenous communities (ibid). The effect of these differing policies resulted in the different patterns of settlements: in the 'urban' regions Indigenous communities are discreet and often exist in forms of residential villages like Jerrinjah in Sydney, while in the 'rural' regions Indigenous communities such as Yuendumu are bigger and often represent administrative centres for Indigenous groups (ibid, p. 12-13). Hence, given the differing degrees of colonial policies and complexities surrounding Indigenous social differences, a stereotypical perception arises that paints the 'settled south' as less

‘authentic’, more Westernised, and individualistic as opposed to the ‘remote north’ which is more ‘authentic’, tradition-oriented, and community-based.

It is likely that Gould’s positionality as an Indigenous man from southeastern Australia informs his stereotypical perceptions of the ‘remote northern’ Indigenous people as secretive, distanced from the modern lifestyle, and more tradition-oriented. During an interview, we discussed if there is any difference between Indigenous people who live in cities and suburbs and those who live in remote and rural areas. Gould pointed out several differences that he identified. He said: ‘[some traditionally living Indigenous artists] think their culture is not welcome and they lock it away, they don’t show it to anyone’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). Gould holds an opinion that their presumed unwillingness to share their cultural knowledge and stories openly to the history of cultural oppression that occurred in missions around Australia (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). He also remarks that, in contrast, people in urban areas ‘are more invited to’ participate in art creation and cultural expression, but ‘it’s not in a traditional way’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). While in reality, the situation in the north is very different, Gould’s perception of Indigenous communities from that region reflects the biased images of ‘remote’ Indigenous people that circulate in the southeast.

Gould continues by explaining that to him contemporary Indigenous art and media, including his book series *Wylah*, ‘doesn’t have as much of an impact’ compared to traditional art (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). Gould states that contemporary mixed-style artworks or media projects that are ‘intertwined with other types of art styles’ are ‘good’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). However, he believes that ‘traditional Aboriginal [art], that is only found in the rural areas and from those who have isolated themselves’ has the most ‘impact’ (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). For Gould, ‘impact’ is a measurement of authenticity of the traditional art style that attributes to depth of cultural and spiritual meaning that is free from other cultural influences. Art that is ‘watered down’ or ‘it’s not from back then, from pre-colonialism’ is, thus, inauthentic (Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). The perception of the northern Indigenous Nations as uninvited and unwilling to share their ‘authentic’ culture with the rest of contemporary Australia is not factual.

In reality, ‘remote’ Indigenous artists and art centres are extensively supported, funded, and promoted. Not only having a viable international market, northern Indigenous artists and

cooperatives are vocal advocates for Indigenous rights, culture, and inclusion. As Morphy (2009, p. 125) states, '[t]he initial stimulus for many of the changes that resulted in the inclusion of Indigenous art and artists as part of the national agenda came from 'remote' Australia'. While the mission stations, for example in Arnhem Land, 'cut across Indigenous societies in every way imaginable: kinship, language, regional trade, ceremony, and so on', this did not lead to the suppression of Yolŋu art and culture in the region (Morphy 2009, p. 121). Rather, the introduction of new 'focal points of regional Indigenous lives' has led to the emergence of a diversity of different styles and trajectories of Yolŋu art practice (ibid).

It is possible that Gould's assumptions about the state of cultural expression and life in the 'remote north' might be illustrative of certain images that people in the 'southeast' hold about them. As Brenda Croft writes, in the seventies and eighties, there was a rise of a new generation of contemporary-style Indigenous artists who wanted their creativity recognised, but their creative practice has caused criticism which was based on assimilationist assumptions (Croft 1999, p. 101). As Morphy (2009, p. 125) encapsulates it, '[t]hese assumptions positioned the art of Indigenous people in the south as inherently inauthentic'. Today Indigenous art and identity tend to be discussed in terms of authenticity less and the access to government resources, national and international markets and galleries are open to Indigenous people all around Australia. However, the old assimilationist discourses still linger among some Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The lack of consensus of what constitutes Indigenous identity, the uneven effects of colonial assimilationist policies, and the resulting regional differences cause Indigenous identity to become a field of political struggle. Bourdieu's theory of fields (1993) perhaps explains this interplay with the most clarity. Indigenous people, specifically people either affiliated with Indigenous organisations or those functioning as cultural authorities, could be viewed as actors in the field of Indigenous identity. This field is hierarchical and these actors compete for the symbolic position of authority (the right to be involved in the decision-making processes representing the interests of Indigenous people) by making use of their social capital (local and regional community connections) and cultural capital (their insider status to Indigenous culture and society). As this is practically a competitive field, people try to 'police' each other on the legitimacy of their identity and the rights to represent Indigenous Nations and local cultures. Like in any field of contested identity, actors may hold polarised views towards different groups who want to assert different definitions of Indigenous identity and challenge other groups. If this happens, these groups would have genuine reasons

informed by their group values, historical contexts, and local cultural specificities that make them want to push back. Therefore, these struggles in the field of Indigenous identity could be at the core of why Pritchard and Gould feel the need to flag their cultural identity in business.

The same struggle for power to define and ‘police’ can be identified in the field of Samoan identity. Richard Pritchard is not an Australian Indigenous man; however, he identifies as ‘fully’ Indigenous Samoan from both of his parents’ sides. The addition of the word ‘Indigenous’ before his Samoan identity is a telling part of Pritchard’s value alignment that he wishes to communicate to his readers. Pritchard explains:

I thought it [identifying as Indigenous] was really important... to... well, I’ve always called myself a Samoan, I would definitely not call myself an Australian or a New Zealander. Lots of reasons. One – to tell people I am not [Australian] Indigenous, in case if they misinterpreted that. And to tell them that I wasn’t an Australian or some other ethnicity. Also to let people know that I am not a Māori from New Zealand [...] In a way, I want to identify myself as also a person from Culture... and another way, because Aboriginal people... there is a lot of mistrust of European culture. [...] *It’s good for them to know that I do identify as an Indigenous person from an island and I am Samoan, so they know I understand Culture because I came from Culture myself. [...] also to have a bit of unity in that, that they are Indigenous and I am Indigenous* – there is a connection of Culture, cultural exchange that is happening.

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/23)

Pritchard’s reasons for explicitly stating that he is an Indigenous Samoan stem from the need to be specific about his cultural background, while at the same time signalling his general affiliation with Indigenous Nations globally. Pritchard’s use of the word ‘Culture’, with an identifiable capital ‘C’, suggests a special meaning he attributes to it. Instead of referring to ‘the plurality and relativity of collective meanings, institutions, and behaviours among humans’ as *A Dictionary of Cultural Anthropology* encapsulates (Vivanco 2018), Pritchard seems to apply it to the trove of global Indigenous knowledges. It seems that he consciously makes this distinction to separate it from the more generic definition given above. Further, the emphasis on the existence of ‘Culture’ among Samoan and Australian First Nations seems to imply a presumed lack of ‘Culture’ in the Western societies. When Pritchard states ‘I

understand Culture because I came from Culture myself' (Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/23), he implies that 'Culture' is an inherently Indigenous concept that ties (all) Indigenous cultures together in 'unity'. Pritchard continues to imply that Indigenous peoples share a certain 'Cultural' unity when discussing the similarities between the New Zealand's and Australia's racial politics. To some, Pritchard's choice to highlight his affinity with Indigenous Australian society through his Indigenous Samoan identity may seem like an act of flattening of Indigenous specificities. However, for him, this signifies his positioning within a framework of global Indigeneity, a sense of affiliation that Indigenous Nations around the globe share among themselves.

Like in Australia, New Zealand had a history of repression of Indigenous peoples and cultures. Pritchard explains that the echoes of such policies and attitudes still affect his family and when he was growing up it was common for people to downplay their ethnic background.

In New Zealand, unbeknownst to me when I was growing up, Samoans were brought over to New Zealand for skills for labour shortages. So they welcomed them to New Zealand because then the New Zealand's economy was booming, like 'bring all those workers over!' and when there was a downturn in work there was a political leader who wanted to get votes, right. And the way he got votes is to vilify all the people that came to work. He said: 'If we not gonna do something about this Polynesian problem, they all gonna get your jobs [...] We need to get rid of them [...] So, if you find anyone that is of Polynesian descend, let us know and if they are not allowed to be here, we will kick them out of the country'. [...]

(Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/23)

Here Pritchard is talking about the New Zealand dawn raids sanctioned by Prime Minister Norman Kirk in 1973. While the raids were supposed to target all illegal immigrants, Pacific Islanders represented 86% of all people prosecuted for overstaying, despite only making up a third of all people who overstayed their permits (Beaglehole 2024). Pritchard shares how this part of New Zealand history affected his family and his connection with Samoan culture:

So, what happen in my culture... a lot of Samoans living in Samoa don't understand this, but they [Samoans living in New Zealand] were vilified for being Samoan, for teaching Samoan, for talking Samoan. And it was quite forbidden for teaching the culture. [...] and so I grew up not knowing how to

speak Samoan because my mum was so afraid of being deported, because she never had a New Zealand passport. So, a whole bunch of us New Zealanders like myself were forbidden and purposefully hidden from our culture so we would not get deported out of the country. And still to this day when I go to Samoa, I am frowned upon [laughs] because I don't speak the language, they are like 'Ah, who are you? You are not the real Samoan'.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/23)

Pritchard's experience illustrates how historical racial policies and systemic discrimination leads to people being disconnected from their cultural roots. Like in Australia, cultural minorities in New Zealand experienced varying degrees of cultural proximity and disconnection that has led to their identity fragmentation. Pritchard shares how his inability to speak Samoan causes some Samoan people to challenge his identity. While Pritchard does not identify as Fa'a Samoan, a term signifying the 'Samoan way' connected directly to traditions and customs (Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/23), Pritchard is in no way 'cultureless'. On the contrary, Pritchard is an insider to two cultures, Samoan (the culture of his parents) and Euro-New Zealand (the culture of the society where he grew up). This puts Pritchard in a position where he can be an intermediary between cultures, where he can access benefits and advocate from a position of experience for better intercultural relations. Resisting the idea of exclusive Indigenous identity, Pritchard chooses to side with the idea of inclusive Indigenous solidarity.

As is evident from Pritchard's experience and the heated debates around Indigenous representation in *Moana* discussed earlier, Samoan Indigenous identity is also a contested field. Different people have different visions of what their group's fragmented identity should look like. Seeing the pitfalls of such divides and experiencing the difficulties of belonging to multiple communities at the same time, Pritchard and Gould are choosing to identify as supporters of the cultural collaboration, social unity, and fraternity. Indeed, historically it is the political power of unity that was behind the creation of the discourse of pan-Aboriginality. Hollinsworth (1992, p. 144) explains:

[the discourse of pan-Aboriginality helped launch] [c]ampaigns for equal wages in the pastoral industry, for repeal of discriminatory legislation, for improvements in education, housing and employment and critically, the struggle for land rights formed the main planks of an increasingly coherent and

national movement. With the adoption of powerful symbols (including the flag and the tent embassy) and nationalistic rhetoric, Aboriginality is asserted as a form of sovereignty which is increasingly gaining recognition internationally.

Pan-Aboriginal discourse helped people to address a certain sense of cultural and social fragmentation, unite into a powerful political force that could advocate for their needs, rights, and visions. Looking for a similar sense of unity, both Pritchard and Gould seem to lean heavily into the rhetoric of pan-Aboriginality in their public and professional lives. Hence, Pritchard and Gould both come from two distinct cultures, and both exist outside complex internal struggles for cultural and political power. However, as they started a business with the aim to represent Indigenous culture in the Australian and international media, they became the agents in the field of Indigenous identity.

Cultural licence to represent

Pritchard and Gould advertise their Indigenous backgrounds as proof of their intentions to celebrate Australian Indigenous culture. Both authors advertise their mission to promote Indigenous culture in Australia and overseas on talk shows, podcasts, and interviews. Almost every social media page of *Wylah*, every website, newspaper articles, podcast episode, and the authors' biography attached to the books, features a declaration of Pritchard and Gould's Indigenous identities. For example, in the first *Wylah* book the readers can find this description in the 'About the Authors' section:

Jordan Gould is an Indigenous Australian from Peek Whurrong tribe in Warrnambool, Victoria. He is passionate about teaching and talking to groups about his culture, language and reconciliation. Jordan often performs Welcome to Country ceremonies at corporate and private gatherings.

Richard Pritchard is an Indigenous Pacific islander of Samoan heritage. He always dreamed of writing books since he was a teenager. His passion for storytelling and illustration has led him to work on blockbuster movies and animated films such as *Happy Feet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Prometheus*, *Pacific Rim: Uprising* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

(Gould & Pritchard 2022, 'About the Authors')

These statements focus on portraying Gould and Pritchard as reputable and experienced Indigenous professionals. Gould's bio explains his cultural insider status and Pritchard's bio

represents him as an experienced media creator who is also a Pacific Islander. These statements seem to be functioning as the authors' declarations of their cultural and professional credentials and signify their commitment to responsible cultural representation.

Demonstrating his cultural credentials and motives for representing Indigenous culture, Pritchard refers to his experience living in 'culturally rich' New Zealand:

I grew up in a very cultural[ly] rich neighbourhood, and when I came to [...] Australia I didn't see that. I kinda expected Aboriginal people to be everywhere. And when I didn't see that I always thought to myself: 'I always really want to do something for Aboriginal people to bring their culture to the mainstream like in New Zealand', like in my experience.

(Pritchard in Australian Writers' Centre 2023)

Pritchard expresses his surprise about the diminished degree of Indigenous cultural visibility in Australia compared to New Zealand. Being a creative person, Pritchard – saw that Indigenous creative cultural potential was deeply overlooked in media. He believed that his idea could help promote Indigenous cultures while also potentially proving profitable (Pritchard in Australian Writers' Centre 2023). His knowledge of media production, marketing basics, and business management, paired with his commitment to represent and empower Indigenous cultures, helped him to initiate the *Wylah* project.

Pritchard reports that his sense of cultural sensitivity that came from him being an Indigenous person is informing his ethical and respectful approach to the creation of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. Pritchard shares that the first step he undertook was to consult local Indigenous Elders:

I know from Culture - you've gotta get permissions first from the Elders [meaning local cultural authorities]. You can write about another culture [but you should not] culturally appropriate anything. I approached the Elders and I said 'I've got this idea for a Koorie warrior. I don't know exactly what's it about yet, but this is it', and I showed them some of the images I came up with. And they loved the idea and they gave me their blessings, permission to pursue it.

(Pritchard in Australian Writers' Centre 2023)

Pritchard consulted the Elders with nothing but an image of a character in his mind. By approaching the local cultural authorities so early on, Pritchard was seeking to avoid potential cultural appropriation that could have occurred if he had written the story before talking to Indigenous Elders. Pritchard's consultation with the Elders has proven to be fruitful. One of the people Pritchard consulted was a recognised and respected Elder and Chief of the Peek Whurrong tribe of the Maar (Gunditjmara) Nation, Uncle Robbie (Rob) Lowe Senior. It was Uncle Robbie Lowe who first suggested that Pritchard and Gould, who was at that time his TAFE 3D Modelling class student, should work on the project together, which has proven to be a successful collaboration. Uncle Robbie Lowe also became their advisor, practically functioning as their project's cultural supervisor. As a result, Pritchard gained a collaborator, received the Elders' approval of his idea, was provided with general principles on how to go about the project, and formed a collegial relation with the local Indigenous cultural authorities.

Jordan Gould also has to stress his cultural credentials to emphasise his right to represent Indigenous people. Although Gould spent his childhood outside of the cultural framework, he managed to reconnect with his local cultural community. Gould reconnected with his culture as a teenager, which means he acquired cultural knowledge mostly by transmission, rather than by internalisation that usually happens when one grows up in a cultural environment. Gould has learnt culture and language from certain Elders of his tribe. This grants him extensive knowledge, but perhaps not a lived cultural experience to the same extent as one who grew up with this knowledge would have. In theory, a non-Indigenous person with access to the same knowledge might share the same degree of cultural familiarity as he does. Despite this, Gould's Peek Whurrong family background and, most importantly, the acceptance of his local community serve as an assurance of his Indigenous status for non-Indigenous people and organisations. It is important to note, that every Indigenous nation or community would have different pathways to acquisition of cultural credentials and authority. For Peek Whurrong, Gould's journey of cultural reconnection was a pathway they accept.

In addition to that, the Elders' endorsements of *Wylah* add further legitimacy to Gould and Pritchard to represent Indigenous culture in the Australian mainstream media. Public support of Indigenous Elders to pursue their creative project helps Pritchard and Gould to protect themselves from accusations of cultural theft and appropriation. The weight of cultural authority that comes with an Elder's support seems to be recognised by the wider Australian public. For non-Indigenous people, it could mean a sign of insider community approval and a

guarantee of ethical conduct. For Indigenous people, it may help alleviate the suspicion of ill-intent or cultural exploitation. The Elders' endorsements have helped Gould and Pritchard to establish their cultural and social credibility as is evident from the overwhelmingly positive reception of *Wylah* as a symbol of cultural celebration. With this, the authors designed and marketed *Wylah* as a new perspective on Indigenous culture overall. While this has largely worked, there was some resistance to their vision of Indigenous people's representation and their legitimacy to represent people and culture to tourists.

While social media responses to *Wylah* have been overwhelmingly positive and openly supportive, early on there were some people who disagreed with how Gould and Pritchard approached Indigenous representation. Some people criticised the way the character of Wylah looks in Pritchard's illustrations. Leaning into the discourse of Indigenous identity as a visible characteristic, this Facebook user wrote a comment under the SBS Australia Facebook post featuring *Wylah*: '[t]hat's not what real Aboriginal women look like#js'³⁵.

There are also opinions that the authors lack knowledge about Indigenous cultural artifacts and tools and, thus, are incompetent to represent Indigenous culture, as is illustrated by this comment:

Obviously dosent know it well if shes holding that pissy ceremonial boomerang. Mobs use 7's if they want to fight.³⁶

Finally, there are people who believe that Gould and Pritchard commit cultural appropriation by turning an Indigenous story into a Disney-looking illustrated book series:

Too much cultural appropriation going on here.³⁷

These comments represent incidents of people disagreeing with Gould and Pritchard's portrayal of Indigenous people and questioning the authors' cultural credentials. I would reiterate that it is difficult to identify social, cultural and geographic affinity of people who left these comments without reaching out to them for clarifications or comments which I chose not to do for reasons I outlined in my methodology section. However, what is important

³⁵ Facebook user (g), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

³⁶ Facebook user (i), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

³⁷ Facebook user (j), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

is that these comments provide windows into opinions and views some members of the public might have that constitute public discourses, trends, or moods.

Such critical comments are concentrated around earlier pre-publication conceptual materials such as an SBS Australia news report about the early concept of *Wylah* from 2020. Notably, it is expressed in online comments on national news networks social media posts or third-party book review websites. It is absent on *Wylah*'s official social media accounts (which could possibly point to the unwillingness of the critics to engage in personal polemics that is common for any criticism expressed online).

At one instance, Pritchard and Gould's cultural credentials were double-checked by a well-known Indigenous cultural authority. Recalling the incident, Pritchard shares with me that he was aware that this was inevitable:

I said to Jordan, 'You know, we are writing this book for Aboriginal culture and at some point we gonna get... the Elders gonna call us up and [laughs] they berate us or something, I know it's gonna happen at some point!' And it happened! [laughs]

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

Pritchard told me that one day he received a call from an Indigenous man he did not know. The man first listed his credentials and accomplishments to establish that he is a cultural authority with influence and connections. Pritchard recalls:

And this is the guy that goes from shop to shop to check if the boomerangs that are selling in the shop are not made overseas, he is the guy who went to the government to make sure that Aboriginal products are legitimate Aboriginal products.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

Evidently a well-connected man with influence and cultural authority, he asked Pritchard:

...then he goes: 'So, what authority do you have to create an Aboriginal character, especially a woman with a boomerang because Aboriginal women are not allowed to be warriors and they are not allowed to hold boomerangs where I come from. So, why are you doing it? Why are you writing this story about us?' My heart has dropped and I thought 'Oh, this is that moment!'

[laughs] He is the cultural police! He is the guy!.. [...] And he was ringing me up to see if *Wylah* is actually an Aboriginal product or if it's a bunch of white guys trying to make a... trying to cash in on Aboriginal culture.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

In this incident, an influential Indigenous activist, a cultural gatekeeper, interrogated Pritchard and Gould's cultural authority to represent Indigenous people. This gatekeeper's inquiry was focused primarily on the authors' cultural credentials and on the gender representation of their main character. Defending himself and his creative project, Pritchard provided the explanations and stressed that *Wylah* is an informed and approved representation of Peek Whurrong people:

And we told him, 'We don't represent everyone! *We are not representing every Aboriginal tribe in Australia as this is who you are,*' I said, 'No-no-no, we only... [representing] those *tribes who are willing to bring in their tribe's culture with us, we are happy to integrate them, happy for them to own their own characters, we could create them together,* but we don't represent Queensland or Arnhem Land or the top end on the north, Darwin. Only Warrnambool and only this tribe. [...] and as soon as I said, the guy was like 'Oh... O-oh! I didn't know much about these tribes down there in Victoria and regional Victoria'. So, he was relieved knowing that we are not trying to represent everyone and he was more than happy to do something with us in the future.

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023)

This person who called Pritchard was most likely acting in the best interests of Indigenous cultural integrity. Concerned of a possibility of financial exploitation of culture, he was ready to hold Pritchard and Gould accountable for their actions. In response, Pritchard emphasised the fact that he and Gould do not represent Indigenous Nations of the north. It becomes evident, too, that the perceived divide between 'settled urban' and 'remote rural' Australia is manifested in this interaction. Acknowledging the historical and cultural differences between regions, Pritchard made it clear that *Wylah* is informed by their research of the Victorian Indigenous Nations. Notably, according to Pritchard, the man who acted as an Indigenous cultural authority did not appear to have knowledge of the Victorian Indigenous cultures. His judgement and advocacy were informed by his knowledge of the northern Indigenous

cultures. Evidently, this interaction pointed at the fact that Pritchard and Gould have entered the politicised field of struggle for Indigenous identity and, thus, their cautiousness in representing their business and themselves is informed by their role as actors within this field. This incident is also an interesting demonstration of how a lot of Indigenous intellectuals today stress the diversity and autonomy of different groups. This is informed by the need to counter the essentialisation of difference the basis of race that happened historically.

Another telling occasion where Pritchard and Gould's authority to represent Indigenous people was under evaluation is the development of their proposed Warrnambool Dreamtime Village tourist centre. Pritchard and Gould initially successfully pitched this project to their local city council, but it was unexpectedly shelved. Warrnambool City Council offered Pritchard and Gould a promising construction site and timeline drafts, but the project has come to a halt. Pritchard and Gould shared with me that the process seemed to have come to a stop after the proposal went to Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation board for approval:

We have a feeling that it [the proposal to build the Dreamtime Village] is not gonna go through knowing how solid is the politics and all this... which is unfortunate!

(Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2024)

Gould mentioned political tensions that exist, particularly in the field of Australian tourism. Considering that the Dreamtime Village is a proposed tourist centre that is supposed to feature hosts in the form of Pritchard and Gould's *Wylah* characters, this indicates certain monetary, political, and managerial profits that they could gain if the Village is to be built. The city council was initially eager and ready to bring this project to life, as indicated by the practical negotiations that Gould and Pritchard held with them. However, the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation board, as the last layer of approval the project had to go through, did not seem to consider this a good idea. Gould and Pritchard believe that the reason for the Indigenous organisation's reservations was connected to their book series:

...Wylah is ... kinda a bit *controversial* to a degree because... [the Warrnambool] Council! And the council quite lazy on this... they struggle to have a green light. *I think Council wanted this, but then it was all up to negotiations between Eastern Maar group and what they can do...* this is a big, big board of Eastern Maar that decide on these things.

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 11/07/2024)

Pritchard was expressing his understanding that the Warrnambool Council might have come to a conclusion that *Wylah* is a ‘controversial’ project. As Pritchard and Gould were not informed of the real reasons for the project’s delay, they could only speculate on the reasons why the Eastern Maar group might have put it on hold:

They might have... saw it’s a good idea but then looked at Richard and were like, ‘Huh, he is not Aboriginal! We are not gonna do it.’ That could’ve been a thing. Or otherwise, ‘Oh, this Jordan guy- he is too young to run it, he is too young, can’t do it’ or maybe it just fell through like one of these things, because not too many people wanted that... or they forgot to talk about that. There are way too many variables to condense it into one thing.

(Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2024)

Their initial assumption that it was their cultural authority and aspiration to represent Peek Whurrong tribe and the wider Maar Nation for tourists that came under scrutiny could reflect Pritchard and Gould’s anxiety about their position in the complex world of Indigenous politics. They do acknowledge that there are a lot of variables that could have contributed to this road block, including economic and internal Council’s political reasons (Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2024). However, their first suspicion reflects the anxieties Pritchard and Gould feel concerning the complexity of internal Indigenous politics that are specific to regions, nations, and organisations.

While I have no insight into the reasons behind the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation board silence, it does seem that concerns over the potential commercialisation of local Indigenous culture and the reference to the religious concept of Dreamtime in the name of a tourist attraction could arguably be justified. As Indigenous corporations usually have the primary responsibility to cultural protection and preservation, resisting an attempt to sell cultural activities and stories for entertainment and monetisation would appear as an appropriate reaction.

In general, Pritchard and Gould’s creative initiatives, business visions, and innovative approaches to cultural expression are testing the waters in how Indigenous people can negotiate their contemporary representation in media and business. Pritchard and Gould have to exist in the complex and non-uniform field of Indigenous identity. As they are entering the

Australian mainstream media production with a project that is designed to represent and promote Indigenous characters and stories in the eyes of the vast international public, their positionality as Indigenous writers helps them to navigate in the intricacies of Indigenous culture, representation, and business. Officially, they are accepted as part of the community by the local Peek Whurrong people. But practically, they could be considered as being part of all these cultures because of their insider life experience in Euro-Australian and New Zealand cultures. The Indigenous community support network that Pritchard and Gould operate from helps them to maintain their cultural legitimacy that is at risk of being contested.

The analysis of Pritchard and Gould's position within the contested field of Indigenous identity reveals the challenges they have to overcome while working on their book franchise, maintaining their public lives, and promoting their vision of Indigenous cultural popularisation. Despite being widely supported by the readers, their local Indigenous community, the literary sector, and many others, they still had to defend themselves from 'cultural police' and criticism targeted at their legitimacy as Indigenous authors. Pritchard and Gould's venture to represent Indigenous culture and characters in the mainstream media is indeed one of the first attempts of Indigenous media franchises to reach the influence a wide cross-section of people. Their struggles to maintain cultural credentials, manoeuvre identity politics, and grow their business represent crucial insights into the world of Indigenous media, negotiated conventions of Indigenous business, and debates around Indigenous identity. But if the field of Indigenous identity is so disparate and highly political, then how do Pritchard and Gould avoid causing political disagreements among their readers, Indigenous community members, and in the general public? Is it even possible to avoid being political if Pritchard and Gould venture into Indigenous representation?

Chapter 8. *Wylah*: representation in the context of Indigenous politics

Sensing the connection between Indigenous representation in the mainstream media and politics, I decided to test the ground and ask Pritchard and Gould if they think that it is possible to tell an Indigenous story in the mainstream media without becoming political. This question prompted unexpectedly mismatched and contradictory responses from the authors. Initially, Gould smiled as he heard my question and responded:

Abso-fucking-lutely! Because this, *Wylah*, is technically an Indigenous story that me and Richard made but it is conveyed in the way that it almost avoids any and all political stuff because it's for children. It's a fun adventure!

(Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Gould's use of the strong language points to the strength of the message he wanted to communicate. Using *Wylah* as an example, Gould explained that it is possible to avoid politics in a media franchise if it is delivered as a children's story. Explaining further how exactly a story can be told apolitically, Gould said:

It's just the way *how you present it* – if you present it like... 'white man – bad!' and this tribe is this, this tribe is that, have anger in it, and try to spit hate, this will get very political.

([emphasis added] Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023)

Listing anger, hate, and mutual accusations, Gould explains that politics exist in conflicts. Gould believes that it is possible to avoid being political by avoiding confrontational representation or narrative.

Responding to the same question, Pritchard offered a more moderate response. Just like Gould, he first responded 'absolutely':

I think you can definitely tell a non-political story, yeah, absolutely...
Depending on who your audience is and depending on what your mindset is.
And your goal is. And your philosophy. And your maturity as a story runner.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 6/04/2023)

Pritchard started off by saying that it is possible to avoid being political, but then he offered a long list of conditions that could minimise political value of a story. Talking about *Wylah*, he shares that *Wylah* is non-political:

We were also purposefully non-political in the book. We do write for the kids. And what matters to them is not what matters to us in political agendas. So, the main goal of it is to make it appealing. Not make a message of it to say: 'you need to learn this! Or this was bad! This is bad people, evil people! Good Aboriginals!' You know? It's not that. It's appealing, it's entertaining, it's enjoyable, it's light-hearted, you know? Not overtly serious.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023)

Pritchard argues that he and Gould purposefully created a children's story that is free of damning labels or politically driven directives. This, and the fact that *Wylah* is an entertaining, enjoyable, light-hearted, and appealing book series, constitute proof in the eyes of the authors that it is free of politics. It has then become apparent to me that both Pritchard and Gould interpret the term 'politics' in a specific way as heated powerplay between different factions that antagonises one another. But what do we usually mean when we say 'politics'?

Jaqueline Briggs (2015, p. 31), the Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lincoln and the former Vice Chair of the Political Studies Association UK, explains that 'politics' is a wide concept. Briggs (2015, p. 31) writes that it generally understood through three main lenses. The first one associated with Leftwich (2004) and focuses on political institutions, their operation, and interactions with each other. The second approach is commonly attributed to Crick and Crick (1987) and looks at politics as a process of conflict resolution and negotiation between groups who compete for different interests and values (Briggs 2015, p. 31). The third definition that Briggs (2015, p. 31) discusses is the all-encompassing look on what politics could be: all aspects of human interaction stemming from the innate human difference. This approach identifies the sources of power and how power manifests. Briggs (2015, p. 33) points that in the field of political science there is a continuous expansion of the political scope. In the recent years issues that used to be perceived as private (for example, domestic violence) are now seen as political (in the case of domestic violence, they are regarded as manifestations of misogyny, patriarchy, and power) (ibid). To continue this thought, I would add media representation as another issue that is now regarded as political rather than depending on the whims of individual creators.

Interestingly, Pritchard and Gould's explanations of what constitutes politics do not seem to align with the most of academic scholarship's conventions. Politics is a field that extends far beyond antagonising rhetoric. However, their views do reflect the moods and conventions of the contemporary Indigenous politics in Australia. Indigenous politics in Australia is a field that is complicated by the history of colonisation, racial discrimination, and uneven and regional effects of colonial policies. Contemporary progress in advocacy, activism, and human rights has galvanising effect that stirs up people's complex feelings about historical events and their consequences. This makes Indigenous politics a volatile field.

The authors of *Wylah* demonstrated awareness of these complexities. As we kept circling back to the topic of politics, Pritchard and Gould were explaining to me that they did not want to put overt political messages in the books because 'internal tribal politics' and nation-wide domestic Indigenous politics are difficult areas to navigate (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023; Pritchard, personal communication, 6/04/2023; Pritchard, personal communication, 17/04/2023; Gould, personal communication, 17/04/2023). Gould (personal communication, 3/04/2023) shared that Pritchard and him were concerned that internal Indigenous politics will get in the way of their attempts to promote Indigenous culture in the mainstream media. They worried that their strategy of representing a specific tribe rather than generalising over the entirety of the Australia's First Nations, could backfire and offend other Indigenous Nations (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023). At the same time, they were worried about being blamed for generalising over all Indigenous Nations and not making it obvious that they set to represent only one tribe (Pritchard, personal communication, 11/10/2023). While Gould and Pritchard appear to successfully avoid assigning dividing labels to people, lifestyles, or political affiliations in their book series, it would take much more than that to avoid venturing into politics when representing Indigenous identity.

From irreconcilable to inseparable: the range of Indigenous political views

The field of Indigenous politics is divisive and non-uniform. Being galvanised in the recent years, most notably by the international Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and then the Voice referendum in 2023, Indigenous politicians and political activists has been very vocal about what they believe would be the best for Indigenous people in Australia. Practically, the field of Australian politics represents a wide range of views of how to express and exercise Indigenous identity. For the purposes of this chapter, I will outline a general picture of the state and different visions of the contemporary Indigenous politics.

On one end there exists an opinion that the only way to decolonisation is achieved through the full forfeit of the lands and government power back to Indigenous people. ‘What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?’, the radical Indigenous activist Roberta ‘Bobbi’ Sykes famously said at the conference dedicated to post-colonialism (Smith 1999, p. 24). While Sykes was politically active several decades ago, her political activism was impactful and she is still quoted many years after her passing by various anthropologists and Indigenous activists. Being often perceived as a radical opinion, decolonisation as ‘return’ of Australia to Indigenous people, nevertheless, exemplifies the view of Indigenous identity as separate, self-sufficient, and unyielding even after two centuries since the European invasion.

Moving away from a view that forbids co-existence and reconciliation but asserts Indigenous self-governance is the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Sovereignty has entered the national discourse in the 1960s (Moreton-Robinson 2007, p. 3). Appearing in courts and being discussed in parliaments, the proposition of Indigenous sovereignty helped Indigenous communities and activists to advocate for self-determination, self-governance, land rights, and more. But what is Indigenous sovereignty and how is it different from its Western counterpart?

In the Western political paradigm, ‘sovereignty’ is a concept from political theory that signifies a supreme authority who possesses decision-making power and enforces order, as defined by *the Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2025). In turn, Indigenous organisations, academic, community leaders, and activists insist that ‘Indigenous sovereignty’ is a concept that differs from that. Instead of signifying power and ownership, it refers to a much wider and more complicated set of ideas referring to the issues of consent, resistance to the colonial systemic oppression, Indigenous ontology, philosophy, and recognition (Moreton-Robinson 2007; Behrendt 2003; Watson 2007; Falk & Martin 2007).

Unfortunately, this clash in interpretations and misunderstanding of this concept often leads to breakdowns in negotiations and political campaigns. The Barunga Statement in 1988, the Aboriginal Provisional Government manifesto in 1992, and the Draft Treaty of 1987 developed by the Sovereign Aboriginal Coalitions all called for sovereignty in terms of its holistic meaning: an expression of a wish to be in charge over their political, social, cultural, and economic affairs (Behrendt 2003, pp. 90-94). A number of legal cases such as *Mabo v Queensland (1992) 175 CLR 1* or *Coe v The Commonwealth (1993) 118 ALR 193* can be seen as steps towards the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. The Mabo case succeeded in

establishing the legal recognition of Indigenous sovereignty over their lands that was effectively stripped in the process of colonisation (Falk & Martin 2007, p. 38). The Coe case ventured into the exploration of ‘internal sovereignty’, a notion that Indigenous people should have power to manage their cultures, lands, and societies, with the argument that the Wiradjuri people are a ‘domestic dependent nation’. ‘Domestic dependent nation’ is a concept that exists in Canada and the US and refers to various autonomous administrative divisions within the state (Falk & Martin 2007, p. 39). However, the Coe case was not successful in establishing a legal precedent that could grant Indigenous nations in Australia this status. ‘Internal’ sovereignty of the Wiradjuri nation was not recognised by the High Court that operates by the principles of Western sovereignty.

Many Indigenous scholars and philosophers insist that assertion of sovereignty does not, in its essence, seek any power over non-Indigenous people (Falk & Martin 2007, p. 39). Behrendt (2003, p. 103) explains the difficulty in finding the right English word besides ‘sovereignty’ that could capture the nuanced complexity of this notion: ‘it has been difficult to find another catch word, expression or phrase within the English language which could state more accurately the claims of the Indigenous Community’.

One of the core elements behind Indigenous sovereignty is a treaty. Treaty (also known as settlements, pacts, accords, and so on) is a legally binding agreement, and, in the context of Indigenous politics, it is used to acknowledge historic misdeeds, delineate rights and responsibilities between the state and Indigenous nations, and work together towards a common beneficial goal (Agreements Treaties and Negotiated Statements 2025). Falk and Martin (2007, p. 45) explain that treaty is a means to establish and maintain relations between the colonial and Indigenous societies practiced in many countries:

In other countries where *terra nullius* was not invoked (such as New Zealand, Finland, Canada and the United States), treaties were entered into with their respective Indigenous, setting out a process for ‘shared’ or ‘internal’ Indigenous sovereignty.

It is notable that among settler-colonial countries of the world, Australia is among very few nations who did not yet establish any treaties with local Indigenous peoples (Agreements Treaties and Negotiated Statements 2025; Falk and Martin 2007, p. 45). Political discussions around the treaty have been on the national agenda since the independent Aboriginal Treaty Committee was established in 1979. The most recent and decisive attempts to reach it was in

2017 – The Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Voice to Parliament referendum that followed it in 2023.

There could be many reasons of why there is so much struggle in achieving a treaty in Australia. Watson (2007, pp. 15-16) writes that there is no one well-defined group in Australia that identifies as ‘Indigenous’ in any shared and common sense. Diverse regional political, social, cultural, and economic situations of Indigenous groups, communities, and individuals make it difficult for people to find one way of being Indigenous, Watson (ibid.) explains. Variations in the state politics that are determined by different colonial histories, geographic features, and political values further complicate the issue making it very unlikely for the federal government to identify one way to negotiate with everyone. At the same time, the government might assert that Indigenous rights are being uplifted in other ways, not necessarily through treaties, but through social, economic, and cultural impact programs (UTS 2023; Moreton-Robinson 2007, p. 4). On a level of general public, some believe that entering into a treaty is either detrimental for the good of the nation as it seeks fragmentation of legal and administrative responsibilities, or impractical as there are over two hundred of Indigenous nations with different political, social, economic, and cultural interests (UTS 2023). Overall, achieving a treaty in Australia became an important, yet highly polarised initiative that is obscured by misunderstanding, historic and regional differences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across different states, and political divides among Indigenous and non-Indigenous politicians, political parties, and their supporters in the public.

Many Indigenous representative bodies are built on one of several principles of Indigenous sovereignty. For example, such initiatives relevant for local Victorian context as Yoorrook, an Indigenous Victorian justice commission. Initiated by the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria and the Victorian Government, ‘[t]he Yoorrook Justice Commission is the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria’ (Yoorrook 2024). Yoorrook could be considered as a move away from views that prevent reconciliation. It represents the opinion of some people that in order to move forward people and institutions must be held accountable for violent, unlawful, or unjust historic colonial acts. Yoorrook’s task is to measure and officially file the impacts of colonisation on Victorian Indigenous people and making recommendations to the Victorian government of how to reform the system. Yoorrook exemplifies the need of some Indigenous people to be validated for their frustration with the institutional racism and historical injustices that they and their families have experienced over the past two hundred years.

This initiative represents and empowers people who seek reconciliation through systemic changes that involve legislative and policy reforms, recognition and healing of colonial traumas, and the desire of Indigenous people to form a united representative body that will protect Indigenous cultures, peoples, and rights. As a representative body, Yoorrook takes on a symbolic role of the protector of Victorian Indigenous people. Further, Yoorrook polices using, storing, and disseminating Indigenous cultural knowledge. They have the power to help people enforce the ban on reproduction of cultural materials or take down particular pieces that could be considered sensitive or personal. However, even on a local level, there are divisions.

Despite Yoorrook's position as the representative body that advises systemic changes that could improve the lives of the majority of Indigenous people in Victoria, this commission does not represent the interests of all Indigenous people in the state. In 2021, the Yoorrook commission's first report was criticised by the First Nations Assembly of Victoria for lacking consultations with Victorian First Nations:

“In our view, the interim report would benefit from further consultation given its critical role in the creation of a new public narrative about First Peoples in Victoria and in informing Victoria's reform agenda,” the letter [sent by the First Nations Assembly of Victoria to the Yoorrook commission's chair] said.

(Latimore 2022)

The commission decided to go ahead with the report regardless of the feedback. The Yoorrook commission is also criticised by some as acting like a revenge-seeker. The Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jacinta Nampijinpa Price accuses Yoorrook of essentialising the colonial harm in a non-constructive manner:

They want to demonise colonial settlement in its entirety and nurture a national self-loathing about the foundations of the modern Australian achievement.

(Jacinta Price 2023)

This and similar responses to Yoorrook's activity highlight the fact that despite the delegated power this commission has, it does not represent the interests of the diversity of Indigenous societies across Victoria.

On another point of political scale moving from regional to national, there is a desire of Indigenous people to fight cultural and social fragmentation with the sense of political unity. This desire has resulted in the Voice to Parliament referendum of 2023. This is not the first time a referendum related to Indigenous rights has been conducted in Australia. Bain Attwood, Professor of History at Monash University, explains that since the 1950s, there have been profound changes in Australia related to race, rights, history, and culture (Attwood 2023, n.p.). In the 1960s, the focus was to bring Indigenous people to the same level of rights and privileges as enjoyed by other Australians and focused on individual rights, as is exemplified by the 1967 successful referendum (ibid). This has changed and for several decades now, racial and cultural difference is increasingly celebrated and associated with pride and empowerment. Indigenous rights are now being seen as special rights that are exclusive, permanent, and group based (ibid).

The 2023 Voice to Parliament had a different focus. It proposed the constitutional establishment of a government consultative body called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. This referendum was proposed by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, an initiative that has been prepared in 2017 as a result of National Constitutional Convention. The Statement outlined the idea of a constitutionally sanctioned Indigenous consultative body that can advise policy-makers in the government on Indigenous issues.

Being promoted as a proposal that reflects the interests of all Indigenous people of Australia, the Voice referendum could be seen as an attempt to form the united Indigenous ‘voice’ that can act as a counterpart to the mainstream Australian national politics and ensure that interests and rights are heard and accounted for. The goal of the Voice referendum was explicitly stated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart: ‘*Makarrata* is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle’ (Uluru Statement 2024). The unity, as opposed to fragmentation, of Indigenous identities, cultures, interests, and political motivations is the wish for many to overcome the extensive colonial trauma and disempowerment that was sustained by the Indigenous societies. This referendum embodies the wish for some Indigenous people to gain the sense of representation, autonomy, and empowerment by having a dedicated government body that would assert their rights and opinions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice was hoped to advise the government and private organisations on how they should treat Indigenous people, culture, and land.

However, the 'Yes' campaign's efforts to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of Australia's First Nations' people were perceived by many as simultaneously being too radical while at the same time not practical enough to bring positive changes to the current legislature. In the end, the Voice referendum failed, resulting in the pro-campaign collecting only 39.9% of votes nationally. The failure of this referendum is still being studied, but it is nevertheless an important marker of the state of Indigenous politics in Australia today. The 'Yes' campaign argued that they represented interests of the overwhelming majority of Indigenous people in the country (Yes23 2023), but the results demonstrate that it was not the case. The failure shows that the Referendum Council failed to recognise the complexity of political views in Australia, and in particular among Indigenous individuals.

The push for the 2023 'Yes' referendum was very different from the 1967 referendum. The 'Yes' campaign was built on the conception of history as 'shameful', that is the history of oppression, discrimination, dispossession, displacement, and dispossession that Indigenous people suffered as a result of the Euro-Australian colonisation (Attwood 2023). Such discourse was seen by many non-Indigenous and some Indigenous people as discriminatory. Describing the changing political discourses and the growing division of opinions about Indigenous politics, Attwood (2023) argues that representation seems to become a political issue that needs to be accounted for in political actions.

At the same time, the criticism of the Voice reveals the other end of the range of the Indigenous politics – the assimilation of Indigenous people into the Anglo-Australian society. One of the most influential supporters of this view is Jacinta Nampijinpa Price. Titled 'a conservative rock star' by The Sydney Morning Herald (Knott 2023), Price has attracted a high number of followers and supporters after her public appearances as part of the anti-Voice campaign. Price famously explained in her speech at the National Press Club of Australia: 'It should be perfectly obvious to everyone that not all Indigenous people think the same' (Jacinta Price 2023). In this statement, Price effectively argues against the idea that community leaders and representative organisations can be entrusted to represent the interests of the whole Indigenous population. In her Senate speech on 13 June, 2023 regarding the Treaty, she communicates her disagreement and explains it as related to Indigenous people's personal freedom of choice and opinion:

It seems to me that many people want to treat Indigenous Australians as if they are not in fact Australian, as if we are different and separate. But the reality is

that Indigenous Australians are Australians. We have the same legal rights as every other Australian, including the right to participate in the democratic process. I have had the right to use my vote as my voice to have a say on who was going to be my local representative since I was 18 [...].

(Jacinta Price 2023)

In this quote, Price argues that on the legal level Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have access to the same rights and freedoms. Price rejects the opinion that Indigenous people are a uniform group of people and that they are inherently separate from the mainstream society. Separating Indigenous diversity from the Indigenous rights agenda, Price argues that Indigenous people do not need constitutional ‘crutches’ to reach empowerment.

Jacinta Price represents opinions of Indigenous people who trust in individual freedoms and rights in the context of Australian constitution and who do not equate them with cultural identity. The emphasis on individualism is a feature of this cohort. Reflecting the tensions between Indigenous social classes, people’s living conditions, and their cultural proximity, this political position could be viewed as liberating and empowering for those who do not wish to tie their identity, decisions, and opportunities to the community-based and often hierarchical political structures. For example, Price criticises the statement of the Indigenous Minister for Indigenous Australians who argued that Indigenous voices were excluded from the government decision-making process. Price says:

We have been told by the Indigenous Minister for Indigenous Australians that Indigenous people do not get a say on policies, or the decisions being made on our behalf. I am one of 11 Indigenous Voices currently in parliament, and I will not accept the lie, the rationalisation of many Indigenous voices of the ‘Yes’ campaign, who suggest our democratically elected voices are redundant because we belong to political parties.

(Jacinta Price 2023)

Price points that to the fact that there are Indigenous members in the parliament and that they do take part in shaping Australia alongside of other parliament members. She suggests that the Indigenous Minister meant that these democratically elected Indigenous members of the parliament are not endorsed by or elected from Indigenous communities and organisations. Thus, Price challenges the opinion that Indigenous cultural and community authorities elected

internally are the only people who can represent Indigenous interests. This does not fit into the individualistic vision of Indigenous identity.

Price's views have caused a storm of reactions in the Australian politics. Becoming extremely popular among some non-Indigenous right-wing supporters and Indigenous people from across Australia, she has also attracted a lot of harsh criticism from others. The Sydney Morning Herald reports that Price was criticised by the co-architect of the Uluru Statement of the Heart, Noel Pearson:

Leading Yes advocate Noel Pearson claimed earlier this year that Price was caught up in a “redneck celebrity vortex”, alleging she was being used as a pawn by conservative think tanks to “punch down on other black fellas” – a charge Price rejected as “belittling” and “bullying”.

(Knott 2023)

Accused of acting against other Indigenous people by Pearson and a number of other prominent and respected Indigenous community members such as Marcia Langton (Langton, 2018), Price's vision on what is best for the Indigenous people differs drastically from what the Uluru Statement proposed. The disagreement between the political factions was so great that Price claims to have received a number of death threats in the months leading to the referendum (Knott 2023).

Death threats, disagreements, and blame casting are the symptoms of the vastly non-uniform state of Indigenous politics. This is an immensely complex field with too many issues at play – individualistic and community identity, demands for special rights and cries for equal rights for all, and many other intricacies that complicate and add extra layers to it. As I briefly mapped the general outline of Indigenous politics, I aimed to demonstrate its disparate and volatile state. Such political factions also demonstrate different modes of perception of Indigenous identity, as hierarchical and community-based and as democratic and individual-based. These diverse perceptions to some extent reflect regional differences; however, it is important not to perceive the regional divide in an essentialising manner (Price, the Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs, comes from Northern Territory and is an ardent supporter for conservative Indigenous politics and also Indigenous land right). Overall, it is because of such vitriol on all sides of Indigenous politics Pritchard and Gould want to be advocates for Indigenous people but they try to find a way to do it ‘apolitically’.

Politics and children's books

Despite this, being public Indigenous figures and representing Indigenous people and culture in the mainstream media, Pritchard and Gould *inevitably function within this political field*. Just like many others, Pritchard and Gould participated in the support for the 'yes' campaign in the months leading to the Voice referendum. They applied the 'Yes' frames to their profile pictures on their private social media accounts. They also shared promotion posts on Instagram and Facebook featuring the drawing of Wylah against a super-sized word 'yes' in the background. Below they wrote that a government Indigenous consultative body and the legal recognition of Indigenous people in the constitution would 'bring back that which was lost in order to move forward'³⁸.

(Figure 27: Wylah says yes, @WylahTheKoorieWarrior 2023. Image description:

Wylah stands holding a shield, a spear, and a glowing boomerang. Behind her, the text says 'YES'.

<https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCxSCgpmrN-f%2F%3Figsh%3DMXcyN3U3cHd0djN4eQ%253D%253D&h=AT1MXTLLWnRN9A75FF_foyV69r-N1AzjUTnPDewRwj0B3YFL7qNkVQisUCg95S-LwFhLCHB6s2PFttDYGywx0VCz52vQnbdcBcNdGLGFJ1MkjDm47at-zZc7xHWhHZK>.)

Gould told me 'I am all for it' (Gould, personal communication, 8/06/2023) when I asked for his opinion about the Voice referendum:

The only reason I can see people saying 'no' is I understand that they might think that its gonna divide Australia more, which I kinda get, but... the good outweighs the bad, if that makes sense. [...] Some people say 'It's a conspiracy' or... there is legit a movement that is saying 'If you don't know – say 'no', legit promoting ignorance, they are not even reading what it actually is and just saying 'no' to it anyway. [...]

While sharing his thoughts on the Voice referendum, Gould speculated on why he thinks people think about voting 'no'. He connects it to Indigenous activism:

³⁸ @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 17/09/2023, viewed 11 July 2024, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCxSCgpmrN-f%2F%3Figsh%3DMXcyN3U3cHd0djN4eQ%253D%253D&h=AT1MXTLLWnRN9A75FF_foyV69r-N1AzjUTnPDewRwj0B3YFL7qNkVQisUCg95S-LwFhLCHB6s2PFttDYGywx0VCz52vQnbdcBcNdGLGFJ1MkjDm47at-zZc7xHWhHZK>.

The reason why many people say ‘No’ to it is because of the black activists. They think: ‘They will change everything! They will change the names of every place! They will just cause mayhem!’ And that’s what people think. Originally, that’s what I thought.

(Gould, personal communication, 16/06/2023)

For Gould, ‘black activists’ represent Indigenous politics on the ground level. ‘Causing mayhem’ and ‘changing everything’, the activists are seen as not challenging the status quo, but as destroying and censoring everything without consideration. Gould continues stressing the unpredictable and sometimes vindictive side of Indigenous activism:

And that is very well represented nowadays because there is always these black activists renaming stuff that just makes no sense, like they renamed Coon Cheese [laughs] which is ... stupid. [...] Obviously, it [the racist name] sounds bad! But you [Indigenous activists] are just making us look bad! [...]

(Gould, personal communication, 16/06/2023)

Gould is talking about a campaign led by Dr Stephen Hagan, an Indigenous writer and activist, who lobbied Coon Cheese brand to change its name. The conflict was resolved successfully in 2020 with the company deciding to rename itself as Cheer Cheese. In 2021, Hagan has launched a Human Rights campaign against Scrabble, a tabletop word game, for including such racial slurs as ‘abo’, ‘coon’ and ‘boong’ in the game which can award players with at least eight in-game points (Collard 2021). While Hagan’s efforts to remove racially offensive language from popular brands and games pursued a goal to end normalisation of racism in Australia, such campaigns were not perceived positively by some people. Hagan was targeted by critics who speculated that he would start a crusade to rename everything in a politically correct way. Rumours started to circulate about what brand would become Dr Hagan’s next target:

In 2020, the network shared on the The TODAY Show’s official Facebook page an article by the Daily Mail and a poll which alleged Dr Hagan was campaigning to have the name of Paul's "Smarter White Milk" changed. [...]

(Knowles 2023)

Such ungrounded accusations of Hagan targeting every brand that may sound offensive to Indigenous people resulted in Hagan receiving threats and ‘hate mail’ (Knowles 2023). The efforts to remove offensive language from the mainstream market divided opinions of Australians, including the opinions of the First Nations people. Gould believes that such Indigenous activism focuses on issues that will not necessarily improve the lives of the people. Instead, Gould sees this as a kind of self-destructive behaviour because it comes from the place of hatred and promotes division:

A lot of people, a lot of older blackfellas are... I say, they are stuck in the mindset of ‘whitefella – bad’, like whitefella is the one that came in and destroyed our homes, took the children and all that, and they are stuck in that way. And they don’t know that it is hurting their own culture because now they are... they are using what happened back then to kinda fuel their activism of what they want changed, not what’s best for Culture, what’s best for Aboriginal people. Just what *they* want changed. [...] they are not listening to actual real proper activism that actually needs to happen ‘cause the Barka River, well the Darling River, like near Sydney where that is getting dried up because of the whitefellas. That’s the type of activism that we need. The stuff that is actually harming the country and harming the Aboriginal people and all that, but the activism that is just changing the milk brands and just wants to cancel whitefella stuff is just stupid [...]. They just try to use their hatred to kinda just fire at whitefellas [...].

(Gould, personal communication, 16/06/2023)

Hence, Gould views quarrelling about brand names or other seemingly impractical things as unhelpful. Instead, he wishes that these activists dedicated their time and efforts to tackle the issues of environment and land use that he considers as more practical and beneficial for the land and people. He seems to connect surface level activism with pride of some individuals and the sense of opposition between Indigenous and Anglo-Australian cultures that they feed. Gould also points that creating division is not a sustainable or wise practice because Indigenous people live side by side with many different cultures in Australia. In the context of many attacks on colonial statues in the recent years (Horn 2024; Southwell 2024) and the discord in the national politics, Gould is convinced that impractical ‘black activism’ has a damaging effect on Indigenous public image. He says:

So... I just hope that people don't see black activists as all Aboriginal people.

(Gould, personal communication, 16/06/2023)

While Pritchard and Gould cannot avoid directly or indirectly participating in Indigenous politics of representation, they try to diminish their political impact in *Wylah*. Being aware of the vast complexities in the field of Indigenous identity politics and activism, they do not argue that Indigenous political movements are to be disregarded. As was demonstrated above, Pritchard and Gould did engage in political activism themselves by lobbying for the Voice referendum. However, what they mean by saying that they try to be apolitical is that they see that *Wylah* is not an appropriate place to engage with such topics. The strategy that Gould and Pritchard employ in an attempt to position *Wylah* outside of direct political engagement is by targeting younger audiences and by making the story entertaining and engaging. But could a story that avoids difficult themes be less political than a story that explores them?

For Gould, stories that avoid strong political messaging and instead focus on presenting as relatable, entertaining, and generally positive help promote learning about Indigenous culture. Besides, the generalised form of their Indigenous representation that focuses on practices and concepts that are commonly shared across many Indigenous Nations (such as ochre painting, cooking techniques, eel fishing, and so on) helps them to avoid provoking controversy over intellectual and cultural property. There is an opinion among the wider Australian public that race politics that infiltrated many aspects of life cause fatigue among some people. For example, this Facebook user's comment left under SBS Australia's news story about *Wylah*'s early story concept encapsulates such mood:

I'm not going to lie I like the artwork and the idea of her pet being a giant galah .but we don't need more conversations about race have they not been on facebook twitter lately everything is a race conversation.³⁹

This and similar responses align with Pritchard and Gould's vision of Indigenous identity politics and highlight the need of different stories. Gould told me during an interview that when he and Pritchard did preliminary research of literature on the market, they found that most of the Indigenous media content appears to be too 'depressing' to appeal to children:

³⁹ Facebook user (k), SBS Australia post comment, Facebook, 23/07/2020, viewed 13 September 2023, <<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16Viis5sU6/>>.

It was all, you know... there were books about Aboriginals or Aboriginal culture, but a lot of that was depressing. And a lot of it was stored away from the children's sections of libraries, so obviously children never got access to it. And obviously they wouldn't be child-friendly [laughs] So, hence why when Richard came to me with this idea of Wylah I was like 'Hell yeah, lets do it!'

(Gould & Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023)

Continuing talking about the lack of positive stories for primary school age, Gould says:

...[it is] a lot more disappointing for parents - they want to teach their kids Aboriginal culture but more of in a fun imaginative way instead of hitting them hard because they are not old enough to learn that stuff [...] [Indigenous books for older readers] can hit hard with the hard stuff, but they'll be 'Ah... that's not fun, I don't wanna read this!' That's why we wanted to put more focus on the fun part. [...]

Gould explains that books and other media projects that delve into difficult themes might not be an appropriate or useful tool to engage children into learning about Indigenous culture. He believes that 'fun' books are much more appealing for children who could become genuinely engaged by an adventure story that showcases Indigenous practices, languages, and cultural concepts in an imaginative and entertaining way. The aspect of educating children about Indigenous cultures is important because, the issue of young Indigenous people being cut off from culture comes up across Indigenous Australia. Djambawa Marawili (2022), Yolŋu artist, activist, and leader of the Madarrpa clan, published an article in the *Madayin* catalogue explaining the nature and significance of *madayin*, the sacred system of knowledge. Marawili (2022, p. 40) explains that *madayin* was traditionally kept as secret knowledge only meant for ceremonies of great cultural significance, such as initiation and so on. For millennia, these traditions persisted and maintained religious and cultural order of the Yolŋu people. However, Marawili (2022, p. 43) argues that today it is of utmost importance to reveal these knowledges beyond the circles of people who originally had exclusive access to them. Marawili explains addressing his people:

These designs we are talking about, when are you going to reveal them yourselves? We might leave it too late to show these to those younger Yolŋu people. Yolŋu who do not know their own stories, and do not know their own places.

(Marawili 2022, p. 43)

For Marawili, the continuity of cultural and religious knowledges is more important and more practically useful than the risk of losing it as a result of the exclusive nature of these traditions. Indeed, cultural involvement of younger Indigenous people and perhaps non-Indigenous people, too, could be a viable strategy to maintain cultural viability. For this reason, Gould believes that *Wylah* is a valuable addition to the literature for seven- to eleven-year-olds – it is likeable enough for children to read it and has enough cultural content to be educational. Gould (personal communication, 23/03/2023) states that this particular demographic is important: children of this age are forming opinions and views on the world and it is important for them to be exposed to stories or educational materials that help them to appreciate diversity. Gould also mentions that these children are still open-minded enough to be into light-hearted and fun fantasy stories:

Because, like, seven- to twelve-year-olds, that is the ripe age for imagination. Kids have the wildest imaginations around that time, anything younger, they just look at something [and go] ‘ha, funny’ moments. But seven- to twelve-year-olds that’s where they get really creative. And it’s just the fact there was nothing within that range for them was, yes, it was absolutely almost disappointing at that point.

(Gould, personal communication, 23/03/2023)

Importantly, Gould does not dismiss the importance of serious Indigenous literature:

Obviously, we can’t just ignore what happened back then. Massacres and all that – we don’t try to shut all that away and pretend that it doesn’t exist. But we want to make this book appeal to kids the same way it does to me and Richard.

(Gould, personal communication, 23/03/2023)

Deep and ongoing tragedies of colonial violence and dispossession cannot be ignored or dismissed, notes Gould. Acknowledging and understanding the impact of these events on Indigenous communities and individuals is important for addressing systemic inequalities and envisioning an inclusive future for the nation. As I pointed earlier, the book series does not shy away from the issues of colonisation (the Dragon army invasion), land dispossession (demolishing a region in search for gold), forced removal of people (enslavement of several

Indigenous tribes, including the tribe of the main character), and complex grief (the loss of the tribal lands, family members, and a death of a close relative). What Gould argues in his statement above is that focusing solely on these themes without balancing them out with positive aspects such as friendship, collaboration, humour, and philosophic discussions about the meaning of changes may not be an appropriate point to begin children's Indigenous cultural education. By framing a story as educational, but also entertaining, relatable, and uplifting may help to genuinely interest children in learning more about Indigenous culture.

While a light-hearted adventure book series could help Gould and Pritchard to attract more readers who would enjoy their story not only for its political implication, but also its engaging plot and educational value, Pritchard and Gould's identity positionality is the key to their abilities to traverse the political minefield without triggering confrontation. Gould, who has lived experience existing in both Peek Whurrong and mainstream Anglo-Australian cultures internalised them both. His positionality as Peek Whurrong community member and cultural practitioner, as well as his Elders' blessing and protection allow him to share stories and sell books without being criticised. His familiarity with the conventions of Western storytelling that he picked up consuming Euro-American media products helps him to tell engaging stories that feel familiar and appealing to the audiences. His journey in learning and practicing Peek Whurrong culture informs his creativity and infuses his storytelling with vivid and realistic cultural details that he must have found fascinating himself.

Pritchard, as I mentioned before, is not a Peek Whurrong man, but a friend and colleague of Peek Whurrong Elders whom he met at TAFE while working there as an educator. However, his Samoan identity does grant him the Indigenous status that he uses to position himself as a media producer who understands 'Culture'. This is an important factor as it positions Pritchard outside of local politics. Pritchard explained:

So, Jordan and I operate outside of a lot of cultural barriers that people would find themselves in. Like, because I am Samoan, I can kind of traverse any of the tribes and work with any of the tribes in Australia, because I am not particularly tied to a tribe and I am probably more 'trustworthy' in that way. Like, 'I am not here to promote my own tribe because I am not a part of your tribe'. For me, it's for everyone as a whole. So, some of them are probably looking at me and think: 'Is he in this for money? Or fame and fortune, if he is not from this tribe?' But then when they see Wylah now and they look and

realise... and they read it, I think, hopefully, it will speak for itself what we tried to do. It's a bit more genuine than someone trying to do a money grab with no educational benefits or cultural benefits. It's not my own agenda.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 15/06/23)

Here Pritchard describes the benefits of his positionality as a 'friendly' outsider. Not being directly involved in any of the internal conflicts or having any obvious political stakes, Pritchard could claim a neutral standing within Indigenous politics. His creative activity could be perceived as non-threatening by some, and his friendship with Uncle Robbie Lowe and other Elders is probably an insurance against criticism from others. As a result, both Gould and Pritchard are able to place themselves relatively separate from internal and national political clashes. However, this does not mean that the authors are completely apolitical.

Any attempts to empower or disempower are innately political. In the case of *Wylah*, Gould and Pritchard not only work on empowering Indigenous people – they seem to trail a new pathway to reconciliation. As both Pritchard and Gould insist, they want *Wylah* to be 'a flagship' (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023) or 'a vessel' (Gould & Pritchard, personal communication, 2022) that will initiate a new chapter in Indigenous representation, cultural exchange, and visibility in all aspects of life, their mission is to shape a new discourse around Indigenous culture. At multiple occasions Pritchard stated:

Well, my plan was to tell the story. So, whether we are successful or not, we want to tell a story that could *bring Aboriginal culture to the mainstream media. That's the ultimate goal.*

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 23/03/23)

...to be a spear for Culture in the public space. *To spearhead Aboriginal culture in the mainstream media.*

([emphasis added] Pritchard, personal communication, 12/10/2023)

We want to blend Indigenous storytelling with Western writing structures so that we can *share a universal story with the world.* The hope is that *Wylah* can be *a conversation starter* for many schools, communities and social groups to learn and celebrate the traditional owners of the lands they live on.

([emphasis added]; *Wylah* Kickstarter 2024)

While the authors never explicitly linked their goals to reconciliation, perhaps because they view this concept through as political, they both believe that reconciliation could be achieved through good will, peaceful collaboration, and empathy. Richard told me that he hopes their readers will be inspired to research their local Indigenous history:

When people look at *Wylah*, they kind of like: ‘oh, wow, she is cool, you know, oh, we now know all this history we haven’t heard before!’ But then, they kind of like ‘oh... I guess... Aboriginal people were real and they did have lives, and we just watched the last two hundred years them getting massacred!... Oops...’ It brings a lot of this kind of things. Now they start to [...] understand that this culture is so deep and it is so rich, and so full of lore and customs and they go like: ‘well, we’ve only been here for two hundred years so what we were all doing when this was all happening?’...

(Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023)

Pritchard hopes that after reading *Wylah* and feeling empathy and connection to the characters and the story, the readers will be more open to contribute to reconciliation.

When I asked Gould what does reconciliation mean for him, he responded: ‘it is better to forgive and build a better future together than be angry at the past’ (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023). Gould (personal communication, 3/04/2023) explains that people who perpetrated colonial violence ‘are already dead’, and thus there is no one left to be punished. In his refusal to participate in cultural clashes or blame exchange, Gould is convinced that ‘we need to create a culture without fear’ (Gould, personal communication, 3/04/2023). Anxiety and uncertainty are often observed among non-Indigenous people who interact with Indigenous culture, history, or art. As I have demonstrated previously, I identified a distinct lack of *Wylah*’s literary criticism among the lay readers and also among professional book reviewers. Fear to offend Indigenous people by passing artistic judgement without having an ‘expert knowledge’ restricts creative representation and curbs Indigenous cultural creative potential, believes Gould (personal communication, 3/04/2023). ‘A culture without fear’ is essentially normalisation. If integrated, demystified, and present in daily life, understanding Indigenous culture may not necessarily require ‘expert knowledge’ to appreciate it. Gould draws the example of NAIDOC Week to illustrate what he thinks normalisation should look like:

It's kinda like NAIDOC Week. Even though NAIDOC Week is nice, but it is only like a week. [...] Everyone just like: 'Oh, this one week we gonna celebrate Indigenous culture! Anyways, back to the office'. [...] We want NAIDOC Week to be a part of day-to-day stuff.

(Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2-24)

Thus, Gould and Pritchard see 'spearheading' Indigenous culture into the mainstream, popularising it via representation in children's books, and making it visible in the mainstream spaces such as shopping centres, major book shops, central radio and television stations as actions designed to make it Indigenous culture as an inseparable part of everyday life. Pritchard and Gould want to see 'Aboriginal culture everywhere' (Pritchard & Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2024). Gould explains that they want Indigenous culture to be integrated into the mainstream Australian culture:

...making Aboriginal culture, I suppose, a lot more accepted, a lot more expected, a lot more part of everyone's lives. And we see that growing from different Aboriginal stories.

(Gould, personal communication, 11/07/2024)

Despite Gould and Pritchard's efforts to stay away from political criticism, some people could still say that integrating Indigenous culture to the mainstream Australian culture by creating a media franchise that mixes Indigenous storytelling with Western writing is either an attempt of assimilation or cultural appropriation. Gould and Pritchard were always aware of this risk and had a lot of anxiety prior to the publication of their first book, as I discussed in the earlier chapters. In my analysis of the pitfalls of Indigenous media representation, I pointed that cultural appropriation is the process where a cultural element is removed from its culture context and, as a result, loses its connection to its original culture. In case of *Wylah*, Pritchard and Gould work hard to signal that they are, in fact, cultural insiders, that their franchise is firmly rooted in Peek Whurrong culture, and that it was created with numerous blessings of relevant cultural authorities of their region. For these reasons, *Wylah* cannot be a case of cultural appropriation. Whether *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and my next case study, *Zero Point*, could be seen as examples of assimilation will be discussed in chapter ten.

When I asked Pritchard what he thinks about the impact of the different political initiatives that aim to address social and political Indigenous issues, Pritchard responded that it is useless

to wait for the politicians to agree on something (Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023). Instead, he quoted Taika Waititi, a New Zealand Maori director and actor he admires, who said people should start building the life they want right now:

He will say that there is so much talk about these issues, here is so much panelling and discussions, meetings about decisions, but where are the people creating the content? Where are people creating the books, and the movies, and the films, and the TV series?

(Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023)

It is likely that Pritchard referred to Waititi's 2023 keynote speech at the Hollywood Reporter's Raising Our Voices Luncheon where he criticised Hollywood's approach to achieve better diversity in screen representation. Waititi explained that talking about a problem does not automatically solve it:

The diversity conversation, inclusivity conversation, all the conversations! All of us want to be working and not having to come and do fucking panels and speeches in the middle of our day. It's a great thing! It's good that we are talking about it, we have to keep talking about it, but this is the shit you've got us doing... You wonder why there's no Indigenous stuff out there? *This* is the shit you got us doing, making us come and talk about the problem and tell *you* how to fix it.

(The Hollywood Reporter 2023)

Taika Waititi is probably one of the most famous New Zealand actors and directors and the most vocal advocate of breaking barriers for Indigenous people and stories in media and cinema. Waititi is known for his initiative in casting Indigenous actors in non-Indigenous coded roles in his production, for expanding the range of Indigenous representation in mass media, and pioneering Indigenous production in the international mainstream media. Pritchard supports this approach of pushing Indigenous representation in mainstream media and leading the industry to where he wants it to be. He adds:

Why wait? What are we waiting for? Let's make this! What are we waiting for the last two hundred years? Let's just tell stories like what we were doing 40,000 years ago. There is a lot of people coming up now talking about this issue. Why is everyone so stuck on the last two hundred years? Why didn't we

find out what happened a thousand years ago and write about that? Why won't we write our own content? So, there is those kind of discussions bubbling up.

(Pritchard, personal communication, 8/06/2023)

Using *Wylah* as a project that can unite Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, Pritchard and Gould build on this idea. Reconnecting to the cultural roots, recollecting the life and world of the ancestors is an important foundation for building the future that brings everyone together.

While the national Indigenous politics tend to focus on one solution fits all and similar overarching ways to improve political representation, Indigenous media creators aim to work on levels closer to lay people. They create stories and visions of what they believe can appeal to their diverse audiences (due to inherent financial interests, as media production is treated by most as a job that should bring income). Pritchard and Gould believe in the power of creativity and storytelling. They see that Indigenous political initiatives and campaigns, no doubt beneficial and needed, may not be a solution to all problems in the wider Australian society. Believing in the 'soft' power, in business and in politics alike, Pritchard and Gould work in different ways to bring about changes that may perhaps help influence Australian society to move towards a greater appreciation of Indigenous creativity, ingenuity, spirituality, and knowledges.

In this Part, I have studied the case of *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*, an Indigenous media franchise that quickly rose to success, recognition and appreciation. In my analysis, I have followed *Wylah* and this journey led me across many fields of production, distribution, and consumption. Through contrast and comparison between Disney's *Moana* and Pritchard and Gould's *Wylah*, I considered the difference of Indigenous representation done by Indigenous and non-Indigenous media creators. I studied how audiences perceive Indigenous characters written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. I delved into personal stories of Richard Pritchard and Jordan Gould. I witnessed how organisations, institutions and individuals express support for Indigenous causes, investigated the intricacies of marketing, studied Indigenous business models, and examined *Wylah* against the backdrop of the contemporary politics.

What I have found is that Pritchard and Gould's *Wylah* is a unique project. Like puzzle pieces, the success of this franchise is assembled from multiple factors. The specific historic moment of *Wylah's* publication offers a heightened attention to it as an Indigenous media franchise. In the aftermath of local and international push for better support and incorporation of

Indigenous cultural knowledges and materials, *Wylah* was able to receive significant support in the forms of Kickstarter funding, marketing help, favourable contract with the publisher, and media and literary attention. Authors' identities that exist on an intersection of Indigenous and Anglo-Australian are another factor that contributed to their success. Being familiar with western conventions of storytelling helped them to tell their story in the manner that can engage a wide cross section of audiences. At the same time, having a 'fresh' look on their Indigenous cultures they can select and represent practices, beliefs, and skills that may appeal to non-Indigenous people.

The very positionality of Pritchard and Gould as Indigenous authors ensured their legitimacy to produce Indigenous representation in the mainstream media. As acknowledged members and allies of a specific Peek Whurrong tribe of the Eastern Maar Nation of Victoria who have explicit public endorsement of the local Elders, they have social and cultural permission to pursue their business venture. The decision to use a fantasy genre with a focus on a light-hearted and humorous narrative style helped them to present their book series as focused on education and entertainment rather than on complex Indigenous politics. Such attempts at distancing from overt political engagement allows the authors to stay relatively unaffected by the dramatic shifts in Indigenous politics. Together with carefully planned marketing strategies informed by the professional insight into media industry of Pritchard, as well as creative storytelling talents of Gould, the *Wylah* project has proven itself a resounding success.

This is a unique franchise in many aspects. It was created by two people who are new to publishing, yet it became a decisive bestseller. It began with almost no budget but managed to accumulate significant funds from public donations and enjoyed tangible assistance from media and marketing organisations. It did not just reach mainstream audiences, it managed to made its way into parts of Australian education curriculum and a recommended reading material promoted by educational institutions. Yet, it fell short from the engagement with Indigenous organisations and administrative bodies that it planned to achieve. It is possible that Gould and Pritchard's commitment to distance themselves from political involvement (besides their support for the Voice referendum), their somewhat idealistic vision that Australia in its entirety is ready to move on from the past 200 years, and an experimental approach to pushing the boundaries between culture, representation, and business venture that all accounted to hesitation of many Indigenous organisations, cooperatives, and regional administrative bodies to jump on board of their bold initiatives. After studying the case of

Wylah the Koorie Warrior, I started wondering if *Wylah*, a media project that uses Western storytelling conventions, genres, and is intended for the Australian mainstream media, is a unique Indigenous project that could only emerge in southeastern Australia.

In the next set of chapters, I will look at another case of mainstream Indigenous media franchise, *Zero Point*. Created by an Indigenous artist from Darwin, this is a different case study that explores the limits of Indigenous identity, questions the scope of Indigenous art, and envisions Indigenous representation in a novel and unconventional way.

Chapter 9. *Zero Point*, a ‘non-tokenistic’ Indigenous hero

While Pritchard and Gould did seem to set up their media project in a novel and somewhat experimental way that makes use of their particular strengths, there are other Indigenous media franchises made in different regions that reached different areas of the mainstream media. One of them is *Zero Point* created by Jonathon Saunders, an Indigenous artist from Darwin, Northern Territory. In this chapter, I will look at why *Zero Point* franchise stands out in the world of Australian comic books, in particular hero fiction. I will explore Saunders’ perspective on how to approach Indigenous representation in media, and explore the features of his positionality and personal lived experience as an Indigenous artist from the Northern Territory influence on his creative work.

Zero Point’s media presence

Jonathon Saunders is a Woppaburra man with connections to the Kanomie clan of Keppel Island in Queensland. Despite these ancestral connections, he was born in Darwin where he was raised by his aunt’s family. From a young age, Saunders was a fan of comic books and action TV series, and this influenced his artistic interests. His family encouraged him to pursue his artistic aspirations and in 2009 he graduated with Honours degree in Fine Arts from Charles Darwin University (Saunders 2016; Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023; Arjun 2016).

Saunders comes from a family with strong affiliations to art and media; his aunt, Justine Saunders (1953-2007), was a prominent Indigenous actress who starred in TV series, films, and theatre productions (Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023). While still a student, Saunders created his earliest *Zero Point* characters such as his main character, Kyle Burton (a.k.a. Zero Point) and some members of his superhero team like Lisa Cartwright (a.k.a. The Winged Commander) (Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023; Saunders 2022). In addition, Saunders has gained considerable experience in media and animation, growing his professional skills. After the completion of his studies, Saunders worked for Arnhem, Northers, and Kimberly Artists (ANKA), ‘the peak advocacy and support body for Indigenous artists and Art Centres across Northern Australia’ (ANKA 2024). For ten years, he provided administrative help to Indigenous art centres, including dealing with cases of art forgery (Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023).

Zero Point was first published in 2016 in a form of a short chapter in a comic anthology. Today, almost a decade later, this franchise consists of a comic series, animated web series, and an animated short film. This franchise follows Kyle Burton, an Indigenous man who lives in Melbourne. He is a former marine who unexpectedly discovers superpowers within himself during combat in a moment of crisis. Trying at first to be a vigilante, and then joining a government department of superhero agents, Kyle ends up untangling high-stake conspiracies that unexpectedly involve him and his family. *Zero Point* takes place in a fictionalised version of contemporary Australia. In Saunders' fictional world, superheroes are real. Like in classic superhero fiction, Saunders' superhuman characters serve in the military and work in government, own tech companies and run crime syndicates. This is 'a gritty, urban Australian take on the superhero genre mixing epic action, political intrigue, superhero mythos and shonen fantasy [a genre of Japanese comics that is designed for adolescent boys] into a unique graphic narrative' (Saunders in Comix 2024).

(Figure 28: Zero Point art in Undergrowth Productions n.y. Image description: a superhero floats in the air. He has white hair, dressed in a white, red, and blue spandex suit, and has a glowing ball of energy forming in his right hand. Text says: 'Zero Point. Everyone starts from nothing. <<http://www.undergrowthproductions.com/zero-point-season-zero/>>'.)

This franchise is published by Wild North Comics, a publisher established by Saunders and his collaborator, film director and curator Timothy Parish. Based in Darwin, this independent comic publisher is run by artists for artists. They first started publishing their comic issues in 2021 and continued releasing a variety of titles ever since. The most daring and expensive project that Saunders included under Wild North Comics several years after its release is *Zero Point: season zero*, a 2018 web series that was produced with the help of a \$200,000 grant that they won from Screen Australia's Indigenous Department initiative '[Black Space] Web Series'.

Zero Point franchise has attracted local and international attention from the art and media worlds. Saunders is involved in organising and participating in events and conventions in comic book shops in Darwin, such as Wild North Comic Con. Together with his team at Wild North Comics, he participated in Geekfest 2022, Darwin Fringe Festival, NT Writers Festival, Supanova, Darwin Zine Fair, Festival and Oz Comic Con. Besides gaining publicity in media, Saunders is also seeking recognition in the Australian and international artworlds. Saunders

was involved in organising exhibitions in Darwin Visual Arts Gallery, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre (Katherine), and more. His short film *One Minute to Midnight* (2023) based on *Zero Point* received a number of international film festival nominations such as Best Animated Film at the UK Multi Dimension Independent Film Festival 2024, semi-finalist for Best Animated Short at the Berlin Shorts Award 2024 and the San Francisco Arthouse Short Festival October 2023, and honourable mention at the Athens International Monthly Art Film Festival 2023.

In Australia, Saunders manages his publicity by participating in festivals such as Illuminate Adelaide 2023 and by appearing on local and national news channels to talk about *Zero Point*, such as NITV, NT News, Channel NT, ABC News, ABC Listen, and Off the Leash Magazine. A number of online news sources that specialise in comic book and media have issued artist profiles and transcribed interviews with Jonathon Saunders, including Comix and Comic Book Yeti. Overall, Saunders' *Zero Point* franchise has received awards, media attention, and is appreciated for its contribution to Indigenous art and progressive media representation of Indigenous characters. So, what helped *Zero Point* to achieve artistic recognition and stand out from other titles?

Relatability in Indigenous representation

One of the first features of *Zero Point* that draws attention is its distinctive art style. Saunders describes his visual style as 'a fusion of eastern and Western comic styles' (Saunders 2022). *Zero Point* is influenced by Saunders' favourite media titles. Saunders (personal communication, 14/03/2023) told me that he was specifically inspired by Japanese media franchises such as TV series *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996) by Toei Animation (and the original manga *Dragon Ball* by Akira Toriyama published from 1984 to 1995), TV series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996) by Gainax/Khara, and manga *Akira* (1982-1990) by Katsuhiro Otomo (see below). As depicted on images above, *Zero Point* is visually reminiscent of Japanese manga in its characters depiction style, specifically facial features and emotional depictions.

(Figure 29: *Zero Point* origins back cover in Saunders 2022: The Threshold. Image description: Kyle opens his military fatigues revealing his superhero outfit underneath.)

(Figure 30: Superman shirt rip in DC Comics 1941. Image description: Clark Kent opens his white office shirt revealing his superhero outfit underneath.)

(Figure 31: Goku in Toriyama 2002. Image description: Goku poses with his fists up. The visual style of character design resembles Zero Point.

<<https://blog.booksandladders.co.uk/2015/05/dragon-ball-z-namek-saga-by-akira.html>>.

(Figure 32: Cover art in Otomo 1991. Image description: two men stand on top of a machine. The visual style of character proportions, military equipment, and colour scheme resemble Zero Point. <https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Akira_Vol_1_31>)

He was also inspired by iconic US superhero media franchises, specifically DC's *Superman*, *Watchmen*, and *Batman*. This influence is visible in Saunders' use of muted colours, character poses, and their body proportions. The franchises Saunders is inspired by are globally famous and well-known to media consumers all over the world. Saunders says that he was also inspired by a famous Australian artist, Richard Bell. Bell's adaptations of Roy Lichtenstein's comic book strips, where Bell inserts Indigenous characters and text-bubble comments on Indigenous political issues, helped Saunders see that the boundaries of art styles, traditions, and fashions are permeable. As Saunders shared with an ABC podcast, looking at Bell's paintings 'he realised that an Indigenous superhero might be possible' (Adjurn 2016).

(Figure 33: *Now my Black People.. Kill*, Bell 2007. Image description: A dark-skinned brunette woman is peaking from the cover shooting from her rifle. Works 'Crak' and 'Now, my black people... KILL!' appear on the painting.

<https://www.artnet.com/artists/richard-bell/now-my-black-people-kill-wJStuK_JOHndsAne8zMMYg2>)

Another feature that distinguishes *Zero Point* is its approach to Indigenous representation in media. Almost every article about *Zero Point*, especially during the first wave of publicity in 2016, opens by commenting that it is a 'non-tokenistic' story about an Indigenous character (e.g. ABC News 2016, 'Diversity not tokenistic' or NFSA's 'Characters Not Tokens'). In an interview, Saunders told ABC News that *Zero Point* is an example of how progressive Indigenous representation should emphasise that characters have more to them than their Indigenous identity:

Since his teenage years reading comic books, Mr Saunders said he had noticed an increase of Indigenous Australian superhero characters by both Australian and international creators, with examples such as Condoman and Multiversity's Kaboomerang.

He said shows like ABC's *Cleverman* were an exciting emergence, however some Indigenous superheroes he had seen in pop culture *relied too much on stereotypes*.

"You've had some Indigenous superhero characters that were *reduced to red hairband-wearing stereotypes*.

"The thing is that it just becomes *homogenous and monoculture*.

"Characters like Spiderman are just regular shmos and Kyle Moulden [Saunders later changed his name to Kyle Burton] is a *regular guy* from Darwin caught up in bigger circumstances.

"It's about telling a thriller with an Indigenous superhero. More diversity that is not just tokenistic."

([emphasis added] Terzon 2016)

In this abstract, Saunders explains that in his view, diversity is not just the number of characters in popular media that seem Indigenous, but the quality and range of stories that feature Indigenous characters who have complex and developed personalities. Saunders' view on Indigenous representation resemble those of his aunt Justine Saunders. Justine was known as an advocate for Indigenous representation that does not pidgeonhole people into stereotypes, but allows them to showcase different personalities, views, and emotions in the mainstream media. Similarly, Jonathon Saunders criticises 'red hairband-wearing' characters. Despite the fact that such characters as, for example, Willy Willy, may technically help promote diversity of representation in comic books, such portrayal often ends up being tokenistic and monocultural.

To illustrate his strategic avoidance of tokenistic representation, Saunders repeatedly refers to *Zero Point* as a story about a 'superhero that happened to be Aboriginal, rather than an Aboriginal superhero.' (Comix 2024; Channel NT 2021; Saunders 2016; Gill 2024; Terzon 2016). Saunders refers to the de-centralisation of Indigenous cultural identity among his characters as a process of making them seem like 'regular guys' (Terzon 2016). This approach echoes Taika Waititi's call to focus more stories on 'Indigenous people doing normal things' (Muzyka 2019). Waititi told CBC Radio:

We're the Native presence in films that talk to trees, and we're smudging all the time, and we're riding whales, and we're talking to the ghosts of our ancestors

— which, sure, maybe for a few of us ... I don't. I'm just a normal dude.

(Muzyka 2019)

Here Waititi highlights the fact that deeply cultural depiction of Indigenous people in mass media is not a relatable experience for many contemporary Indigenous people, including himself. While its significance for cultural appreciation and empowerment should not be overlooked, Waititi points to the importance of portraying Indigenous people outside of the cultural context. For example, in his film *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016) the leading actor is Julian Dennison, a young Māori boy, but the film itself does not really focus on Māori culture.

Likewise, in *Zero Point*, Saunders treats his Indigenous characters the same way as his non-Indigenous characters – he mainly leaves their cultural and ethnic backgrounds out of focus. For example, throughout the franchise Saunders practically never explores the Indigenous cultural or social background of the main character Kyle Burton. Instead, Saunders uses markers of Indigenous identity to suggest that his characters are Indigenous, such as appearance features, stickers or pins with the Indigenous flag or boomerangs on their clothes, or slogans like ‘Blak Magic’ on their uniforms (see images below). His Indigenous characters also occasionally use words from Indigenous vocabularies such as ‘bub’, ‘mob’, and ‘bunji’ contextually, but without translation.

For example, in the image below Kyle talks to his grandmother at her house in Darwin (Saunders 2023, p. 3). Both characters are depicted using Indigenous words, but the conversation occurs primarily in English. During this scene, the readers are supposed to receive confirmation that Kyle is Indigenous, that he grew up in Darwin, and that his late mother was educated in a Melbourne university and worked for a multimillion-dollar tech corporation. Nothing in the scene reveals any further insights into Kyle’s Indigenous background; instead, the readers are presented with information that unpacks Kyle’s personality. These narrative choices allow Saunders to spend more time focusing on the plot, action, and character development rather than crafting a deliberate representation of how and why his characters are Indigenous in the context of his story. As a result, *Zero Point* comes off as a fast-paced, action-filled story that can grab readers’ attentions quickly with its internationally-spanning intrigue and engaging characters.

(Figure 34: 'Black magic' helmet and the Indigenous flag sticker in Saunders 2022.

Image description: a frame from the graphic novel depicting a military man in a green camouflage combat attire holding a rifle. There is an Australian flag on his left shoulder and a sticker 'Black magic' with a boomerang on his helmet. He says: 'Copy that, Hancock!')

(Figure 35: Indigenous flag on a cap in Saunders 2023. Image description: a frame

from the graphic novel depicting two men standing on the left. The first man is Jim Watt dressed in green fatigues. There is an Indigenous flag on his cap. Next to him is Kyle dressed in training gear who uses his abilities to shoot energy from his hand.)

(Figure 36: Kyle and his grandmother in Saunders 2023. Two frames from the graphic

novel. On the left, there is a close-up of Kyle's hand in his grandmother's grasp. She says: 'You can't blame yourself, *bub*'. Kyle: 'I know... but if these powers came earlier...'. Grandmother: 'Don't, you'll just make yourself sick thinking in circles...'. On the second frame, Kyle and his grandmother sit in her kitchen at the table and talk.

Grandmother: 'I wish I could've come to the funeral, I know they were good mates to you'. Kyle: 'It's OK, nan, I know it's hard to travel with...everything. Are the carers still coming round?' Grandmother: 'Yes, those mob still visit. Does anyone else know about... this?'. Kyle: 'No'.)

Zero Point is a mainstream-oriented Indigenous media project. Just like *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*, it is targeted at a wider audience and positions itself as a contemporary take on Indigenous representation. However, these two franchises have differences. The first one being the attitudes towards the best way to approach Indigenous representation in media. Pritchard and Gould believe that Indigenous art is about Culture and that it is best that Indigenous people produce it. In their view, seeking official permissions, consultations, and collaborators is key to appropriate Indigenous representation. Saunders sees Indigenous representation in media a little differently. He thinks that art should primarily be about Art, meaning that anyone could technically produce stories featuring Indigenous characters, settings, and knowledges. Saunders believes that prioritising culture while making Indigenous art is an understandable, but in many ways limiting approach. Having worked for ANKA for a decade, Saunders knows that traditional Indigenous art has a big international market that is very profitable. He has also witnessed the damage forged Indigenous art can cause to Indigenous businesses. However, despite the many concerns and potential issues that could

arise from this, he still believes that separating Indigenous and non-Indigenous art does not help improve Indigenous representation. When I asked him about his thoughts on the importance of Indigenous representation in media created by Indigenous authors, Saunders said:

I think the thing is, *I've always felt that anyone can write any story and tell it any way they want.* But I understand why a white comic book writer might want to shy away from that [representing Indigenous stories and characters] because there'll probably be backlash from that, which I feel they wouldn't want any of that. Because the thing is, in the past some of the best minority superheroes were created by... Obviously Black Panther, Marvel's most famous black superhero was created by two Jewish guys. *I feel that limiting the stories, saying you can only write stories based on your race or your gender or sexuality is a form of segregation.*

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Saunders explains that restricting Indigenous stories only to Indigenous people, or any stories to only one category of people, 'is a form of segregation' that impedes creativity. In an interview with an online magazine that covers news from the world of comics and graphic novels, Saunders was asked to give advice to aspiring comic book authors from the Pacific Islands. He encouraged them to focus on stories rather than culture:

My advice is to write engaging, cool, fun characters that *just* happen to be Fiji and Marshall Islanders, and not *just* 'Fiji and Marshall Island characters'. People like a character because of what they do, or what they want, or how they deal with adversity. *I feel there is too much focus now in comics and films about what skin colour a character has, and not why we should care about them. Diversity is now just a checklist,* not as an organic process of creating a story. Write a story that would resonate with you, as a reader, don't try to chase trends and write for others. Be true to yourself, and use elements from your own life, community and history and build upon that.

([emphasis added] Saunders in Irvin 2024)

Hence, Saunders believes that representing Indigenous characters in media should not involve trying to portray the entirety of Indigenous society in a certain light. Rather, he believes in the

benefit of being represented with dignity, on equal standing with other characters of mainstream culture. In his view, to create Indigenous characters that feel alive, engaging, likeable, and relatable, is to show respect to Indigenous people and culture.

Among the downsides of Indigenous representation that is ‘open to everybody’ is the potential for the perpetuation of stereotypical representations that Saunders believes are often a consequence of limited research non-Indigenous authors might do before creating Indigenous characters. He explains:

It's important to show that you can have Indigenous people as villains or heroes and everything in between, to try and break that... red headband and a spear, and that *there's a certain type when it comes to Indigenous comic characters that they tend to... again, at no fault of the people writing this from another country and culture. So, it can only be based on what they're seeing or just skimming on the surface.*

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Saunders points out that non-Indigenous and overseas authors tend to fall into stereotypes and tokenistic representation due to their lack of knowledge of diverse Indigenous cultures, the diversity of Indigenous communities, and the effects of colonial policies that contributed to regional differences. Overseas authors might have a genuine wish to appreciate Indigenous cultural uniqueness and share it with their international audiences, but as Saunders believes it, such representation often fail to capture the complexities of people and instead offers an exoticised portrayal that focuses on differences rather than similarities.

Another problematic issue with non-Indigenous people creating Indigenous art is artistic forgery. Saunders speaks about this danger from his experience dealing with it while working for ANKA:

Again, it's a very tricky subject because I'm very much for creative freedom, but I know that there's a big problem in the Indigenous art world with fake Indigenous art and forgery. That was a big issue for a while, so I understand making sure that it's authentic. But again, *I think that if an Indigenous artist wants to paint traditional art, they should be able to do that. But if they were to paint more European style stuff, they could do it. [...]* Again, *I think that if a European artist wants to study and paint something that's inspired by*

Indigenous art, I think they should... They should be able to do that. It's just obviously making... the clear distinction. Thinking about it in terms of the ten years of ANKA and dealing with the forgeries and stuff, I know that you'd have these white artists paint pictures and sell them down the street... to an Indigenous person, down the street, saying that they sold it and then they get the money because... If there was someone trying to sell their work as a white person doing an Indigenous thing, people don't want to buy it because they want the authentic... real thing. [...] If I wanted to write a story about King Arthur and his knights of the round table, that's fine, for an Indigenous writer or myself to do.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

In this passage, Saunders reflects on the exclusivity of Indigenous art and the problems it creates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Saunders believes that forgery is an issue that arises in part because of rigid boundaries around Indigenous art. If non-Indigenous artists want to sell their own art which was inspired by Indigenous culture, they would be unable to avoid problems with either finding buyers or being blamed for appropriation.

Elizabeth Durack's controversial use of the false identity 'Eddie Burrup' demonstrates how exclusivity of Indigenous art can create difficulties for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Durack grew up in close socialisation with Indigenous people of Kimberly region and was taught by respected Indigenous artists (Casement 2016, p. 422). She wanted to produce and exhibit artworks reflecting the traditions she had knowledge of and appreciated (ibid). However, she was aware that as a non-Indigenous artist, she would not be allowed to exhibit her works in Indigenous art showcases (ibid). This exclusivity of art production may have pushed Durack to participate in these events under the identity of an Indigenous persona to be able to make art that she wanted.

When her true identity was revealed, Durack was labelled a forger and an outsider exploiting cultural expressions she supposedly had no right to claim (Casement 2016, p. 423). Yet, Durack continued to insist that her actions were driven by a genuine passion to produce art in a tradition she was familiar with over many years, rather than by financial or opportunistic motivations (ibid). Moreover, her lasting and close ties with Indigenous friends, her active participation in ceremonies, and her role as a mentor to her 'classificatory son' suggest a

degree of cultural integration often overlooked in the heated debates surrounding her case (ibid; Merlan 2001, p. 218).

It is arguable that if Durack was permitted to exhibit under her real name, she would not have resorted to pose as ‘Eddie Burrup’. In this sense, the rules and boundaries of Indigenous art designed to safeguard it against appropriation, inadvertently contributed to Durack’s deception that undermined both her reputation and broader efforts around maintaining Indigenous cultural and artistic authenticity. Thus, Elizabeth Durack’s case could be considered an example of how strict exclusivity of cultural and artistic boundaries can impact non-Indigenous artists, while also fuelling concerns among Indigenous communities and cultural institutions about cultural misrepresentation and exploitation.

For some Indigenous artists, the rigid boundaries of Indigenous art also become impediments to their creativity, funding, publicity, and business opportunities. Saunders shares his frustration with the existing categories of art that fail to account for creative diversity among Indigenous people:

I think that if you're Indigenous, I don't think you should be constrained to do Indigenous art only. It's one of those things where I understand when the idea behind these concepts with First Nations stories, you should prioritise First Nation writers and creators. But, again, *I feel that's getting taken too far* and it's almost becoming like a form of creative segregation. [...] I think again, as I was saying before, worried that some of the policies that Screen Australia [Australia’s funding body for screen production] is implementing. Where if you're putting in applications for things, *there's certain boxes you have to tick for Indigenous representation and culture*. I always find that this, and also just for Screen Territory [an NT screen industry agency], as well, I almost find it a bit odd. Because where does Zero-Point fit into that? It's an Indigenous character, but it's not about Indigenous culture.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Saunders thinks that the ‘diversity’ criteria that many funding bodies are implementing are not as helpful as they intend to be. By reducing representation to box checking and equating Indigenous characters to Indigenous culture, funding bodies to some extent could be encouraging tokenistic representation of Indigenous characters and culture and also perpetuating Indigenous creative segregation. Saunders says that works like *Zero Point*, those

that have Indigenous characters but are not focused on exploring traditional culture and knowledge, are often still technically classified as Indigenous artworks. Such misclassification may potentially mislead audiences who are interested in tradition-oriented art and fail to engage those who could have been interested in these works, if they had found them among products of similar mainstream genres. Hence, Saunders believes that ideally the ability to tell stories or produce art should not depend on cultural identity. Despite the potential dangers of it (like art forgery) and cultural conventions of many Indigenous cultures that view art as religious and separate from profane, he maintains that in his view art should be free of segregation (Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023).

Trusting in the benefits of equally open participation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists in art creation, Saunders is hesitant to identify himself as ‘an Indigenous artist’:

I understand that because even growing up, I kinda didn't want to say... even now *I don't wanna say 'I'm an Indigenous artist' because I feel that's putting me into a box.* Obviously, I spent ten years working with ANKA and working *with* traditional Indigenous artist, but I think the distinction that... It's more the fact that if you're saying that you're Indigenous, you have to be '*Indigenous artist*' and I find that a form of creative segregation and restricting.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Feeling that such classification restricts him, he tends to omit or downplay his cultural identity in media. His professional Instagram page briefly states that he is from the Northern Territory. The official Facebook page of ‘Zero Point origins’ and posts featuring Jonathon Saunders do not mention his cultural identity, just like the video introduction of Saunders and his project featured on his Kickstarter page. By doing this, Saunders tries to remove some pre-determined expectations that the audiences might have when encountering a work by an Indigenous artist. While this approach to publicity does grant him potential access to wider international audiences and allows him to create stories that he is passionate about without feeling constricted, there are also challenges that he has to face.

At the time of our interviews, I was tutoring students on the subject of the anthropology of globalisation. I integrated *Zero Point* into a tutorial activity by showing students a trailer of the *Zero Point: season zero* web series as an example of media globalisation in Australia. When the students saw the villain of the web series, an Indigenous terrorist, they looked shocked and uncomfortable. Some students asked me who the creator of the series was. They

were specifically interested in the ethnic identity of the creator. It was only after I informed them that the author of *Zero Point* is an Indigenous man that they visibly relaxed and carefully expressed their curiosity and surprise about this media project. I later told Saunders about this and he responded that it is occurrences like this that he sees as cultural segregation:

Personally, I find that a little... I don't know, I feel like I would've liked to hear their thoughts before they found out if I was Indigenous or not. Maybe that would be more honest. *Again, this is what I'm talking about, that kind of cultural segregation. Saying that you have to be this race to write this race.* The thing is, when I was looking at some of the comments coming through on episode four when Samson [the Indigenous villain] reveals who he was, I found that an awful lot of Australians... for them it was like 'Ah!' [makes shocked face], a big 'holy crap' moment. For a lot of American viewers and even people from England, it didn't really matter as much. They didn't have the cultural context and history of it. But also, again, black supervillains are out of place in comic books.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Feeling dissatisfied with how some people in the wider Australian audiences react to his work, Saunders acknowledges that there are historical and cultural reasons why local audiences perceive his choice to make an Indigenous villain as shocking.

Another problem stemming from Saunders refusing to promote himself as an Indigenous artist is that he is likely missing out on the heightened publicity that Indigenous authors and their creative projects are receiving today. By advertising himself as one of the first Indigenous comic book artists, Saunders potentially could have been able to get access to more publicity campaigns and supports that have appeared as a consequence of a national agenda to help preserve and promote Indigenous culture. Pritchard and Gould made the most of these opportunities, proving that support structures do exist as well as a market. *Wylah's* Kickstarter campaign represented *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* as an Indigenous project endorsed by the Elders and based on the culture and nature of the local Country, and became an instant success that yielded Pritchard and Gould more than \$20,000.

Saunders also launched a Kickstarter campaign in March 2024 to fund his *Zero Point origins* comic series, a prequel to *Zero Point: season zero* web series. However, he only raised \$954, failing to reach his goal of \$6,000 after campaigning for a month. His Kickstarter page did not

position *Zero Point* as an Indigenous project (despite the fact that his earlier promotion in 2016 tended to label itself like this). It advertised *Zero Point* as ‘Australia’s most powerful superhero’ (Kickstarter 2024), with no mention that he is an Indigenous character. Saunders’ Indigenous identity was mentioned once in the middle of a long paragraph of text, between the description of *Zero Point*’s plot and technical details outlining the project’s timeline. Besides this, there was no indication that this was in any way an Indigenous project or a project that aims to bring a new level of Indigenous representation in media. I believe that this might be one of the reasons why this Kickstarter campaign failed. Mixed together with other comic books and graphic novels that are in abundance on the platform, *Zero Point origins* missed out on the opportunity to position itself as being one of very few professionally made Indigenous comic series in Australia.

With *Zero Point* being neither typically Indigenous, nor fully global mainstream, Saunders often feels that it does not fit into what people understand as ‘Indigenous representation’ because his art does not explore themes of cultural identity (Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023). Featuring Indigenous characters in his series but leaving Indigenous culture out, representing them as heroes but also as villains – Saunders pushes the idea of representation far beyond box ticking. While creative, his approach creates difficulty in finding suitable support, production, and distribution networks. Hence, Saunders and Parish decided to create their own infrastructure around comic creation and distribution. Starting from scratch, they set up Wild North Comics and started developing their own distribution network and accumulating local, national and international audiences. On the publisher’s website, they state:

Wild North Comics is developing a unique distribution network across Australia that incorporates comic shops, art galleries, independent bookshops, cafes and other cultural venues. Our audience are lovers of art, writing, creativity and comics who may not visit comic specialty shops.

(Wild North Comics 2024)

Struggling to find a way to gain more attention from their potential audiences, Saunders and his team tried different strategies to get their work out there:

We created Wild North to celebrate the art of comics, illustration and independent publishing culture. We love publishing but we also curate exhibitions, organise workshops and film screenings and film festivals.

(Wild North Comics 2024)

Through festivals and comic cons, they seek publicity among art professionals and comic book readers. Perhaps, it is the niche nature of this franchise that simultaneously wins Saunders creative awards and makes it difficult for him to generate significant momentum in the mainstream entertainment market. However, Saunders is not discouraged by this. He is a trailblazer who tests the boundaries of art, media, culture, and identity.

Saunders' Wild North Comics is not just a comic publisher: they are art creators and curators that exist in the domain of popular culture and contemporary art. For Saunders, there is more to art than being trendy or profitable. In an interview, he shares the advice that he thinks could help beginner artists:

But don't make the mistake of comparing yourself to another artist. And again, it's more a social media thing, but comparing yourself to an artist that may not be as skilled as you, but has more followers, because as I said, putting yourself out there is another skill, but also... Maybe that artist that's got a million followers that's not as good as you, might have gotten that amount of followers because they had to draw stuff they didn't particularly like, but it was what the algorithm liked. *They had to sacrifice their own enjoyment and create artwork to get the followers, while you get to make the artwork you want, but it might not be as popular with the algorithm.* It's always important to stay true to yourself because it's better to have people that follow you for your art and what you want to do than following a trend.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

By 'algorithm', Saunders means ever-changing trends that exist on social media which are calculated and fed to the users by a program that calculates and predicts public interests. Distinguishing between the intentional pursuit of trends and innovative artistic endeavours, Saunders prefers being a trailblazer who creates art that he loves. While Pritchard and Gould have also created a new path to Indigenous representation, they are making use of existing infrastructure and support initiatives to help them gain publicity and reputation. Gould and Prichard are oriented towards business success, and they are sensitive to media trends set by successful international media companies such as Disney. Saunders, on the other hand, expresses his disapproval of Disney's trends and initiatives, such as their decision to remake their animated classics into 'live action' films:

I hate those Disney remakes, because it kinda does not understand why the originals work and I think they are just done so that Disney can keep the IP and copyrights of their property.

(Saunders, personal communication, 26/05/2023)

Seeing Disney's efforts to update their media products as a calculated effort to preserve their intellectual property and make easy profit, Saunders denies these 'remakes' any artistic value. He seems to hold this opinion about following trends in general. Saunders believes that it is worthwhile working on novel art projects, creating new paths of creation and dissemination of independent comics, and being considered somewhat ahead of his time rather than following media trends set by the demands of the audience.

I believe that Saunders' democratic views on Indigenous representation, art creation accessibility, and shift away from traditional art subjects and styles are informed by his positionality as an Indigenous artist from Northern Territory. While *Wylah* was produced in southeastern Australia, in the town of Warrnambool near Melbourne, *Zero Point* was created in the Northern Territory, Darwin. Typically viewed as 'rural north' by the southeastern communities, Northern Territory has a very different history of colonial policies, as I discussed in previous chapters. However, the case of *Zero Point* demonstrates that it is incorrect to assume that all Indigenous artists from 'the north' are traditional artists. Jonathon Saunders grew up in suburban Darwin and remembers seeing ample Indigenous representation in media, in politics, and other spheres of life. He says:

I guess because of my generation, growing up I saw a lot of Indigenous representation on TV. The local news reader for the Northern Territory, for Channel 8, was Linda McCarthy, who's currently now, I think she's still, a senator [...] My auntie, Justine Saunders, is a famous film actress, she even won an Order of Australia for her work. She was in *The Fringe Dwellers* and I think her best role, in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. That was a starring role with another Indigenous Territory actor, Mr Tom E. Lewis, who passed away some years ago. [...] There was a series in the late 90s called *Water Rats*, it was based on the water-based police department and it had a character on there played by Aaron Pederson, an up-and-coming Indigenous actor. [...] But as I said, there was Indigenous representation while I was growing up, which always made me think when later on in modern times, hearing about the

importance of having Indigenous representation, I was like, ‘well, it was always there’...

(Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

This perspective differs drastically from that of Pritchard and Gould who come from the southeast, where Indigenous representation has been historically much more limited. News anchors, politicians, TV and film actors – Saunders grew up seeing Indigenous people visible in media and in the society around him. He states that Darwin is probably the city with the highest Indigenous representation in the country:

We probably have the most Indigenous population compared to all the other capital cities. So, obviously as an Indigenous man myself, and I used to work ten years for an Indigenous body. So, I feel that’s, at least here in the Northern Territory, Indigenous representation feels very good. Again, I am purely saying from the NT side of things, there’s obviously a strong Indigenous art scene that focusses on again, there’s a really strong sense of Indigenous culture here as well. And it’s something that government’s happy to promote, and especially government speeches and events they do a, a traditional Welcome to the Country. *So, here in the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal representation is really big.* Again, I think that’s probably the fact that there is a lot of Aboriginals up here, I think. Again, *I don’t know what it’s like down south, but I guess that would probably be very different kind of set up.*

(Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023)

While Saunders reports greater visibility of Indigenous people and culture in Darwin and in the Northern Territory in general, he mentions that he has no knowledge of the situation in the ‘south’. As all the major media companies and institutions in Australia are located in the southeast where Indigenous people tend to represent smaller proportions of the population in urban centres and were more affected by assimilation policies, representation in those regions was more limited historically in comparison to the north. Hence, it has only been in recent years that the call for bigger and better Indigenous representation reached mainstream outlets. Saunders’ reflection on the ‘strong sense of Indigenous culture’ in the Northern Territory and his lack of knowledge of the situation in the southeast demonstrates the differences these regions have and points to the fact that both north and south have mythologised conceptions of each other. In our interviews, Saunders refers to southeast regions as ‘down south’ and

expressed his surprise that some people there are unaware of some points of Indigenous colonial history:

And all the stuff that happened with the Stolen Generation and all of that. I always felt that that was always acknowledged, and people were aware of it. But with the right government, without making apologies at high level, I guess that was more of a... I don't know if I can say 'acknowledgement', but it was always acknowledged. [...] growing up I always knew about it, but again, I'm saying this from NT perspective, I know that when I worked at ANKA and we took the narratives of our work down south, *I was surprised that there were a lot of people who still didn't know about that part of the history*. So, it [the Apology] was beneficial for other states, compared to the Territory where, that the things, as I said *I found people that still were shocked or had no idea about just how things were during the Stolen Generation time and all that*.

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023)

In this passage, Saunders expresses his surprise about people in southeastern regions who do not know much about the Stolen Generation. He did not expect to find that people in those regions have a significantly more limited exposure to Indigenous history. On the other hand, in the previous chapters I demonstrated how Pritchard and Gould held stereotypical views about the people 'up in the north' as being much more rooted in their traditional culture and having community-oriented lifestyle. Both examples point to the lack of knowledge about each other's regional complexities.

Despite the fact that stereotypical views oversimplify differences between the regions, there are certain distinctions in history, society, and culture that do affect the views and experiences of artists. Considering the lack of infrastructure and distribution for Saunders' project, it may first seem that his novel artistic vision of contemporary Indigenous art and representation is almost post-racial and somewhat ahead of its time. Yet, the fact that Saunders' life in Darwin exposed him to high levels of Indigenous representation in media and in the society, and with Indigenous culture being particularly strong in the region, it puts into context his wish to break away from traditional cultural styles and push his art into new domains of expression. It would probably be more challenging to launch a work similar to *Zero Point*, with its representation of Indigenous characters as terrorists, billionaires, politicians, and superheroes who all exist outside of any cultural context, in southeast Australia compared to the Northern

Territory. While in the north such creative projects add to the existing plethora of Indigenous representation, practically expanding on it and helping representation, in the southeast it may be perceived as controversial due to the relatively low level of historical representation in media and in society. If there are less than twenty titles of Indigenous media entertainment projects that are known to mainstream audiences and one of them features a controversial Indigenous character, this potentially skews the balance of Indigenous portrayal in society. Hence, it is Saunders' positionality as an Indigenous man from Darwin that influences his approach to Indigenous representation as open to anyone and how he perceives Indigenous identity as somewhat confining rather than empowering.

In this chapter, I found out that *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is a product that is created in the context of southeastern Australia. *Zero Point* is created in the socio-cultural environment of the Northern Territory. Informed by Saunders' views and personal and professional experiences, *Zero Point* represents a novel and unconventional look at Indigenous representation in media. The aim to normalise Indigenous culture is a goal shared by the authors of *Wylah* and *Zero Point*. But while Pritchard and Gould see it as pushing Indigenous culture, practices, and knowledges to the mainstream culture for everybody to participate in,

Chapter: 10. *Zero Point* and politics of ‘normalisation’

In the previous chapter, I explored the differences between *Zero Point* and *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. I demonstrated that *Zero Point* is a media franchise that explores and pushes the boundaries of identity, representation, and styles. It is a product that reflects experiences and convictions of its author who created it in the cultural and political context of Darwin, guided by his lived experience in a capital city with heightened Indigenous cultural and political visibility. *Zero Point* represents a distinct case study that is different to *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*. Significant point that distinguishes Saunders’ franchise is his goal to not only bring Indigenous representation into mainstream Australian media, but also, by doing so, normalising it within the wider Australian society. But is the pursuit of ‘normalisation’ different to promotion of assimilation? In this chapter, I will explore Saunders’ views on national Indigenous politics, study his goal of bringing Indigenous representation to the mainstream of art and media, his disapproval of ‘sensitive’ or tokenistic representation, and promotion of Indigenous cultural and social liberation. I will also compare Saunders’ views with the foundations of the policy of assimilation to evaluate if normalisation and assimilation are related concepts.

Politics and pop culture

During an interview, I set out to explore Saunders’ views and opinions on such subjects as decolonisation to understand his general political alignment. I wanted to see if his art is driven by his political views. I asked him, ‘And what do you think about decolonisation? And what does that mean to you?’ Upon hearing my question, he looked uncomfortable. He smiled and initially struggled with the response:

...I understand the answer is making sure, like, it’s looking at things. And some of the things that are more Indigenous history and culture, and all that. Again, it’s not maybe something that I have been in that area and that space for a while. So, I’m not sure I can give a good answer to that...

(Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023)

His hesitance to give me an answer seemed to indicate his reluctance to engage in a potentially galvanising political discussion. This is illustrated by how he eventually responded to me:

...it is in acknowledging Indigenous people being here first. But I do think that it's equalisation, again, it's just my thoughts... But it's really serious about something more of a political thing, in terms of, obviously if we gonna decolonise, how can we say that and still have the Union Jack on the Australian flag. I feel it's something we gotta go full in, and form a Republic. I've been now in that kind of artist and political discussion for a long time now. It's just my thoughts!

(Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023)

Broadly connecting decolonisation with the separation of Australia from the Commonwealth as well as with equality for Indigenous people in terms of historical acknowledgement, Saunders seems to aim at expressing his thoughts in neutral terms. He adds that he took part in similar discussions many times before and that he is only expressing his personal opinion. His tone and added disclaimer that he is not trying to summarise anyone else's opinion suggest that he is wary of how he might be understood. Saunders' discomfort in expressing his political views and his caution about being misunderstood points to the contested and heterogenous field of national and regional Indigenous politics. As an artist from Darwin who worked for ANKA, he has been exposed to such debates, their effects on artistic communities, and their consequences for advocacy and legislation. In the context of Northern Territory where Indigenous political empowerment and representation in media and in the society is strong, Saunders' wish to distance himself from political debates does not necessarily signify his lack of desire to work towards decolonisation. Rather, it seems that he aims to broaden the conversation around colonial aftermath, Indigenous representation, and intercultural relations. It is notable, though, that in his answer he spoke for the wider, cross-cultural Australian community, forgoing the opportunity to take an Indigenous-centric stance.

Aiming to unpack Saunders' political position and its connection to *Zero Point*, I asked Saunders if he thinks that his franchise has any political stance. He responded 'maybe' (Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023) and explained:

I think, I mean, that's where it gets tricky because *obviously my political views have influenced the work*. But I do want to make it more... *I don't want to make it that simple, like 'left versus right', and like, 'I favour this and not this', and all the other things which mean... For me, it's always been for the good sense it's about, individual freedoms and fighting for democracy. [...]* I feel

that in terms of politics that's where it gets an even hand, that's part of a *human story* that is all about being the downtrodden or a superhero rising up against a government force that is stripping peoples' freedoms away. And obviously whether it's fascism or communism, it doesn't matter, because you have this, obviously there's that [agenda that] exists on both sides of the spectrum. *It's about standing up to that and getting back your rights and questioning who is in power, of how those people in power run.* And so, yes that's probably as I said, politics trying to influence or trying to make more of this and that, you know.

Here Saunders stresses that while his personal views and political affiliations inevitably influence his story, he does not intend to use *Zero Point* as a platform to share it with the public. Instead, Saunders argues that *Zero Point* is 'a human story' about 'individual freedoms and fighting for democracy'. This could imply that his goal is to highlight the commonality of human experience, or in other words, to showcase the relatable 'normalcy' rather than separating uniqueness of Indigenous characters. Saunders believes that by interrogating motives, values, and actions of government and terrorists, heroes and villains, law enforcement and anarchists in his story helps him to deconstruct limiting stereotypes around Indigenous characters, political representation of history, and questioning the *status quo*.

While Saunders says that he consciously avoids lobbying for his political views in his art, *Zero Point* reflects Saunders' affiliation with the wider, multicultural Australian society and his disinterest to draw cultural and social boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As two Indigenous people who come from different parts of the world but still share understanding of the complexities of colonial aftermath, we exchanged opinions on how we feel about the essentialisation of history:

Me: ...when people are trying to talk about decolonisation and making colonisation sound as only one-sided process of only negative things, that makes sense from one point of view. But from the other point of view, we are all products of colonisation, for the better or for worse, right?

Saunders: Yeah, yeah, exactly. That's right! As I say, that's why I find it hard to talk about, if you ask me about that. Again, maybe it's slightly off topic, but talking about Australia Day, my view is that all things that are happening here in Australia now because of what happened on January 26th. And I think, it's

[debates around altering its celebration] not much of a salvation, just more of an acknowledgement that yes, that's never going to happen [again]. *And I think that changing it or trying to scrub those fields of history is going to be bad in the future and, honestly, I think we need to acknowledge part of what's happened.* And that is part of our history so that we make sure it doesn't happen again.

(Saunders, personal communication, 5/04/2023)

In this fragment of our conversation about the public tendency of oversimplify historical events, Saunders expresses eager agreement that colonial legacy is overwhelmingly regarded as simply harmful without having anything redeeming about it. He expresses his discomfort and hesitation about being asked to comment on such topics because he believes that there is no simple answer to describe and evaluate such historical events due to their complexity.

Hence, from this perspective it would seem that Saunders aims to keep his work politically 'neutral' by avoiding explicitly passing definitive judgements on complex political topics in his franchise and by exploring generally relatable themes of democracy, freedom, and justice.

Saunders' reaction to my question is similar to Pritchard and Gould's. The authors of *Wylah* responded reluctantly to my questions about the meaning and importance of decolonisation and reconciliation, too. However, under closer examination, it seems that the motivations of Gould, Pritchard and Saunders might be different. While Gould and Pritchard's main motivation may be to keep their franchise positively charged by- including difficult topics of violent colonial dispossession, forced removal of people, and environmental destruction alongside wholesome depictions of friendship, humour, and breathtaking adventures, Saunders' goal appears different. He not only wants to attract audiences, but also to promote 'normalisation' of Indigenous representation in mainstream media. But what does 'normalisation' of Indigenous representation in media mean for Saunders?

During our interview, Saunders and I discussed the pitfalls of tokenistic representation, and he stated that authors often avoid creating complex Indigenous characters out of fear of causing offence to Indigenous people:

Saunders: Because I think again, it's falling into that trap where *you can't have someone as a minority character be bad because it's meant to represent all minorities,* and I feel it really limits the stories you can tell and in a way it's...

Me: People would be a little afraid of offending people.

Saunders: Yes, exactly. *People are afraid to offend*. I think that by shoehorning us all in a monolithic, what's the term? Noble savages! [...] I feel it's obviously insulting and... *We are just like any other person in the world because we can be good, we can be bad, we can be everything in between*. And having an Indigenous villain helps show that it shouldn't be equated to... All different stories about all different Indigenous people.

(Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Saunders argues that fear of offending Indigenous people holds back progress in contemporary Indigenous representation. The trope of the noble savage that I discussed earlier has left a lasting impact on how Indigenous people around the world are represented to this day. Tokenistic and overly sanitised, such representation often works to acknowledge the shadow of the noble savage legacy that continues to cause anxiety among non-Indigenous artists and their audiences. However, such approach only masks the diversity of ways of being in the world. To address this pitfall, Saunders exposes mainstream media consumers to Indigenous representation that may appear controversial or unusual. He believes that depicting Indigenous characters not only as heroes, but also as villains, tech moguls, politicians, government officials, military officers, and ordinary citizens is the way to bring representation that captures the intricacy and diversity of Indigenous people. For example, exploring the complexities of what it means to be a hero, Saunders juxtaposes his protagonist against the antagonist who acts like 'a dark mirror of the hero'.

The *Zero Point* web series is a story set years after the events of the comic series. According to the series' plot, a masked terrorist interrupted the celebration of the Australia Day. He descended from the sky and claimed: 'I am Samson, King of Australia!' (*Zero Point* 2018). Zero Point and his team of superheroes who all work for the government tried to apprehend the terrorist, but he overpowered them and escaped, leaving havoc behind. Samson later attacked the Parliament House and when Zero Point confronted him, Samson transported them both to the site of Maralinga nuclear test and told him that the tests that government ran there were part of the secret program to create more people with super abilities. However, these tests were detrimental to many test subjects. In an emotionally charged scene, Samson told Zero Point that they are both connected to this program and revealed that Samson is, in fact, an Indigenous man whose family was victims of Maralinga. However, the position of

both men on Maralinga tests differs: while Samson regards this incident as an unforgivable crime that deserves vengeance, Zero Point sees this a historical crime perpetrated by people long gone (see the screenshots below). Zero Point regards Samson's retaliation targeted at people who had no hand in this crime as illogical and unnecessary.

(Figure 37: Reveal of Samson's real identity in Zero Point 2018. Image description: *Samson and Kyle talk, Samson removes mask and speaks. S: 'We are the bastard children of Maralinga. We cannot escape this anguish, Kyle! It is what we are! This land lives under the shadow of the great crime! These tests poisoned my people! They killed my mother! Would you deny me my vengeance?' K: 'the people you killed had nothing to do with that!' S: 'They deserved it!'*)

In this scene, Saunders wanted to demonstrate that even though his characters shared somehow similar origins and powers, they make drastically different choices in life. Saunders explains:

I thought having Samson [the villain] be Indigenous plays in that well, but also, one of the key points of the story is that Zero-Point's father got his powers from a fictional Maralinga Quantum Test Facility. Which itself is a reference to the nuclear Buffalo tests in Maralinga back in the forties and fifties, which affected the Indigenous population there. I felt that having Samson also be related to the fictional Quantum one, was *referencing that piece of Australian history and is meant to show a possible dark mirror to Kyle, in terms of what happens with revenge or vengeance taken that far. [...]* Also, again, I just thought it would be *interesting to have the main villain be Indigenous as well, because you don't see that. [...]*. To me it was showing that you have those two extremes and obviously that means that you can tell every different story in between. [...]

(Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Embracing diversity in the full sense of this concept, Saunders uses his characters and stories to highlight the non-uniformity of Indigenous people who have agency to act in any possible way. This appears to be a neutral way of challenging the essentialisation of Indigenous identity without sanitising the story of controversy and complexities. While sensitivity around Indigenous representation in media is informed and enacted with the best intentions of protecting Indigenous image, Saunders sees this as an almost patronising attempt to police art

production. He does agree, however, that seeing Indigenous characters in the mainstream media in Australia and overseas, even those depicted in ‘a sensitive’ manner, is important:

I think it's [representing Indigenous people in media] just important because *it envisions Indigenous people in Australia*, [...] there is the saying – be the change you want to be. I always... Depending on the character, it's always like, you've got a really straight, boring Aboriginal character that's... you know... and this is just some writer that's just looked up or read something on Wikipedia about Indigenous culture that is just super generalised and stereotyped. Therefore, I wanted to change that and show that, I don't want to say realistic, but *more a nuanced take*. [...] I think it's important for them [Indigenous people] to have that in comics, but do it in a way where they are interesting characters that add to the story, and not just shoehorned in.

(Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Saunders sees diversely-represented Indigenous people in mainstream media as an act of affirmation that envisions Indigenous people in Australia, meaning that when people imagine Australia, they inevitably imagine Indigenous people there, too. He acknowledges, though, that typical mainstream representation of Indigenous people is done by non-Indigenous creators who tend to essentialise or simplify their Indigenous characters. To counteract this trend, he produced his own franchise that offers a deeper look into Indigenous characters.

The authors of *Wylah* share Saunders' opinion: Pritchard and Gould intentionally set their story in Australia in the distant fictionalised past with the goal of envisioning a living and breathing Indigenous society in an act of affirmation. It is also notable that while Pritchard and Gould depict their characters living ‘traditionally’, they still depict them in diverse and complex ways. Like Saunders, Pritchard and Gould have nuanced Indigenous protagonists and antagonists who are depicted as rivals in pursuing the same noble goal. And similarly, both villains have an understandable approach that could be emotionally justified, even though it is unethical. Gould explained his and Pritchard's motivations behind such approach to their villain, Tiller, in our interview:

We wanted a black villain to be in there [...] there are so many tribes and so they would have conflicting ideals. *And this is completely normal as, you know... as humans we will have different opinions and all that. And Tiller just has a completely different opinion to the rest of the tribes. Which is completely*

normal. And we wanted him to have a decent ideal [...] In theory it's a real good idea, it's really, really good. It is one of those things when you can almost convince the protagonist [...] almost convert the protagonist on their side. We wanted Wylah to have that conflict. So, we designed Tiller to be as he is, have a good ideal and obviously the way he does it is very unethical because he [subjugates] his own people, but it is what it is...

(Gould, personal communication, 12/10/2024)

With the help of their antagonist, Gould and Pritchard aim to point at the diversity of people, opinions, and outlooks that exist within Indigenous communities same as in any other population.

The perception of Indigenous people by the mainstream Australian lay public tends to still be essentialist and changes in Indigenous public image seem to happen in an essentialist manner, too. That is, as a result of the political activism, new legislation, and cultural shifts, public perception of Indigenous people among non-Indigenous people seems to be increasingly associated with empowerment, persistent continuing traditions, and strong political voice. However, again, this image seems to remain essentialist and often omit the acknowledgement of Indigenous diversity. At the national political scale, due to these changes, Indigenous politics are being increasingly polarised and both sides often fail to capture the diversity of Indigenous society that they aim to represent. Representing Indigenous characters as heroes, villains and everything in between, Saunders, Pritchard, and Gould are able to showcase the range of possibilities for Indigenous characters and focus on the exploration of their characters' humanity that unites all people despite their differences.

While overall, both creative teams are committed to showcasing the diversity and nuances of their Indigenous characters, Pritchard and Gould work to 'humanise' the entire image of Indigenous people by showcasing their characters as having different yet somewhat justifiable beliefs and motives, diverse personalities, and also by subduing the intensity of the difficult themes they rise in their book series by balancing it out with humour, imaginative plot twists, and wholesome relationships between the protagonists. Saunders, on the other hand, is standing for the freedom of artistic expression that is not limited by people's cultural backgrounds. His story and characters seem to break socio-cultural barriers rather than celebrate Indigenous cultural uniqueness. This intrigued me and I began to ponder. Saunders supports the view that Indigenous people should be treated as ordinary Australians without the

emphasis on their cultural heritage. I wondered, is there a difference between Saunders' idea of 'fighting for democracy' and promotion of assimilation?

Assimilation vs. normalisation

The history of Indigenous assimilation in Australia is a complex subject filled with regional nuances and shifts in attitude over time. The policy of assimilation has its conceptual roots in the English Poor Laws, which operated under the assumption that people outside British institutions were a potential source of disorder, in need of protection and management, and should be brought into the British system of wages, education, and housing in order to achieve a better life (Armitage 1995, p. 3-4; British Parliamentary Papers 1837). In the Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines (1837), a British government body set up to manage matters of Indigenous inhabitants of British settled countries, it is stated that the Committee was established 'to secure for [Indigenous people] the due observance of Justice and the protection of their Rights: to promote the spread of civilization among them, and to lead them to the peaceable and voluntary reception of the Christian religion' (British Parliamentary Papers 1837).

Working with the intention of protecting and eventually integrating people who they considered disadvantaged into their social order, the British colonial authorities believed that they were acting in the best interests of the First Nations. For example, laws were introduced to control alcohol use and sexual exploitation of Indigenous people (Armitage 1995, p. 18). In Australia, the Aborigines Protection Acts were created independently by each state, starting in 1869 in Victoria and finishing in South Australia (which then included the Northern Territory) in 1910 (Armitage 1995, p. 18). These policies differed from state to state depending on the historical aspects of colonisation, proportion of Indigenous representation in public, and the funding available to each state. However, what unites these policies is that they all decreed Indigenous displacement, their relocation to missions and reserves, and determined where they could work and who could employ them. Thus, while these Acts intended to protect and regulate the lives of Indigenous people, Australia state authorities approached this by creating and imposing various control measures that concerned all aspects of the life of Indigenous people (Armitage 1995, p. 18).

From the 1930s, as the result of multiple instances of unfair treatment of people in missions, stations, and reserves across different states, Indigenous people started to push back and demand rights and freedoms that other non-Indigenous Australians had (Attwood 2004, p. 37).

William Cooper, a famous activist and one of the founders of the Australian Aborigines League, expressed his vision of co-existence as '[t]he two races, side by side yet distinct' (Attwood 2004, p. 68). Cooper trusted that equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities could be achieved without full cultural integration of Indigenous people into the white Australian society. However, among state authorities, Indigenous activists, and the wider public there was no consensus on what exactly assimilation and constitutional equality should look like for Indigenous people.

By the mid-1930s, the discourse of Indigenous rights and equality shifted. From 1934, influenced by A.P. Elkin's call for a 'positive policy', the Aboriginal Fellowship Group and other humanitarian associations—alongside the Commonwealth—shifted their emphasis from segregation and protection (and the Aboriginal rights these could entail) to assimilation, adaptation, and development (Attwood 2004, p. 101). Many political and academic figures started to believe that the best way to deal with Indigenous issues was through their assimilation and absorption into the wider Anglo-Australian society. As a result, in 1937, the Commonwealth Government held a national conference on Aboriginal affairs where the policy of assimilation by absorption of people of part-Indigenous descent was approved. It was accepted as a solution to facilitate better provision of Aboriginal welfare (Attwood 2004, p. 48). However, the Indigenous activist leaders disagreed with the racial emphasis of this policy. Attwood (2004, p. 68) writes:

In June 1937, shortly after the first national conference of administrators of Aboriginal affairs had adopted a policy of absorption, Cooper told the federal government that 'the whole attitude of the administration' was 'most decidedly wrong' because it was premised on 'the assumption that the dark man admits the superiority of the White and desires incorporation in that race'.

The 1940s and 50s were marked by Australian postwar reconstruction and demands for Indigenous 'full citizenship rights' (ibid, p. 163). Many Indigenous activists and organisations advocated for it:

Equality for Aborigines, they asserted, meant enjoying the same rights as other Australians. As Bill Onus stated in February 1947: 'What the aborigine wants today is the same rights as his white brother'.

(ibid)

In the 1950s, the Council for Aboriginal Rights called for a greater federal role in Indigenous affairs. Some states with large Indigenous populations, such as Western Australia, lacked the resources to successfully provide Indigenous welfare (ibid, p. 138). The Northern Territory, where the Commonwealth Government did have responsibility to ensure Indigenous welfare, was the focus of the Council's campaigning and hope for the establishment of a national standard. However, the government failed to deliver any substantial progress or improvement. In that decade, 'assimilation' was widely accepted as a goal for all Aboriginal people, prompting the Commonwealth and each State Government to adopt it as policy:

For much of the 1950s the Council for Aboriginal Rights had an understanding of race, rights and history that largely accorded with the dominant political discourse of the postwar era. Most significantly, it was in favour of the Commonwealth's ideal of assimilation. It accepted its apparently uncomplicated conception of equality. Assimilation promised the same individual rights for Aborigines as other Australians enjoyed and it anticipated, indeed required, that Aborigines would eventually become the same as other Australians.

(ibid, p. 144)

Continued calls for the Commonwealth to assume responsibility for Indigenous welfare eventually took effect. Crucially, this led to a campaign in which federal control, the end of racial discrimination, and the granting of citizenship rights were seen as interlinked reforms, realisable through constitutional change. Campaigners believed that amending the Constitution would enact these reforms and thus deliver equality (ibid, p. 164). The policy was defined at the 1961 Native Welfare Conference of Federal and State Ministers in these terms:

The policy of assimilation means in the view of all Australian governments that all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.

(Native Welfare Conference 1961, p. 1)

The acceptance of this policy resulted in an increase in expenditure on health, housing, education and training programs in the Northern Territory and in the States (Australian Government 2010). In this instance, assimilation focused on fully integrating Indigenous people into Anglo-Australian communities. Eliminating differences in beliefs, lifestyles, identities, cultures, and aspirations was thought to bring Australian society unity and help solve the socio-economic problems of the Indigenous population.

It was not until the referendum of 1967 that the Commonwealth gained the power to make special laws for Indigenous Australians. The referendum itself was a turning moment in the history of Indigenous politics: it expressed the wish of the Indigenous people to have the same rights and freedoms as non-Indigenous people. In the wake of the referendum, the policy of assimilation was increasingly questioned (Australian Government 2010). ‘assimilation’ as a goal was abandoned, and more people started talking about ‘integration’ as a policy that ‘recognised the value of Aboriginal culture and the right of Aboriginals to retain their languages and customs and maintain their own distinctive communities’ (Australian Government 2010). 1972 saw the establishment of the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs. A year later, the Woodward Commission was formed and tasked with brainstorming possible ways to grant land rights to Indigenous people. Their research resulted in the creation of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth). Rising Aboriginal demands for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, mounting criticism of assimilation’s racial dimensions, the huge cost of that policy, concern over chronic Indigenous disadvantage, and fear of international censure prompted both the conservative Coalition and later the Australian Labor Party to rethink their Indigenous policies (Attwood 2006, p. 25-26). As a result, they abandoned assimilation and embraced Indigenous self-determination policy (Attwood 2006, p. 25-26).

In recent years, the Commonwealth’s policy has been grounded in the right of Indigenous people to retain their racial identity and traditional lifestyle or, if they wish, to participate, to any extent, in the European lifestyle (Australian Government 2010). Indigenous participation in or control of local and community governance is encouraged, as well as in other areas of concern. This approach, alternately labelled as a policy of self-management or self-determination, has gone hand in hand with government support programmes administered by Indigenous organisations.

Overall, the policy of assimilation has a very complex history that spans centuries, generations of activism and state and federal policies. Starting as a concept that was related to the English Poor Laws, the policy of assimilation evolved into a race relations issue in the early twentieth century. Then it shifted to become a problem of Indigenous rights and citizenship, shifting the discourse from assimilation to integration. Eventually, integration gave way to self-determination that remains the current government policy towards Indigenous affairs. Not all people agree with the main direction of political thought and there remains no consensus on what the best way is to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous people. Today, the public generally agrees that the policy of assimilation and its practices were detrimental to the social and cultural integrity of the First Nations. In the context of Indigenous empowerment, cultural revival, and persistence, it is remembered primarily for its attempt to erase Indigenous culture and fully integrate Indigenous society into the colonial Anglo-Australian population. However, the history of assimilation, as I attempted to briefly demonstrate above, was much more complicated and involved changing attitudes towards assimilation, integration, and self-determination. Moreover, as Attwood (2013, p. 161) points out, many historical accounts essentialise the impact of the assimilation policies, exclude Indigenous voices from this topic and discount Indigenous autonomy, agency, or resistance in the face of changing views about assimilation and also downplay any benefits they might have reaped from it.

Interestingly, the general goal of assimilation policy, integrating Indigenous people into the mainstream non-Indigenous society, is somewhat reminiscent of Saunders' vision of Indigenous 'normalisation'. His representation of Indigenous characters as people fully integrated into the contemporary Indigenous society, sharing its values, practices, social conduct, and occupying positions of power and influence presents an image of Australia where cultural and ethnic boundaries are not positioned as central to people in his story. Across the franchise, his Indigenous characters are represented as 'regular guys' (Terzon 2016) who act, talk, and think like everyone else around them. There is no social or cultural difference between the most of his Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters in *Zero Point*.

This pattern can be traced across different aspects of his franchise, such as in the names that Saunders gives his characters. He named his main character Kyle Burton and gave him a pseudonym Zero Point, avoiding any reference to Indigenous culture or spirituality. In many media entertainment franchises, Indigenous characters have names and aliases that reference either Indigenous tools, cultural concepts, or spiritual beings. For instance, this is evident in

the names of characters such as Dreamguard a.k.a Willie Walkaway, Kaboomerang, or Cleverman. Resisting this trope, Saunders picks Western-sounding names for his Indigenous characters and discusses superpowers in scientific terms, rather than spiritual. Superpowers rooted in spiritual or magical powers are a persistent trope in Indigenous character depiction, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. Many historical and contemporary Indigenous stories use this trope, including *Wylah's* magical boomerang, Gateway and Talisman's Dreaming-related ability to open portals or enter spiritual dimension, and so on. Instead, Saunders depicts Kyle turning to Western scientific traditions for an explanation of his powers (see image below). Such contemporary concepts as 'energy manipulation' and 'metabolic transmogrification' substitute the commonly used Dreaming-related terms. Saunders explains such creative decisions as progressive and non-tokenistic forms of Indigenous representation (Terzon 2016). It could be argued that Saunders merely aims for a 'realistic' representation; that is, it is more likely to meet a man named Kyle Burton rather than Willie Walkaway.

But it is important to remember that Saunders works within the genre of superhero science fiction. It is customary to deviate from realism in the conventions of this genre – superheroes fly, shoot lasers out of their eyes, have flamboyant names, and so on. Hence, Saunders seems to be making a statement that his Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters live in an integrated society by substituting a spiritual explanation of superpowers with scientific explanation, refusing to explore the cultural and community connections of his Indigenous characters, and focusing on portraying his protagonist as culturally indistinguishable from non-Indigenous characters rather than emphasising his uniqueness. Coincidentally, the only Indigenous characters who seems interested in protecting and upkeeping the integrity and distinction of Indigenous culture are the villain, Samson, and an angry episodic unnamed Indigenous man who protests at an Australia Day celebration in the web series.

(Figure 38: Superpower explanations in Saunders 2023. Image description: a pile of government handouts and pamphlets on a table titled *The Physics of Superheroes and Extra-normal Counter Operative*. Text overlay: 'Maybe I can figure out what powers these are... The main four types are: power sourcing, energy manipulation, passive access, metabolic transmogrification. Any other abilities usually fall between these types, or outside them as their own special classification type.')

Further, Saunders makes use of the mainstream media entertainment genres such as hero fiction to further promote Indigenous normalisation. In an interview with an ABC host, Saunders reflects on the relatability of superhero stories:

Interviewer: Jonathon, I think, deep down, all of us what to be a superhero, you know, selfless, powerful, admired.

Saunders: [laughs] I guess we all feel that regardless of race and... create what we all feel like we're alone or different or maybe we are from another planet. So that's why I think superhero stories resonate a lot with people because everyone has that feeling of loneliness, but deep down they might be destined for something more... and again, it's the transformation state as well, and you might be a mild-mannered office worker but you rip off your shirt, puff your chest out and you're an amazing superhero wearing a bright costume. It's something that appeals to both children and adults at different stages.

(Adjrun 2016)

In this passage, Saunders talks about human feelings that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. He repeats his sentiment that rejects cultural and social differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with the phrase 'regardless of race'. While the underpinning themes of superhero genre such as yearning for recognition, experiencing loneliness, and wishing to live to your full potential is probably something everyone faces at different points of their lives, the contemporary superhero story that he references is a very particular genre that is associated with white middle class American people (Curtis 2019, p. 368). Superhero stories, especially in their modern form, are not accepted as being staples of traditional Indigenous folkloric traditions. While stories of legendary individuals who accomplish great deeds might be quite common across the world myths, it could be argued that it is reductionist to equate them to each other in terms of their religious, social, and cultural significance. While there is something to be said about certain parallels between such stories and contemporary superhero genre, in this interview Saunders makes an impression that this genre is universal. He takes this point further by associating his superhero franchise with the idea of monomyth. During an interview, I asked him what he thinks unites all the different sources of inspiration that he has, he responded:

What really unites it, again, it probably unites a lot of stories as the *monomyth*, *the hero's journey*. I think that even though those are completely different

genres and mediums, I feel that the stuff I like, interestingly, either has that very strong connection to the monomyth. *I feel that's something that's connected in all stories.*

([emphasis added] Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023)

Here, Saunders expresses his inspiration by the concept of monomyth that describes a trope of hero's journey. Outlined by Joseph Campbell in 1949 in his book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* after his analysis of dozens of hero stories from across world cultures, the monomyth is essentially presented as 'the mysterious energy for inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic stories worldwide is also universally found in human beings' (Estés in Campbell 2004 [1949]). The concept of monomyth could be a useful framework in discussing superhero genre. Indeed, the argument that all heroic stories in the world are repeating the same pattern has its place in the study of human societies, but it also could deny originality of specific cultural traditions and omit important points that make stories and cultures unique. Saunders, nevertheless, finds monomyth's rejection of cultural boundaries inspiring. Tracing American genre of superhero fiction to the heroic epics from different cultures, he connects his franchise to the global trove of hero stories. He explains:

For generations people have loved stories about demigods and great heroes, myths and legends, and I think superheroes really just is the modern-day version of that.

(Saunders in Channel NT 2021)

He, thus, regards superhero fiction as a recent development of the long tradition of heroic epics. This perspective positions *Zero Point* as a story that aligns with world trends of storytelling. Choosing to move away from representing Indigenous culture as somehow distinct and unique, Saunders focuses on dismantling ethnic and cultural boundaries between Indigenous and the wider society. Notably, Saunders does not do this by bringing Indigenous traditional culture or its elements into the mainstream as did Pritchard and Gould. Instead, Saunders omits narrative references to it, focusing on crafting a franchise in the classic traditions of superhero detective story, a genre attributed to the international mainstream media. His wish to depict Indigenous people as 'regular' Australians who blend in within the mainstream society is reflected in his creative choices and public statements. So, what are the differences between Saunders' vision of Indigenous people as 'regular' Australians and assimilation?

Despite some alignment of Saunders' creative vision of Indigenous normalisation and assimilation, there are major differences that set them apart. Firstly, it is important to stress that assimilation policy and its derivatives until the end of the twentieth century were mostly imposed on Indigenous people by the state or federal authorities. Indigenous people were subjects of government protection. In the past, government imposed their care by practically taking away or limiting the ability of many Indigenous people to choose whether they wanted to participate in the Anglo-Australian lifestyle, or not. People, especially in the southeast, had little choice or opportunities to practice their culture and spirituality. While provision of education and job training were not essentially negative for Indigenous people, what was damaging and traumatic was the limited ability to make a meaningful input into how their lives were shaped. Indigenous people and organisations had to protest and advocate for their rights for decades before the tangible progress was made. What Saunders essentially argues for is the choice to pursue self-expression and the freedom to do so without feeling constraint by societal expectations or industry limitations. The freedom of choice is the key difference between the assimilation policy and Saunders' idea of normalisation.

Saunders works to normalise the idea of urban Indigenous people whose identity is not fully centred on their cultural and community affiliation. In the past, assimilation and integration policies that were rolled out state by state in varying degrees and had one comprehensive goal – to bring Indigenous people to Anglo-Australian standards of living. This may have created a negative association between forced 'civilising' of Indigenous people and urban Australian lifestyle. Saunders tries to remove the cultural, social, and political barriers between being Indigenous and living urban lifestyle by designing his main character as 'a regular guy from Darwin' (Terzon 2016, ABC News) who just 'happened to be Aboriginal' (Comix 2024; Channel NT 2012; Saunders 2016; Gill 2024; Terzon 2016). The emphasis on 'happened' in this quote is significant as it implies the lack of political motivation. There is no doubt a personal stake in Saunders' work. He grew up in suburban Darwin and he appreciates his urban lifestyle. However, he felt that even in Darwin, a city with significant Indigenous population, he did not really fit in:

As a light-skinned blackfella, I always felt I was not 'black enough' due to my upbringing and interests. Being called a 'coon' by white kids and then called a 'coconut' by black kids was my daily confusion.

(Saunders 2023, p. 48)

Being ostracised by white peers due to his Indigenous identity and by black peers due to his middle-class urban upbringing, Saunders felt that the social niche he occupied was not acknowledged by the society. Saunders received higher education following his passion for art. He worked for an Indigenous representative body and also started his business as a graphic artist, digital animator, and comic book creator working in mainstream genres. His stories portray Indigenous men and women who pursue their passions in the contemporary world, who command authority like the billionaire Jim Watt, participate in political and military conflicts with an international scope like Kyle Burton, or stay at her suburban home and provide a safe haven for her family like Kyle's grandmother. These characters are not portrayed as forcibly integrated into the Western society; rather, they are depicted as living according to their values, pursuing their interests, and actively choosing what they want from life. It is not assimilation that Saunders promotes. Saunders wants to remove socio-cultural barriers that could impede the freedom of art, representation, and choice.

Saunders approaches Indigenous representation in mainstream media as breaking boundaries around Western-centric mainstream genres and their pervasive tropes. In an interview with ABC Listen, Saunders reflected on the unconscious racial bias he had internalised after being exposed to mainstream media entertainment as a child, a bias that affected his own art:

I always had comic book ideas and stories but without consciously thinking about it, *the characters would be Caucasian* [of white race], because I guess in a lot of comic books and the other stories I'd consume, it would always be a classic American hero.

(Adjrun 2016)

Saunders points to the pervasive influence of the 'classic American hero' archetype in media – a white male (Curtis 2019, p. 368), highlighting how it has become so deeply embedded that even non-American and non-white individuals unconsciously reference it when narrating their own stories. Even if unintended, such skewed representation influences media consumers, creating a sense of exclusion around who can be or become a hero. Interestingly, despite talking about multiple Japanese media titles that inspired him during our interviews, Saunders does not reflect on their cultural influence beyond the art style. Most of the Japanese superheroes are either of Japanese descent or coded as such (e.g. aliens or robots with Japanese names), they are not white American men. Despite this, Saunders omits any references to this and instead focuses on American influence. He states that he needed an

external impulse to realise that the racial boundaries around the superhero genre could in fact be crossed:

It wasn't until I saw the Richard Bell Lichtenstein's series featuring the character Richie done in that sixties pop art styling that I actually ever seen, an Indigenous character drawn in that almost heroic style. *Before then the few Indigenous characters that I'd seen were a bit stereotypical Jackey Jackey characters.* But seeing Richie there as this heroic character that was desired by the women in those paintings again riffing on Lichtenstein and those sixties romance comics was a bit of an eye-opener, because to me it was like 'wow, you can do that with Indigenous characters, and they don't have to be that, Jackey Jackey character'.

(Adjrun 2016)

Hence, it is only after he was exposed to Bell's provocative art that Saunders realised he can create Indigenous characters in non-stereotypical roles. As I have explored before, characters of colour, specifically black characters, have a complex history of representation. In Saunders' example, he mentions that he was exposed to stereotypical depictions of Indigenous characters as 'Jackey Jackey', referring to an Indigenous companion of surveyor Edmund Kennedy. Jackey Jackey has been often depicted as a submissive and devoted Indigenous companion to an authoritative white person in historical colonial sources. It seems that for Saunders, even after almost two centuries, the image of Indigenous character as a heroic, loyal supporter of the white colonists echoes in contemporary Indigenous representation.

Saunders required an external impulse to break the mental boundary around the genre of superhero comics. Seeing Bell's renditions of Lichtenstein's American comic strips with the white main characters switched to Indigenous people granted him creative liberation: '[s]eeing an urban Aboriginal man drawn in that classic comic book style gave me permission to break away from the Dreamtime Warrior stereotype' (Saunders 2023, p. 48). He explains that he felt liberated and validated when he saw someone he could relate to being represented on canvas: 'I realised there is no right way to be Aboriginal, and I became free to express my own experience' (Saunders 2023, p. 48). Saunders points out that he was specifically inspired by Bell's 'sixties pop art' style that made his Indigenous character look 'heroic' because it bears a strong resemblance to the classic superhero comics, something that he later borrows for his own comic creation. Additionally, he was drawn by Bell's representation of his

Indigenous character as an urban, middle-class man desired by white women, which works as affirmation of the value and appeal of Indigenous characters in Western style media.

However, the main theme of Bell's Lichtenstein series is not a mere substitution of the white characters to Indigenous; rather, it plays with the effect of such substitutions that recontextualise his art. By switching the characters and sometimes altering the speech bubbles, Bell conveys provocative messages (see image comparisons below). For example, the first pair of images ('Forget it! Forget me!'), Bell switches the conversation from gender (where a man tells a woman 'I am fed up with your kind') to race (where an Indigenous man tells a white woman 'I am fed up with your kind'), which is accentuated by the visibly racially coded characters in Bell's version. In '*Psalm Singing*', Bell presents the perspective of the artist rather than the viewer how it is done in Lichtenstein's '*Masterpiece*' painting. Bell provocatively questions the viewer's praise confronting her paternalistic attitude while wishing to engage with Indigenous women instead (see image comparison below).

(Figure 39: '*Forget it! Forget me!*', Lichtenstein 1962. Image description: a pale brunet man closed his eyes, he has a disappointed expression. Behind him, a pale blonde woman looks at the man, concerned. He tells her: 'Forget it! Forget me! I'm fed up with your kind!').

<<https://www.lichtensteincatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=448>>)

(Figure 40: Lichtenstein series, Bell n.y. Image description: a brunet man of dark complexion closed his eyes, he has a disappointed expression. Behind him, a pale blonde woman with blue eyes looks at the man, concerned. He tells her: 'Forget it! Forget me! I'm fed up with your kind!').

<<https://kooiweb.org/foley/great/art/works21.html>>)

(Figure 41: '*Masterpiece*', Lichtenstein 1962. Image description: a pale blonde woman and a pale brunet man who looks resentful stand in front of a painting. The woman looks at the man with a smile and says: 'Why, Brad darling, this painting is a masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all of New York clamoring for your work!').

<<https://www.lichtensteincatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=418>>)

(Figure 42: '*Psalm Singing*', Bell 2007. Image description: a pale blonde woman and a brunet man with dark complexion who looks resentful stand in front of a painting. The woman looks at the man with a smile, but the man's thoughts reveal this:

'Masterpiece! My arse. Next she'll be tellin' me all of New Farm will be clamouring

for my work an' calling me dahling. Where are the black girls?'.
<<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/28675/lot/32/richard-bell-born-1953-psalm-singing-2007/>>)

Richard Bell is famous for interrogating and criticising the idea of 'Aboriginal art' as a separate art culture. 'Richard Bell does not make Aboriginal art; but he does make art *about* being Aboriginal', states Daniel Browning, the producer and the host of ABC Listen podcast (ABC Listen 2013), encapsulating Bell's stance about the superficiality of artistic boundaries between Anglo-Australian and Indigenous artistic expression. Saunders seems to share Bell's vision for artistic expression without cultural borders as is evident from his boundary-crossing art practice. Like Bell, Saunders is also moderately provocative in his art – by introducing Indigenous terrorists and exploring the fictional aftermath of the real Maralinga nuclear tests that harmed the local Indigenous population, he exposes the readers to potentially confronting and controversial material that may cause discomfort. However, instead of embracing the discomfort he creates, he uses the compassion and open-mindedness of his main character to unpack, validate, and navigate these themes. What is 'normal' cannot be off-putting. Hence, Saunders softens the edges of his provocation by showcasing any confronting material as part of diverse representation of views and perceptions and by adopting a neutral stance in overtly political public discussions. He uses these tactics to bring the readers in, rather than putting them off.

Finally, Saunders pushes to normalise Indigenous representation to open the path for Indigenous people to take control over their representation. Saunders describes superhero genre as 'a power fantasy'. He argues, '[t]hrough superheroes, Indigenous peoples and minorities can reclaim power on how their stories are told' (Saunders 2023, p. 48). Indeed, media has power to create and alter public's perceptions. Creating and popularising more Indigenous characters created in a complex, interesting, and nuanced way may help Indigenous and minority peoples to feel seen, appreciated, and diversely represented. 'It is not enough to simply talk about diversity and in new voices in media, you must take the steps to change it yourself, to be the model for emulation, to journey forth and lead by example', writes Saunders, addressing aspiring media creators and artists in his publication dedicated to the exhibition '50 Years of First Nations superheroes in Australian Art' (Saunders 2023, p. 49). He repeats this sentiment across multiple public statements and interviews:

All those new Indigenous heroes are carving their own chapters in the Monomyth, following in the footsteps of their mythological elders that came before. And like these heroes of old, I hope the new Aboriginal heroes inspire and empower not only First Nations People, but all Australians.

(Saunders 2023, p. 49)

Generally equating the concept of monomyth, myths about heroes and demigods, and Indigenous Dreaming, Saunders intentionally ignores cultural boundaries between these concepts and piles them all as if they represent the root of the superhero genre. Saunders does not seem to mind that these concepts separated by time, culture, and geography are not, in fact, equally appear at the root of the superhero genre. Despite this, Saunders' statement should be regarded as political. By equating monomyth, hero epic, demigod myth, and Indigenous Dreaming, Saunders aims to bring Indigenous cultural expression to the mainstream and remove the boundaries around Indigenous culture that tend to position it as unique and almost stand-alone among the world cultures. This way Saunders imagines the possibility of bringing forth a reality where Indigenous people and culture are liberated, revitalised, and free to choose how to express themselves and stir the Australian society for the future where one can live unbound by limiting cultural expectations.

In a similar manner, Gould and Pritchard's vision of mixing Indigenous storytelling with Western writing conventions and business models is not a stand that promotes assimilation. While the authors are telling a story about an Indigenous girl who discovers her spiritual powers, connects to her ancestors through the Dreaming, and undergoes cultural initiation in a story format that follows 'Hollywood' plot tropes and is accompanied with Disney-style illustrations, Gould and Pritchard are aiming to normalise Indigenous presence in mainstream media. They aim to achieve this by promoting their local Indigenous culture in their book series and in in-person workshops they host in collaboration with Indigenous cultural organisations, by formatting their story in a shape that is familiar to media consumers around the globe, by marketing and distributing it in an accessible and transparent format, and by making sure that their creative team works in close collaboration with their local Indigenous cultural authorities. *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is a media franchise that is not disconnected from its cultural roots, nor it denies Indigenous cultural specificity.

To conclude, Saunders aspires to dismantle cultural and social expectations that constrain the ways Indigenous people live, express themselves, and contribute to the society. He believes

that policing art production and limiting it based on one's race, or even gender and sexuality, effectively functions as segregation. While some could argue that normalisation of Indigenous representation in media and Australian society is just another word for assimilation, the main difference between these concepts is the freedom of choice and the impact on Indigenous culture. If assimilation tried to enforce Western lifestyle on Indigenous people, often with the goal of dissolving Indigenous culture and society within the wider Anglo-Australian order, normalisation is the push to revitalise, empower, and liberate Indigenous culture and people. He promotes this vision through his art and public statements, talks about this in interviews and on the news. For Saunders, diversity is not about trend chasing, box checking, or sanitised tokenism. It is about honouring different ways people live and act, about valuing complexity of history and its aftermath, and refusing to allow cultural boundaries stand in the way of equality, cultural development, and freedom of choice. By imagining an almost post-racial society where people are less affected by prejudice and social mobility is a given, Saunders passes on his vision with the hope that other young Indigenous artists could find it inspirational the same way he was stirred by paintings of Richard Bell.

Chapter 11: Emergence of new institutions and the complexity of social change

Now that I have discussed different aspects of Indigenous mass media production, I will contextualise my findings in a broader context that accounts for the multilayered complexity of media production, representation, and social change. Reflecting on the specificity of the Australian historical context, I will consider the place of Indigenous mass media within the contemporary state of Indigenous politics, struggles over the power to represent, the development of new industries, and the influence of current social views and trends.

Who holds the power to represent?

In my study of Indigenous representation in media, I have looked at numerous media titles that feature Indigenous characters and depict Indigenous societies. What I have noticed is there is a mismatch between the reception of some non-Indigenous compared to Indigenous media products, in instances where both represent Indigenous peoples and cultures in a seemingly similar way. For example, in 2024, some Indigenous institutions, academics, writers, journalists, and activists expressed indignation over the portrayal of Ruby, an Indigenous character in a new children's book by the celebrity chef James Oliver titled *Billy and the Epic Escape* (2024). The Guardian reported:

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation (Natsiec) has described Oliver's book *Billy and the Epic Escape*, which has an Australian subplot, as damaging and disrespectful, and has accused the celebrity of contributing to the "erasure, trivialisation, and stereotyping of First Nations peoples and experiences".

(Burke 2024)

The accusations followed Oliver's representation of Ruby, an Indigenous girl in foster care, who likes to eat desert bush food, and also 'can read people's minds and communicate with animals and plants because "that's the indigenous way"' (Burke 2024). Ruby says that she is from Mparntwe (Alice Springs), but later she uses words from Gamilaraay language from New South Wales and Queensland. In the book, Ruby is kidnapped by the villain who explains his motivations as such: 'First Nations children seem to be more connected with nature' (Dervisevic 2024).

Sharon Davis, the chief executive of NATSIEC, said that ‘the book’s reduction of First Nations beliefs and spirituality to “magic” was “a longstanding stereotype that diminishes our complex and diverse belief systems”’ (Burke 2024). Later, Oliver and his publisher issued formal apologies for the offence they had inadvertently caused to Indigenous people and agreed to withdraw his book from sale following multiple calls to do so (Thompson, McLay & Shay 2024; Dervisevic 2024). Oliver stated:

It was never my intention to misinterpret this deeply painful issue... Together with my publishers, we have decided to withdraw the book from sale.

(Dervisevic 2024)

However, 9 News soon reported that ‘Jamie Oliver has been urged to engage with a truth-telling commission [Yoorrook] and meet with First Nations people following the fallout from his children's fantasy novel’ (Sharma 2024).

While it is true that Oliver’s inconsistencies in representing Ruby’s cultural identity, his depiction of complex Indigenous religious systems as ‘nature magic’, and his depiction of the abduction of an Indigenous child have attracted understandable criticism, the especially harsh rebuke seems to point at a different underlying reason. Oliver’s portrayal of Ruby as a magical ‘nature’s child’ is strongly reminiscent of the ‘noble savage’ and ‘magic man’ tropes that dominated Indigenous representation up until the end of the twentieth century. It is, then, not a surprise that neither the author, nor his respective publishers, sought consultations with or advice from Indigenous cultural experts prior to the publication of his books (Sharma 2024). Practically all media critics of Oliver came to the consensus that it was this lack of consultations with the First Nations people, cultural authorities, and the general lack of research into the history, culture and spirituality of specific Australian Indigenous peoples that resulted in the author’s flawed Indigenous representations (Burke 2024; Thompson, McLay & Shay 2014; Sharma 2024; Leane & Smyth 2024).

I found it intriguing that while Oliver was blamed for ‘erasure, trivialisation, and stereotyping of First Nations peoples and experiences’ (Burke 2024), the author did not portray his Indigenous character as villainous, immoral, or even as unlikeable. Yet, he was criticised for causing harm to Indigenous culture (Burke 2014; Sharma 2024). This provides a curious contrast with the representations of Saunders, Pritchard, and Gould, who have portrayed certain Indigenous characters as villains in their respective stories. Tiller in *Wylah* and Samson in *Zero Point* are both portrayed performing deeply unethical deeds, such as plotting terrorist

attacks, kidnapping and enslaving people, and committing direct or indirect murders. However, there was no public uproar about these representations in the media, in academia, or among the public. Instead, both franchises have received international awards and nominations, been given funding, and indeed, have expanded on their production.

In conversations with me and with their readers, Saunders, Pritchard, and Gould have discussed how representations of Indigenous villains are important for the promotion of Indigenous diversity (Gould, personal communication, 12/10/2024; Saunders, personal communication, 14/03/2023). The ‘Indigenous criminal’ is not a new trope in media. In the context of historically high Indigenous incarceration rates and staggering numbers of deaths in custody, in Australian media in the past centuries it was not an oddity to see Indigenous people portrayed as dangerous or performing the role of criminals. This is arguably one of the most harmful stereotypes represented in media which influenced public perceptions of Indigenous people. Today however, characters such as Tiller and Samson are either regarded as celebrations of Indigenous empowerment and diversity, or, at the very least, do not attract any public criticism.

I began wondering about the specificities of Indigenous representation in media. What distinguishes contemporary Indigenous mass media products from the works of non-Indigenous authors in the past? Stereotypical representations of Indigenous characters have been widely discussed as culturally, socially, and politically harmful, yet it is possible to identify these same tropes in some contemporary media titles produced by Indigenous creators. In the early representations of Marvel and DC, Indigenous characters were featured wielding traditional weapons, appearing in either traditional (or pseudo-traditional) clothing and possessing undefined Dreaming powers (e.g. Talisman, Gateway, Umbaluru, etc.). In other cases, the opposite was true: characters such as Marvel’s Shard and Bishop were only later revealed as Indigenous characters, yet their Indigenous identity came across as tokenistic due to their unexplored and undefined cultural background. These sorts of representations of Indigenous characters as created by non-Indigenous authors are often viewed as stereotypical.

But today, in Indigenous-created titles like *Wylah* and *Zero Point*, these tropes are also technically recreated. *Wylah* uses a boomerang, a well-recognised traditional weapon that is often used to symbolically represent Australia; she has a number of native animals emblematic to Australia such as koalas, a Tasmanian tiger, a snub-nosed kangaroo, and a possum as her side-kick companions; and she draws on the powers of Dreaming as a source of

her strength. Yet, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* was nominated for literary prizes and recommended by various Australian embassies across the world as a representation of Australian Indigenous culture.

This last fact leads to another observation – *Wylah* is essentially intended to function as a ‘cultural ambassador’. Despite the fact that the authors identify their story, characters, and settings as specifically Peek Whurrong, the characters’ designs and personalities, depiction of their daily lives and practices, the juxtaposition between the antagonists and protagonists, and the authors’ ambition to create a local tourist theme park with *Wylah* as a host suggest that *Wylah* was supposed to represent all Indigenous Nations, for Australian and international audiences. In *Zero Point*, Kyle Burton’s Indigenous background remains largely unexplored, similarly to Shard and Bishop. Although Kyle Burton is supposed to be an Indigenous superhero, his cultural identity is not central to his character, his development, or his interaction with the world around him.

Why is it that non-Indigenous works that represent Indigenous characters in certain ways attract criticism, while Indigenous works presenting a similar type of representation are celebrated? While it could be argued that there may exist a certain ‘double standard’ in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors are judged in the field of Indigenous media representation, looking deeper into *Wylah* and *Zero Point*, it becomes clear that beyond a surface look, there are distinguishable differences in how these franchises approach Indigenous representation.

In the case of *Wylah*, there is, in fact, a distinction between its portrayal of Indigenous culture and society and that of early DC, Marvel, or Disney representations. *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* is a book infused with Indigenous reality: Indigenous characters constitute the majority of the characters in the book series and the narrative is based on Indigenous cultural values. The characters may possess ‘stereotypical’ markers of Indigenous identity such as boomerangs and spears, the Dreaming powers, and recognisably Australian animals as ‘side-kicks’, but these elements are presented within their cultural context. *Wylah* has to learn to use her weapon correctly and to understand its form and meaning. Her Dreaming powers, while still undefined, are based on her connection with her tribe’s traditional animal totem, which, as Gould (personal communication, 8/06/2023) explains, is a real feature of Maar Nation culture. Koalas, a possum, a thylacine, and other animal-companions featured in *Wylah*, while no different from Disney’s animal-companions in function, are shown within

their native habitat and are included to represent the idea that Indigenous people had pets, just like other cultures.⁴⁰ The characters themselves are written in a dynamic and diverse way. They have different personalities and skills; Wylah in particular is a complex character whose perspective is revealed to the readers in the form of first-person narration. As a result, while ‘cultural ambassador’ characters generally tend to feel unrelatable to audiences, *Wylah* in its specific case is a story full of relatable and engaging characters who exist in their cultural context.

In the case of *Zero Point*, there are also differences between Saunders’ and Marvel’s respective portrayals of their Indigenous characters. Saunders’ lack of exploration of his protagonist’s cultural identity does not completely disconnect the protagonist from Indigenous society. Kyle Burton’s Indigenous identity is not absent – it is present from the beginning of the story and emphasised consistently through the subtle use of Indigenous cultural and social signifiers (such as stickers and badges with the Indigenous flag, in interactions with his grandmother, and so on). Having de-centred rather than ignored Kyle’s cultural identity, Saunders’ representation differs from that of Marvel, which most likely decided to label Bishop and Shard as Indigenous as an afterthought, a decade after their successful performance in international media.

The benefit of Saunders’ conscious choice to shift away from cultural exploration is that it allows him to explore Kyle’s personality, inner conflicts, and moral choices. This exploration of Kyle as an individual is what is supposed to engage the readers and draw them to the story. Kyle’s relatability as a person is designed to attract readers across cultural and social groups. Moreover, Saunders’ depiction of multiple Indigenous characters leading different lives and having different values is designed to communicate to his readers that ‘there is no right [or one specific] way to be Aboriginal’ (Saunders 2023, p. 48). All this makes Kyle Burton the opposite of a tokenistic character – rather, Kyle could be viewed as an example of diverse representation, that is relatable and not stereotypical, that expands on what it means to be Indigenous in contemporary Australia.

Secondly, stepping back and looking at the wider context of the apparent ‘double standards’, it is important to look at who exactly constitutes the people who issue criticism. Backlash

⁴⁰ @WylahTheKoorieWarrior post, Instagram, 5/06/2021, viewed 12 May 2023, <https://l.messenger.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instagram.com%2Fp%2FCPu3-sbD7UM%2F%3Figsh%3DMWtvdmcynjZsb2Ribw%253D%253D&h=AT1Qx4Whr9_osbE-mimM2yw0EMIWHFQCErPzGIjI6EO-fCqFQpatHkhHOVqdgVpxRKsk_nPQ2G0W8IN0m8IwipA-pZZZbafiOTz9I0ncuWteelK0sa8BxwxAE3tGg6w>.

reactions to Indigenous representation created by non-Indigenous authors are reported by the media in a way that implies Indigenous people hold a unified view. Yet, in reality there may be only a few Indigenous academics, journalists, writers, or representatives of certain Indigenous organisations that openly express their disapproval. While this does not mean that such criticism is invalid or not representative of some existing views of the Australian Indigenous population, its representation as a prevalent opinion could be problematic. As in any slice of the population, the tastes, preferences, personal experiences, and perceptions of Indigenous people are very diverse. Saunders, while disliking the repetitive portrayal of Indigenous characters in pop culture, still enjoyed seeing at least some Indigenous representation in internationally famous franchises like *Batman* or *X-Men*. He believes that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with Indigenous characters being represented by non-Indigenous creators. Pritchard found *Moana* to be an inspirational film which proved that Indigenous stories have a potential to attract strong international interest. He still enjoyed it despite criticising some details of Disney's Pacific cultural representation.

Like with *Moana*, *Billy and the Epic Escape* was caught in a bigger conversation that concerns such complex topics as the colonial aftermath, historical misrepresentation, cultural exploitation, current academic trends and discourses, negotiations around cultural protocols, and more. Simultaneously, such rhetoric around the features of Indigenous representation points to the lack of conceptual clarity in what 'positive' Indigenous representation actually means. While Indigenous media representation is often discussed as sitting somewhere along the axes of 'positive' or 'negative, 'beneficial' or 'damaging', 'empowering' or 'trivialising', 'authentic' or 'inauthentic', there are no clear and comprehensive guidelines which are unanimously accepted as authoritative. It might appear confusing that an Indigenous character who is depicted enslaving, murdering, and punishing members of their community can be discussed as a 'positive' representation while another Indigenous character depicted as having close ties with nature and enjoying desert bush food can be viewed as a 'negative' representation. Some people would criticise *Billy and the Epic Escape* and its author, Oliver, for not consulting Indigenous cultural experts. Others would criticise *Moana* and Disney for corrupting and coercing Indigenous cultural experts into consulting Disney's creative team on cultural topics. What to make of such contradictions?

I began to reflect on these complexities. Firstly, criticism of non-Indigenous portrayal of Indigenous people in pop culture could be explained by the authors' lack of understanding of the specificities of Indigenous lived experiences. Following the heated discussions about non-

Indigenous portrayal of Indigenous characters in media and the importance of appropriate representation that is not damaging or disrespectful, The Conversation authors Leanne and Smyth commented:

Non-Indigenous writers are grappling with how to craft inclusive fiction that does not impinge on Indigenous knowledge, beliefs and rights of self-representation.

(Leanne & Smyth 2024)

Indeed, non-Indigenous media creators are often positioned in such a way that they cannot grasp the whole complexity of Indigenous lived experience, cultural, spiritual, and social knowledge, and familiarity with everyday life in the same way Indigenous media creators can. Indigenous cultural and institutional authorities tend to believe that dedicated research and consultations with appropriate cultural experts can help create representation that is not offensive to the majority of Indigenous people. Without this sort of preparations, non-Indigenous media creators expose themselves to the increased risk of portraying Indigenous people in a way that could be seen as offensive, appropriated, or stereotypical.

Secondly, it is also possible that the difference in how media titles that appear similar but are created either by Indigenous or non-Indigenous authors are perceived, may be because the cultural identity of actors can affect the meaning of social situations. Just as Richard Bell's Lichtenstein series demonstrated the effect of simple race-flipping and its profound effects, similar depictions of Indigenous characters, stories, or tropes can be perceived by audiences profoundly differently if created by Indigenous authors, as compared to non-Indigenous authors. The meaning of such media products may be perceived differently depending on the 'racial' identity of the producer or the extent to which the creators have ensured from the outset that the venture has been collaborative with Indigenous creators.

Further, looking at this contradiction from the lens of Indigenous sovereignty, the rejection of non-Indigenous portrayal of Indigenous people in media points to the desire of people to own their representation and their creative potential, and to be able to resist systemic disadvantages. As public representation is closely connected to the expression of Indigenous identity, the right to represent Indigenous people in pop culture has a direct connection to the cultural affiliation of the creator, obtaining consent from relevant cultural authorities, and to contemporary political struggles. The nature of the representation itself here is not to be discounted, but appears somewhat secondary to the act of creating representation as an

enactment of sovereignty. Inserting Indigenous people into the homogenising international machine of mass media is an understandably frightening process that can be seen as threatening to Indigenous sovereignty.

From the angle that looks at the contested power to represent, Indigenous public scrutiny does not necessarily relate to the actual representations created by non-Indigenous authors, but rather to the fact that no Indigenous people were consulted or asked for endorsement. The requirement to receive a cultural clearance from Indigenous cultural or socially appointed authorities, grants the power to censor, endorse, or influence changes in media titles to Indigenous people. This returns the agency over their representation back to Indigenous people, even when the majority of media production is not created by Indigenous people themselves. This sentiment is expressed in the comments of Daniel Browning, ABC journalist and Bundjalung and Kullilli writer, who appeared on BBC Radio 4's program to comment on Jamie Oliver's *Billy and the Epic Escape* (Burke 2024 (2)):

These are people who will be read in ways that I will never be read. Blak people who have been writing their whole lives will never be read as much as these guys. And yet they still get to dictate what we look like. Well, we are not there for your delectation. We are not there to be used and consumed as you think fit. What you say about us matters. In the representation economy we are 3%, we are never going to have the audience that you have. We are never going to have the number of readers that you have. So when you write something about us, at least check the facts.

Browning expresses how and why Indigenous people want to gain power over their representation in mainstream media. As Indigenous people represent a very small percentage of the representation economy, simply producing more media content would be challenging. But coupling increased Indigenous media production with the ability to weigh in on Indigenous representation and influence changes or censor representation altogether grants real power to Indigenous people that could potentially lead to cultural and societal changes. Certainly, there would be many deeper and more varied reasons ranging from the individual to the systemic. All these factors have their place in the study of Indigenous mass media representation.

The message that Indigenous people should be a part of projects that attempt to represent them has been communicated relatively loudly. There are, however, still negotiations over

what the exact protocols should be. Some conventions of Indigenous media representation seem to have seeped through from the production process to consumers, as my description of the students' shocked reactions to Saunders' depiction of the Indigenous terrorist Samson demonstrated. However, this does not seem to work as a universal solution. For example, Saunders believes that a 'box ticking' approach to representation is impeding representational diversity in art and media. Some respected Indigenous academics and media researchers such as Langton (1993, p. 10) have warned that demanding censorship is 'naïve' and could hamper intercultural communication. Michaels (1994, p. 146) cautioned that discussing Indigenous artworks in terms of 'traditionalism' and 'authenticity' suppresses the passing of any artistic judgement or commentary and restricts art conversations to certain 'experts'.

As I discussed in the previous chapters, the multilayered complexity of the Indigenous political climate is undoubtedly affecting the complexity of Indigenous representation. Indigenous people are a group that is historically, socially, culturally, politically, and ideologically diverse. What one subgroup may find beneficial, another might find detrimental, and each side will have valid respective reasons for that. Thus, it is likely that Indigenous representation, and Indigenous identity, will remain a contested field. In the domain of mass media, there are going to be constraints on the expression and representation of Indigenous cultural and social worlds.

Indigenous mass communication practices and rapid social change

Australia is a settler-colonial society that has incorporated multiple individual Indigenous societies at different historical moments. These individual societies underwent diverse changes following colonisation, and these changes were determined by different factors. This has resulted from the fact that across the country, different Indigenous groups and individuals have experienced the colonial process in one way or another. Indigenous groups in Victoria have a different colonial history to Indigenous groups in the Northern Territory; Palawa people from Tasmania have a distinctly different place in the history of colonisation to Yolŋu from north-east Arnhem Land. Profound differences also occur within the same regions with the Stolen Generations having a different history from those who were not taken away. All these differences indicate that the particular local meaning of concepts such as decolonisation, racism, appropriation, and tokenism will be very different. Despite this, all Indigenous people now exist in the same nation state.

On a national level, in government, cultural, and educational institutions, there is a sense of moving towards inclusion of Indigenous history, an acknowledgement of colonial injustices, and some recognition of a common national heritage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This can be seen in the sentiment of pan-Indigenous empowerment, the adoption of practices such as Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country, consultation with Indigenous Elders, emphasis on the existence of Indigenous spiritual relationships with land, and the recognition of the religious significance of the Dreaming. These practices and sentiments may be viewed by some as tokens that do not bring many practical social or cultural changes. However, this reflects a broader orientation of the wider Australian society towards reconciliation and collaboration. In this complex diversity of colonial histories and effects, and national orientation, mass media contemporaneously intersects with all of this.

Today, the national policy rhetoric in regard to addressing Indigenous affairs primarily focuses on mainstreamisation (normalisation) of Indigenous lifestyles, institutions, and businesses, and also on initiatives such as Closing the Gap (Morphy & Morphy 2013, p. 185). Through a variety of strategies ranging from forms of coercion to forms of encouragement, the state wants to integrate Indigenous people into the ‘undifferentiated mainstream’ with the goal of achieving better outcomes for them (ibid). However, Indigenous socio-cultural differences and their internal diversity are not only present and enduring, but may also find various strategies to manifest in ways that serve Indigenous groups and the mainstream society at the same time. In my research, I have demonstrated that Indigenous media creators are able to navigate the vast complexity of contemporary politics, business development strategies, and Indigenous cultural and social diversity, while at the same time attracting wider audiences. They prove that Indigenous mass media is a growing field that succeeds in appealing to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences through different aspects of their production.

In my analysis of *Wylah* and *Zero Point*, I discovered that the representation of Indigenous characters and stories, their creation, dissemination, and marketing involve many different issues. The challenging of stereotypes, the recognition of colonial disregard for Indigenous rights, the dialogical relationship between inclusion and appropriation – these seemingly unconnected processes could be, in fact, viewed as *relatively autonomous* components of very complex historical processes. As I discussed in my methodology chapter, relatively autonomous components (e.g. mortuary rituals or religious systems in Morphy & Morphy 2017) exist within the context of the same culture/society, while at the same time maintaining

relative autonomy from one another in how they function, manifest, or regulate themselves. Morphy and Morphy (2017) outlined examples of how changes in religious context such as the introduction of Christianity and its values do not necessarily lead to the collapse of mortuary traditions, but rather to shifts that exist in continuity with historical traditional values and meanings. Arguably, there are many examples of how relatively autonomous components within Indigenous cultures undergo transformations and continue on. For example, kinship systems remain relevant for many Indigenous Nations despite profound changes in the patterns of people's housing, living arrangements, social interactions, and so on. As Central Land Council (2025) outlines, the contemporary style of avoidance relations between classificatory sons-in-law and mothers-in-law across certain regions of Central Australia means people who relate to each other in this way would avoid being in the same room or a car together. As relatively autonomous components help communities to 'reconcile' cultural and social gaps, they are simultaneously directed 'inwards', towards the world of cultural expression, and 'outwards', towards the world of difference' (Morphy & Morphy 2017, p. 2). In the case of relations between sons-in-law and mothers-in-law in Central Australia, the acts of avoidance (leaving the room, refusing to get into the same car) are designed to continue the cultural practice of distancing, encapsulating its 'inwards' meaning. At the same time, the 'outwards' practices would differ to accommodate various social situations, for example saying, 'there is no space in the car or room even though there appears to be sufficient space' (Central Land Council 2025).

The relative autonomy of analytically distinguishable cultural components ensures cultural flexibility and adaptability. Just several decades ago, in the spheres of certain schools of anthropology, colonial governance, and also among the general public, there was a belief that Indigenous cultures, not to mention the entirety of Indigenous society, were set to disappear. Certainly, colonial violence, displacement of people, systemic oppression, and the resulting cultural fragmentation left enduring damage on Indigenous communities across the country. However, with the rise in cultural celebration, cultural revitalisation, and the efforts to form an Indigenous political unity, the Australian society moves towards a recognition that neither Indigenous society, nor its diverse cultures, disappeared in their entirety. Language loss, interruption of many historical cultural and social practices, diminished population, and profound changes in lifestyle inevitably caused cultural damage, but Indigenous people and communities demonstrated cultural resilience. Morphy and Morphy (2013) attribute the ability of groups to integrate change and at the same time maintain a certain degree of

separation from the larger society, to the capacity to modify relatively autonomous components of their society. Preservation, revitalisation, and popularisation of Indigenous stories, certain ceremonies, languages, art practices, knowledge of native foods and ingredients – these are all examples of how relatively autonomous Indigenous cultural components are aiding cultural continuity. Through two-directional modifications (for example, by speaking English), Indigenous groups ensure they can function within wider Australian institutions, while at the same time maintaining their separation and the sense of social continuity (such as by speaking Indigenous languages at home, modifying English to best serve their communication style, and developing a vernacular, or special vocabulary).

Indigenous media and other traditional communication practices represent another example of this process. Communication practices existed for millennia in Indigenous societies, being an effective and practical way for people and groups to exchange information. Smoke signals, message sticks, rock paintings, storytelling events, ceremonial practices – these were Indigenous methods of spreading messages, stories, knowledge, and information. Complex and innovative, Indigenous societies developed and perfected these methods, using them in their daily lives. The arrival of European colonists caused a violent disruption in these practices, while at the same time introducing a new variety of communication technologies that were quickly picked up by Indigenous people. Despite some anxiety among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Indigenous consumption and use of photography, video recording, filmmaking, animation, and digital media technologies did not lead to the dissolution of Indigenous culture or identity. The relative autonomy of communication practices allowed space for rapid cultural and social change while at the same time preserving cultural coherence. *Wylah* and *Zero Point* exemplify this process. As digital media transformed Indigenous pre-colonial practices of communication, entertainment, and information exchange, Indigenous people formed two-directional institutions of media production that now allow their participation in global media exchange while at the same time catering to their specific cultural and social needs.

The ‘**outwards**’ direction of *Wylah* and *Zero Point* can be identified in their orientation towards the mainstream Australian and global audiences. Both franchises use accessible and globally recognised formats and English language, and create relatable and empathetic depictions of Indigenous characters and culture. In *Wylah*, Indigenous ‘traditional’ lifestyles, languages, and practices are presented in a way that people of any cultural background, who may not have basic cultural, linguistic, or region-specific Indigenous knowledge, are able to

comprehend, follow, and feel invested in. For example, Pritchard and Gould explain the meaning of ‘Dreaming’ at the end of chapter one in their second book as such: ‘The Dreamtime or Dreaming is an English word commonly used by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike to describe Aboriginal cosmology and the genesis of the world’ (Pritchard & Gould 2023, chapter 1). In chapter eleven, there is a scene where Wylah teaches Jayden Peek Whurrong language:

Jayden follows me over. ‘Wylah, how do you say “beautiful” in your language?’

I smile [...]. ‘We say “mootyung”.’

(Pritchard & Gould 2023, chapter 11)

The back of book one and two feature a ‘Glossary’ that contains Peek Whurrong words from the text, explanations of Indigenous character names, and socio-cultural concepts (see below). This suggests that the authors targeted their book series at people who might not be familiar with the basic vocabulary and cultural concepts of Peek Whurrong.

In *Zero Point*, as I have discussed at length in previous chapters, Saunders shows his Indigenous characters leading Euro-Australian lifestyles in a way that would be instantly relatable to wider-Australian readers. In the comic series, Kyle is shown serving in the military and being deployed to East Timor after he has returned from Afghanistan (Saunders 2022). His mentor, an Indigenous superhero named Jim Watt (a.k.a. Cockatoo), is involved in politics and runs his own tech company (Saunders 2023). In snapshots of his younger years, Jim Watt is depicted going to university and working for a nuclear test facility (Saunders 2023).

These aspects of *Wylah* and *Zero Point* could be interpreted as efforts by the authors to position their franchises as accessible and engaging for the ‘outwards’ mainstream Australian (and international) audience. As Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders have been consistently arguing from the very conception of their creative projects, they are motivated primarily by the desire to see Indigenous characters and stories in the mainstream media, not in separate specialty Indigenous shops. For them, seeing *Wylah the Koorie Warrior* and *Zero Point* available alongside other products of mainstream pop culture and entertainment like *Batman* comics, *Bluey* books, and films like *Moana* helps create the perception that Australian society is inclusive of Indigenous culture.

At the same time, it is possible to identify the ‘inwards’ direction of both franchises (the aspect that faces Indigenous cultural insiders). It is important to remember that Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders created *Wylah* and *Zero Point* in response to Indigenous mainstream representation that they saw as lacking complexity, reach, and scope of diversity. While historically, it was mainstream representations of Indigenous characters that were criticised and blamed by some Indigenous academics, cultural authorities, journalists, and other members of the public for perpetuating damaging stereotypes, today Indigenous media creators produce mainstream representations themselves. People like Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders have entered this space, bringing their own visions of Indigenous identities and expanding Indigenous presence in media. Both creative teams saw the expansion of Indigenous cultural, social, and creative production into the mass media as a necessary and logical step required for cultural revitalisation, popularisation, and expression. In their media franchises, Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders show the diverse ways contemporary Indigenous people live, interact with the world around them, and make sense of their identities. By doing so, they validate the different experiences of Indigenous people.

While it is possible to point to different aspects of *Wylah* and *Zero Point* and identify them as facing either ‘inward’ or ‘outwards’, often a single creative or business solution of Pritchard, Gould, or Saunders caters to both directions at the same time. Pritchard and Gould’s creation of *Wylah* is sparked by their belief that Australia needs more Indigenous media products to help build a society that has a lasting and meaningful Indigenous presence in mainstream culture. As this nation unites Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, communities, and groups, Pritchard and Gould see the need for accessible mainstream entertainment franchises that showcase the diversity and appeal of Indigenous peoples and cultures, cultural educational materials that cater to all age groups, and a variety of Indigenous media creators who motivate and empower each other. The authors took every opportunity to become visible, to win audience trust, and to promote their project. With every creative, administrative, and marketing decision, Pritchard and Gould established precedents in their industry and facilitated further Indigenous cultural and social expansion into mass media business.

Working in ANKA for a decade and dealing with community art centres in advocacy, consulting, marketing, and training, Saunders was exposed to Indigenous art circles that had an explicit focus on ‘traditional’ cultural production. He is aware that while ‘traditional’ art (just like ‘traditional’ culture) is a category that exists in the public’s imagination, in practice

it could represent a wide variety of practices, art styles, and subject matters. Regionally and culturally diverse, Indigenous art that is based on traditional expression is not a unified field.

While Saunders was immersed in Indigenous art world through his work in ANKA, he also grew up consuming a lot of pop-cultural media production, effectively being exposed to a variety of academic, cultural, community, and media industry fields. His life experience as an Indigenous person from suburban Darwin with a formal university education prompted Saunders to feel that pop-cultural representation of Indigenous people made by many non-Indigenous artists and writers did not quite capture the complexity and diversity of Indigenous people in Australia. He viewed depictions of Indigenous characters as embedded in a stereotypical and simplified image of Indigenous ‘traditional’ culture, as tokenistic and monocultural representation that fails to meaningfully engage the reader.

When Saunders was ready to create his own media production, he wanted to tell a story about Indigenous characters who are complex, appealing, and representative of the contemporary diversity of Indigenous people. This is what inspired Saunders to create *Zero Point*. As a result, the two-directional orientation of *Wylah* and *Zero Point* franchises permeates the motivations, goals, business organisations, creative choices, and political intentions behind both these projects.

As a result, it is possible to say that media is an area of cultural production that Indigenous people have been gradually incorporating into their cultural and social worlds. Cinema, music, theatre and stage performance – Indigenous people have worked to incorporate the new modes and methods of these industries to form two-directional institutions. These institutions take advantage of new ways of cultural, social, and creative expression and the availability of wider audiences. They also work to position these institutions in both directions, facing towards the wider society and also towards the inner circles of their cultural groups. Until quite recently, mass media and pop culture were areas where Indigenous people had not yet formed such institutions.

Arguably, the formation of Indigenous mass media and pop-cultural production is still just being negotiated. This means that there are multiple different ways Indigenous individuals, groups, and institutions interact with and perceive this production. Morphy and Morphy (2017, p. 9) explain the complexity of emerging social and cultural changes:

In looking to explain human action in the world it is essential to see it as being *multi determined*. The Yolngu memorial ceremony is not just ‘for outsiders’. It

can also be seen as a context for expressing emerging changes within Yolngu society, as part of a structured process of adjustment, and it is this that motivates the Yolngu side of the performance.

[emphasis added]

The multiplicity of goals, motives, desires, needs, and other factors determine the formation of new institutions, customs, and practices of social groups.

The concept of relative autonomy allows us to move away from the rhetorical binaries or the opposing perspectives that insist either on the false concreteness of Indigenous people as separate from the wider Australian society, or view them as on an inevitable path to becoming absorbed into the modern individualistic Australian lifestyle (Morphy & Morphy 2013, p. 185). Perceiving Indigenous communication practices as elements that change, shift, and incorporate new technologies while at the same time retaining cultural continuity, helps in understanding the development of Indigenous societies in a nuanced way that accounts for the complexity of social changes.

The two-directional institution of Indigenous media needs to navigate complex webs of ‘inwards’ and ‘outwards’ meanings, needs, protocols, and boundaries. The Indigenous identity of media creators has a place of significance in this field of production, and the need to express Indigenous social, political, cultural, and historical diversity is a challenging factor that is embedded in media representation. This research captures the early days of Indigenous media development: the negotiation of its parameters, protocols, and conventions is still underway. More variety in media products will follow, attracting different sections of the Australian population. While it might be difficult to predict what will happen to this field in the future, it is clear that Indigenous media creators are becoming increasingly influential actors who are gaining the power to alter public discourses, influence audience values, and imagine new paths for the future of Australia’s society.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to offer a peek into the world of Indigenous mass media production, its relation to Australian mainstream media, its reflection of contemporary Indigenous identity and its positionality within the wider Australian and global contexts. I have approached this research with a question in mind and allowed myself to follow the data, uncovering its significance one layer at a time. I have discovered that this field contains rich research material that offers insights into many areas of Indigenous social, cultural, political, industrial, and creative fields.

Thinking about my primary and supplementary case studies, what do I make of the impact of Indigenous-made pop-cultural production on Australian Indigenous culture, identity, self-expression, self-awareness, and positionality?

As I traced back the history of Indigenous engagement with media technologies, it became apparent to me that the subject of contemporary Indigenous mass media represents a new facet of a continuous and, in some sense, linear history of Indigenous communication traditions. From storytelling to exchanging message sticks, Indigenous people traditionally used a variety of in-person and long-distance communication technologies. The colonial interruption did not end the use of all traditional communication. While some methods either ceased being used or became less prevalent, the introduction of Western media technologies added to the variety of methods of communication Indigenous people used.

Contemporary Indigenous mass media production is a new two-directional form of communication that represents a facet of Indigenous cultural, social, political, and self-expression. Facing ‘inwards’, Indigenous mass media allows Indigenous creators to uphold and express various social and cultural needs and obligations that are specific to Indigenous groups. Facing ‘outwards’, it opens Indigenous people to a world of opportunities to establish their individual, cultural, and political presence on a national and global stage. What arguably makes the development of Indigenous mass media production linear is that, while mass media co-exists with other means of communication, it can be relatively easily traced back to its birth. Its development represents a linear progression of Indigenous representation from simplistic to complex. Similarly, Indigenous peoples’ participation in mass media creation has shifted from being subjects of interest to becoming producers in their own right. Thus, while

the field of digital media may be new, Indigenous expression of their identity and the place they occupy in the world is not.

Hence, it would be inappropriate to consider mass media as an entirely novel means of communication for Indigenous people. As I have discussed, Indigenous people in Australia and in many other countries became involved with video and photographic technologies almost as soon as these were invented. As mass media content reached Indigenous communities across the country in an uneven manner and eventually became a part of their daily lives, engaging in its creation became just another way of communicating and spreading news, knowledges, and stories.

The desire to define their contemporary identity, their wishes and views, take political stances, and be in charge of how they are portrayed in media is also an expression of Indigenous sovereignty. Taking a serious stance on procedural, political, and representational issues of mass media's inclusion of Indigenous people, Indigenous media consumers, academics, cultural authorities, and representatives of Indigenous organisations protect their cultural, social, and political right to self-determination.

The involvement of Indigenous people in contemporary pop-cultural production as creators and vocal audiences signifies a new stage of development in the long history of Indigenous people and media. Some Indigenous people and organisation now seek to gain the power to influence mainstream media in relation to their representation. Representing a population of just over 3% in a country with a colonial history, Indigenous people have had to advocate continuously for their rights and freedoms. In recent years, many Indigenous media creators have begun producing pop-cultural and other mass media products intended for mainstream media. They do this in the hope of encouraging cultural and social changes in the wider society towards the inclusion of Indigenous culture in the dominant Australian culture, through empathy and cultural appreciation.

Wylah the Koorie Warrior is one such work. Studying this media franchise, I observed a clear demand and need for such media products among the public and in the education sector. Purchased by schools, libraries, and as part of home reading material, *Wylah* is viewed by audiences as a symbol of Indigenous agency and self-determination. This particular perception of the franchise is carefully guided by its authors via targeted marketing campaigns. Using their cultural licence to represent the Indigenous people of their region, *Wylah's* two Indigenous authors – Richard Pritchard and Jordan Gould – centred their

marketing campaign on their adherence to certain cultural protocols of working with Indigenous people such as seeking consultations with the local Indigenous Elders, securing their endorsements, which they then included in the front material of their book series, and including a ‘Welcome to Country’ statement written in two languages.

The goal of helping to promote Indigenous cultural empowerment and share the benefits with the wider Indigenous community is reiterated in Pritchard and Gould’s business approach. Their ‘warm business’ model is intended to be mindful of community benefits in both practical (donations of their products) and ideological ways (encouragement of social and cultural change in Australia). *Wylah*’s Indigenous representation hinges on a delicate balance between a push to represent a pan-Indigenous community, but also a desire to delineate that *Wylah* only represents Peek Whurrong people. This approach to representation reflects the complex and politicised non-uniformity of Indigenous identity in Australia and the plurality of meanings people associate with being Indigenous.

Zero Point is another media franchise that aims to promote normalisation of the presence of Indigenous people in the wider Australian and global society. Representing his Indigenous characters as ‘regular’ people who are not fully immersed into culture and spirituality, Jonathon Saunders tries to move away from the stereotypical association between Indigenous people and ‘traditional’ lifestyle and beliefs. His media project is a ‘fusion of eastern and Western comic styles’ (Saunders 2022) that crafts an Australian Indigenous rendition of the superhero trope. Guided by the philosophy of ‘be the change you want to be’ (Saunders 14/03/2023), Saunders tells stories about Indigenous characters who are diverse in the fuller sense of the word – he focuses on their motivations and personalities rather than on their cultural and social differences. By promoting the view that Indigenous people and cultures are not necessarily bounded by traditions, he pushes to revitalise, empower, and liberate Indigenous culture. He hopes that this can help Indigenous people to feel liberated from socio-cultural expectations to live and behave in a certain way.

Wylah the Koorie Warrior and *Zero Point* showcase different sides of Indigenous representation in media and reflect regional and ideological differences between the authors. Regional contextual differences had an effect on Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders’ mass media projects and on how they approached Indigenous representation. However, these effects were expressed in subtle ways, as part of a more complex set of motives and goals. *Wylah*, a media franchise produced in the Victorian town of Warrnambool, located some 250 kilometres from

Melbourne, depicts Indigenous people as living pre-colonial lives, immersed in traditional lifestyles and spirituality. *Zero Point*, a franchise launched in Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory, portrays Indigenous people as living an Anglo-Australian lifestyle in urban centres. Saunders' Indigenous characters are tech billionaires, scientists, military professionals, and superheroes.

There are many factors that determine how media creators depict Indigenous characters and cultures. From personal preferences to the availability of grants and support initiatives, Indigenous media creators can be guided by a multiplicity of different factors when creating their mass media products. However, the existence and impact of regional, political, and cultural factors should not be discounted. Pritchard and Gould live and work in the socio-political context of southeastern Australia, a region which has been affected for longer by colonial practices, policies, and legislation. Historically being depicted through the biased lens of 'inauthenticity', many Indigenous people of this region are now seeking stronger cultural connections and working towards cultural political empowerment (for example, establishing Yoorook). Such trends in society affect the function of institutions, funding government bodies, educational providers, and so on. Pritchard and Gould identified the need for media products that capture the public's support for Indigenous cultural empowerment and revitalisation, and identified an opportunity to do so with a children's book. These factors, along with many other, contributed to their representation of Indigenous people in *Wylah the Koorie Warrior*.

Jonathon Saunders produced his *Zero Point* franchise in the context of the Northern Territory, a region that underwent colonial intrusion much later than the 'south'. It was subjected to different colonial policies than the southeastern regions. While the 'south' suffered from the fragmentation of communities, cultures, languages, and identities for longer, some parts of the 'north' managed to preserve more of their pre-colonial cultural and societal presence. The demographic of the Northern Territory and Darwin also differs from that of Victoria and its metropolitan regions. There, the Indigenous population is represented more prominently in the public, media, and political spheres.

This context had an impact on Saunders, who grew up in an environment where he reported he was exposed to Indigenous actors, politicians, news anchors, and artists. Feeling that the Indigenous culture that surrounded him was overrepresented in local and international media production, he decided to create a franchise that sheds a new light on Indigenous characters

and stories. His depiction of Indigenous people as no different from non-Indigenous in terms of social, industrial, political, and educational opportunities and capabilities is a novel take on identity representation. His vision of Australia as almost post-racial and Indigenous people as not unique, but rather an integral part of the wider society, feels somewhat ahead of its time. While he reported that he was inspired by an array of international mass media products, his choice to focus on a post-racial vision of Australia rather than on Indigenous cultural empowerment was to some extent influenced by his impression that the popularisation of Indigenous culture does not need his assistance.

Another point of difference between *Wylah* and *Zero Point* is the authors' ideological position concerning Indigenous art. Pritchard and Gould think that Indigenous art is a manifestation of Indigenous culture and, thus, it should be created as part of cultural expression. Adherence to cultural protocols and the need to collaborate with the Indigenous Elders, together with their goal to use their franchise to bring about social and cultural benefits to Indigenous people and culture, reflects their view of the close connection between Indigenous art and culture. On the other hand, Saunders considers that art should ideally be a vehicle of creative expression. In the context of his identity as an Indigenous person, Saunders feels hesitant to call himself an 'Indigenous artist' because of the cultural implication that this label connotes. Choosing to create artistic and media production that does not touch on cultural exploration or expression, Saunders aims to break away from expectations around his work and personal life. None of these creators appear to hold strong views about the connections between culture and art, but they have nevertheless expressed their respective positions in their personal statements, in public, and in their mass media works.

The respective approaches of *Wylah* and *Zero Point's* creative teams to business are differentiated by their different attitudes towards marketing and trend chasing. Pritchard and Gould leaned into their Indigenous identity as one of the major points of their marketing campaign with the aim of using it to signify cultural authority to produce Indigenous representation. Saunders initially did the same, but subsequently decided to stop advertising his identity as part of his marketing. Positioning himself as a contemporary Australian artist, he aims to remove any preconceptions about his creative work.

In regards to chasing media trends, Pritchard and Gould view this as a way to make their mass media franchise relevant and engaging, according to the current trends and interests of mainstream audiences. This reasoning pushed them to take inspiration from Disney and craft

a story that aims to empower Indigenous people and culture in the modern Australian context. Saunders does not believe in chasing trends and instead chooses classic tropes and genres that have withstood the test of time.

However, there are still major parallels between these franchises. For example, both creative teams are aligned in their aim to bring about some form of benefit to Indigenous communities. Pritchard and Gould are continuously seeking collaborations with other Indigenous Nations who want to join their media project. They also work to create positive associations with Indigenous culture and stories among the general public. Saunders and his friend have set up an independent comic book publisher to help out new artists in their community. They also organise and run various events, talks, and exhibitions in Darwin to help new artists gain publicity and experience.

Importantly, Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders are all testing new paths to establishing Indigenous media presence. Their choices in how they approach marketing, set up their businesses, and what characters and stories they create will likely influence the future development of the Indigenous mass media field as a whole. The experimental nature of highly creative and imaginative works of these Indigenous mass media creators differs from the works of non-Indigenous creators, who have tended to represent Indigenous characters and stories in a repetitive and stereotypical way. In growing numbers, new Indigenous media creators have entered mainstream media and now work to subtly subvert the existing tokenistic tropes and stereotypical depictions of Indigenous people. Their complex characters become protagonists and antagonists in dedicated stories that explore concepts, ideas, and problems that are relatable to people across the world.

Notably, not only media creators, but also Indigenous audiences in the form of individuals, institutions, activists, and academics, have entered the field of digital media as active participants. They assert their right to self-determination by trying to regulate their representation in mainstream media. Indigenous media audiences employ different strategies to achieve this: they call for more products to be made by Indigenous media creators, vocally criticise non-Indigenous creators and their media products that set out to represent Indigenous characters and stories, and encourage non-Indigenous creators to collaborate and consult with Indigenous people. By calling out media titles that do not follow the most current cultural guidelines and criticising the intentions of non-Indigenous media creators, active Indigenous audience members aim to assert sovereignty over their media presence and also to initiate

cultural and societal changes in global and Australian attitudes to Indigenous people and culture. While not every member of Indigenous audiences holds strong opinions about non-Indigenous authors creating Indigenous characters and stories, the active audience members provide a strong oppositional voice that is picked up by media outlets and supported by some Indigenous institutions, academics, and industries, creating a multivocal front.

As a result, the initial observation in my introduction related to the socio-political agenda of decolonisation, appears to be not absent as such but rather, expressed subtly. In the recent decades, the rhetoric around decolonisation emerged as a dominant trope in discussions around Indigenous culture and society. This trope was rapidly taken up by scholars in the humanities and social science disciplines. Notably, some scholars leaned into this trend more than Indigenous artists and practitioners. While there is a strong political consciousness among Indigenous authors and media creators that was evident from my interviews with Pritchard, Gould, and Saunders, the lens of decolonisation tends to oversimplify the complexity of Indigenous political agendas. It does not capture the individual agency of creative practitioners. While the call for decolonisation is a prominent movement in Indigenous politics, there is a lack of consensus over what it actually entails. Moreover, there is a complementary ethos of collaboration, reconciliation, two-way learning and similar sentiments, which is also present in the Indigenous politics and communities, as well as a determination to be present and heard in many spheres of life. At the same time, there is also a passionate call for Indigenous sovereignty that seeks to establish Indigenous self-determination in Indigenous affairs. My findings suggest that Indigenous pop-cultural media creators embed such political calls subtly, as one part of the broader effect they hope to have on their audiences.

This thesis demonstrates the potential for greater academic attention to Australian Indigenous mass media and pop-cultural fields. Mass media reveals insightful and up-to-date data that relates to multiple spheres of Indigenous daily life, politics, industry, technological engagement, knowledge production, and more. It is therefore crucial to pay attention to developments and innovations in mass media and pop culture. Reflecting the most current attitudes, social and political movements, and trends, mass media production and pop culture are invaluable sources for the study of human society.

Returning to the comparison of the Indigenous mass media industries in Australia and the US, I come to the conclusion that while perceived differences do offer interesting paths for further

exploration, it is important to keep in mind that the historical and political differences between the US and Australia have set these countries on different trajectories. Hence, the surface differences that I have observed still require further exploration to be perceived meaningfully.

There are a few points that concern my research design that I want to reflect on. Firstly, the titles chosen for my primary case studies are not intended to be viewed as representative of entire communities or groups ('northern' or 'southeastern', the entirety of Indigenous media creators in Australia, Victorian or Northern Territory, and so on). Rather, they are singular voices in the developing field of Indigenous mass media and pop culture. The insights and trends that I identify as part of this case study research are valid and representative, but I would not go as far as to propose that they apply across all Indigenous mass media or pop-cultural production. More research is needed to investigate the wider implications for and uses of mass media by Indigenous people in Australia.

Rather than being the straightforward comparative study that I expected to conduct, my case studies ended up representing different aspects of Indigenous media production that I can use to expand on insights I have gained from one or the other. The findings from studying *Wylah* and *Zero Point* complement each other while also pointing me in additional directions that highlight the complexity of motivations, goals, and views that Indigenous media creators hold. With the help of additional case studies that cover non-Indigenous production, I was able to draw intriguing comparisons that yielded key findings exposing the contested nature of Indigenous identity and the politics of representation.

I encourage academics to apply different research lenses to the study of Indigenous mass media and pop culture. Due to the constraints of this thesis' scope, I chose to leave out discussion of gender in relation to Indigenous media representation. *Moana*, *Pocahontas*, and *Wylah* suggest the availability of substantial material in relation to the depiction of Indigenous identity and its relationship to feminism, societal views on femininity, media market demographics, among other topics. As gender representation and its political, cultural, and social implications is a field in its own right, its consideration in this context deserves a dedicated study. Indigenous sovereignty is another significant lens that was not explored in-depth in this thesis due to the fact that my chosen case studies did not happen to touch on this subject. I believe that the connection between Indigenous pop-cultural media production and Indigenous sovereignty deserves a separate study.

Australian society is multicultural and vibrant, and this is somewhat reflected in my discussion about mainstream media and cross-cultural audiences. However, I did not have space in this thesis to explore wider culture-specific relations between Indigenous cultures and non-Western cultures in depth. This does not indicate that these are insignificant cultural relations.

There is, however, another reason why I chose to focus specifically on Euro-Australian and Indigenous cultural relations. Mass media technologies were brought to Australia as a result of European contact. During British colonisation, Anglo-Australian people constituted the political majority and were generally the producers and consumers of Australian media. While people from various backgrounds, countries, and cultures eventually became involved with media production, it was Anglo-Australian culture that became the main constituent of the Australian mainstream media audience. This remains largely so today, though it is important to point that it has been gradually shaped by the multiculturalism of Australia.

Ultimately, contemporary Indigenous mass media and pop-cultural productions represent an output for Indigenous people to share their experiences, feelings, and ideas with the Australian people. Inviting audiences to see the world from their point of view, they craft stories that appeal to our shared humanity. Love and regret, joy and pain – these are feelings shared by people around the world. In comic books, animated series, illustrated books, and short films, Indigenous media creators imagine their Indigenous characters as superheroes, magical warriors, protectors of the innocents, and defenders against injustice. They envision themselves standing strong in their traditional societies and futuristic space stations, in the rural outback and in urban megapolises, in historical dramas and in fantasy adventures. While the Australian society of today may be divided on how to proceed with the future of Indigenous political representation, Indigenous artists, writers, animators, directors, and media producers envision new paths to a better, kinder, and ongoingly diverse future.

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Figure 7: Manifold in Marvel 2020, cover art, *S.W.O.R.D.* vol. 2, no. 1.

Figure 8: Thylacine in DC Comics 2020, cover art, *Suicide Squad*, no. 5.

Figure 9: Molo the Mighty in Miller, Syd 1943, cover art, *The Coming of Molo the Mighty*, Syd Miller, Lindfield.

Figure 10: Superboong in *Basically Black* 1973, TV series, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, directed N. Parsons.

Figure 11: Condoman 1987, poster, Townsville.

Figure 12: Neomad art in Campbell, Steward 2014, *Neomad, book three: porkchop plots*, Gestalt Publishing, Singapore.

Figure 13: Umbaluru and Batman in DC 1988, cover art, *Detective Comics*, no. 591.

Figure 14: Pocahontas and John Smith in *Pocahontas* 1995, animated film, Walt Disney Feature Animation, United States, directed by M. Gabriel & E. Goldberg.

Figure 15: de Passe, Simon 1616, *Pocahontas*, portrait engraving, viewed 17 June 2024, <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/680619/pocahontas>>.

Figure 16: Moana and Māui poster in *Moana* 2016, animated film, Walt Disney Animation Studios, United States, directed by J. Musker & R. Clements, <<https://www.disneyplus.com/en-au/browse/entity-e8896bfa-1052-41f7-ae2e-00255d77cf05>>.

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Figure 21: Wylah the Koorie Warrior book one cover in Gould, Jordan & Pritchard, Richard 2022, *Wylah the Koorie Warrior book one: guardians*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.

Figure 22: Moana movie poster in *Moana* 2016, animated film, Walt Disney Animation Studios, United States, directed by J. Musker & R. Clements,
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Figure 34: 'Black magic' helmet and the Indigenous flag sticker in Saunders, Jonathon 2022, *Zero Point: origins, part one*, Undergrowth Arts, Darwin, p. 5.

Figure 35: Indigenous flag on a cap in Saunders, Jonathon 2023, *Zero Point: origins, part two. The threshold*, Undergrowth Arts, Darwin, p. 27.

Figure 36: Kyle and his grandmother in Saunders, Jonathon 2023, *Zero Point: origins, part two. The threshold*, Undergrowth Arts, Darwin, p. 3.

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