Containing, contesting, creating spaces: leadership and cultural identity work among Australian Indigenous arts leaders

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Abstract
Drawing on the experiences of 29 Australian Indigenous artists and arts leaders, this article explores the way these individuals provide leadership by expressing and resisting cultural identities of Aboriginality. Scholars have shown how a key activity in leadership is ‘identity work’, or negotiating a sustainable leadership identity, yet much of the scholarship to date neglects context and cultural dimensions of identity work in leadership. Our research draws on the extensive theorising on social identity, but we take a critical perspective, arguing that public discourses of Aboriginality mean that leadership identities in Indigenous communities have a complex, sometimes contested status. We begin the article showing the way in which Aboriginality as an identity is constructed in the public domain. We then explore three categories of identity practice enacted by our sample of arts leaders: contesting essentialisation, containing trauma and creating belonging. The discussion argues that these practices of interrogating and re-shaping stereotypic cultural identities often constitute acts of leadership. We contribute to scholarship by providing new insights on identity work; and to practice, highlighting the potential significance of leadership identity work to the self-determination and flourishing of Aboriginal peoples.

Keywords
Indigenous leaders, arts leaders, identity, Aboriginalities, cultural identities

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Introduction

Research has shown how leadership involves dynamic processes of identity navigation, which may involve performing or conforming to expected leader identities as well as resistance to and disruption of stereotyped identities (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003, 2005; Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2011). Some of the richest and most interesting accounts of leadership identity work come from critical research of leaders working against gender, racial and cultural stereotypes (Ford and Harding, 2007; Kirton and Healy, 2012; Nkomo, 2011; Ospina and Foldy, 2009). Because leadership has historically been ‘a white male idea’ (Sinclair, 2007), leaders who are neither white nor male encounter challenges such as being rated less ‘leader-like’ by subordinates (Eagly, 2011). They are also often given extra responsibilities to use their leadership to redress collective inequities and empower others who share a marginalised group identity (Kenny and Fraser, 2012).

This article explores the leadership identity work of 29 Australian Indigenous arts leaders as they move across different worlds, juggling roles and responsibilities such as artist/community member/Aboriginal/leader. We suggest that Indigenous artists offer new insights into the navigation of identities in leadership due to several factors. First, their own leadership contribution takes place against a backdrop of consistent public debate of cultural identities and Aboriginalities. Who is Aboriginal, how do we know and who decides? Most ‘White’ leaders never have to consider their cultural identity in this politicised context, but such public debate has profound consequences for the capacity of Indigenous leaders to speak for, and make a contribution to, Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Second, as artists, this group often enact publicly mediated, embodied leadership (Bathurst and Ladkin, 2012; Ladkin, 2008), which includes identity tensions between expressing themselves as individual contemporary artists, and their role as inter-generational representatives and custodians of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

In the article that follows, we begin with a brief overview of research on Indigenous leadership, arts leadership and identity work before discussing the public, discursive construction of Aboriginality and some of the consequences for Indigenous leaders. The epistemological and methodological approach adopted in this study is described, referencing Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous standpoint theory, for example, acknowledging multi-vocal Indigenous positionalities (Smith, 1999). The ‘Findings: Leadership identity practices’ section identifies from our data three categories of identity practice enacted by Indigenous arts leaders: contesting (essentialisation), containing (trauma) and creating (belonging). In the discussion, we suggest this identity work often constitutes leadership practice, for example, by creating spaces for belonging for those with marginalised identity positions, or providing cross-generational cultural advocacy and mentorship. This leadership identity work impacts at the level of individual arts leaders and their followers, including students, audiences, staff, artistic peers and community members. However, we also suggest that wider Indigenous, Australian and international arts communities are impacted by this leadership identity work as it challenges notions of Aboriginality, creates contemporary understandings of cultural identity and integrity, and contributes to self-determination of peoples.
Indigenous leadership and identity work

A growing international research literature is devoted to exploring Indigenous leadership (for example, Begay Jr, 1991; Borofsky, 2010; Kenny and Fraser, 2012; Ottmann, 2005; Spiller et al., 2011a; Sveiby, 2009; Sveiby and Skuthorpe, 2006; Warner and Grint, 2006; White, 2010). In this section, we provide an overview of some of this work and build on the argument made by some others (for example, Ospina and Foldy, 2009) that concepts of identity and identity work provide a powerful lens for exploring leadership contributions of Indigenous leaders.

But first, is there such a thing as Indigenous leadership? As critical researchers have argued, prefacing ‘leadership’ with ‘Indigenous’ runs risks of essentialising potentially diverse approaches, while also enabling Western notions of leadership to be the un inspected norm against which all others are measured (Bolden and Kirk, 2011; Nkomo, 2011). Warner and Grint (2006) warn of the related risks of reducing dynamic, complex Indigenous patterns of leadership to one understanding, perhaps so they are more comprehensible within Western understandings. However, it is vitally important that research does not reproduce colonising patterns (Connell, 2007, 2013). Rather, scholarship should be built on several things. It should recognise existing Western/Northern biases in social theory and the problems with subordinating Indigenous leadership as variant of an unproblematised norm (Nkomo, 2011). The impact of historical, cultural and socio-economic factors need to be acknowledged in research, as well as a reflexive consideration of researcher positionality, which ideally creates a third space from which to theorise, and one that potentially breaks apart dominant and colonising views of leadership (Evans, 2012; Nkomo, 2011; Zhang et al., 2012).

A second issue in Indigenous leadership research is the evidence that the very idea of leadership itself is alien to some cultures that have been governed traditionally in more collective and distributed ways (Scott, 2009). Historical accounts of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, primarily constructed by anthropologists and social scientists, describe a pluralist communal-based society, where the idea of a single leader did not exist (Foley, 2007). As one account of the over 500 nations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, however, this view cannot be assumed as a pan-Indigenous Australian truth. In our research, we sought to respond to these risks with a focus on Indigenous arts leaders, rather than seeking to generalise the broader category of Indigenous leadership. Our sample of 29 leaders is small (reflecting the population) and, accordingly, our primary interest is in exploring the identity pressures arts leaders encounter, rather than drawing conclusions about the general category of Indigenous leadership.

Previous research has shown Indigenous leaders grappling with issues and enacting values not usually represented in conventional leadership accounts (Kenny, 2012). These issues are around identity – who belongs and to what – and the values include a primacy on self-determination and self-governance; spiritual connection and responsibilities to land, ancestors and community; and taking responsibility for the broader community as well as for future generations (Begay Jr, 1991; Calliou, 2008; Calliou and Voyageur, 2007; O’Donoghue, 2007; Sveiby, 2009; Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2005; Warner and Grint, 2006). Leaders are expected to uphold traditional cultural values and models of leading (such as being a custodian) alongside contemporary leadership demands (such as economic management of community assets). Indigenous leadership values both embodiment and spiritual connection (see, for example, Borofsky, 2010; Wuttunee et al., 2007).
Indigenous people are often inducted into leadership through embodied experiences (such as dance or music), connection and cultural knowledge, but they also describe tensions in their leadership, such as being both inside and outside of Indigenous culture (Kenny, 2012; Sanders, 2008). In Australia, with half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 21 years or below (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), Indigenous leaders must also negotiate conflicting inter-generational leadership expectations. These examples reveal Indigenous leaders to be subject to complex cultural identity pressures and we turn now to research on leadership identities and identity work, to show why this is a potentially valuable lens with which to explore Indigenous leadership.

The study of the self and how people go about producing and enacting themselves in society – a field known as identity or social identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995), has flourished through the 20th century. While critical scholars have warned that the focus on the self is itself a culture-centric notion (Rose, 1989, 1996), identity has become a central theme of study in disciplines from anthropology and sociology through to organisational studies and leadership (Hogg, 2001; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). There is also substantial work on cultural identity and leadership (see, for example, Bell and Nkomo, 2003; Nkomo, 2011; Ospina and Foldy, 2009); and the importance of embodiment and aesthetics in artistic leadership and artists who provide leadership (see, for example, Ladkin, 2008; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010), which we draw on in this article.

According to research, leaders are understood to be persistently involved in the production and performance of leadership identities. As Sveningsson and Alvesson define it, identity work involves ‘...forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that may be productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness...’ (2003: 1165). Often a leadership identity is just one of a number of identities an individual takes up, it is usually precarious and can sometimes contradict other identities given to, or taken up by, that individual (Bolden et al., 2011; Sinclair, 2007). According to DeRue and Ashford, the leadership identity, ‘...comprises three elements: individual internalisation, relational recognition, and collective endorsement’ (2010: 629).

Within leadership studies, it is possible to distinguish several approaches to identity, including social identity theory, which is informed by social psychology (see, for example, Hogg, 2001; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004) and identity theory with more critical social theory and sociological antecedents (for example, Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008; Collinson, 2003; Ford et al., 2008; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). While Hogg et al. suggest these two approaches offer ‘similar perspectives’ but occupy ‘parallel universes’ (1995: 255), there are key differences between the theories. Social identity theory tends to treat individual identity as more available for conscious adjustment, with an interest in how the leader identity becomes a focus of identification for followers. In much of social identity theory, there is a prescriptive and performative intent: leaders are encouraged to adjust their identity to maximise followership. In critical identity view, identities are produced, structured and constrained by social, discursive forces, as much by individual crafting. Researchers therefore problematise these processes and the consequences of ‘identity management’. From a critical perspective, leadership identity work is seen as a never complete, often fraught negotiation of multiple and sometimes contradictory identities, in response to structural and internal pressures, which may not be consciously experienced (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Ford, 2006; Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2011; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). We situate this article within the critical accounts of leadership identity work described above, where identity is also understood as a political
and discursive outcome ‘...between the projects of identity, social demands and personal possibilities’ (Calhoun, 1994: 14).

For many Indigenous peoples, identity and cultural identity are concepts with particularly powerful and embodied meaning. People with historically stigmatised minority identities have often been required to hide or defend their identities (Scott, 2009). Indigenous peoples in Australia have, until recently, been taken away from families and country on the very basis of their racial identity, or more accurately, how it was designated by white authorities. How racial and cultural identity is determined continues to be highly controversial, because of colonial practices aimed at removing blood and physical racial markers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to achieve a White Australia. For most Indigenous people, cultural identity is not about blood or appearance but connection to family, ancestors, country and spirituality. As described by Bob Randall, a member of the Stolen Generation ‘the purpose of life is to be part of everything that is. You take away my kanyini, my interconnectedness, and I’m nothing, I’m dead’ (cited in Kahane, 2010: 25).

Accordingly, we suggest, Indigenous leaders often navigate the leadership identity differently: in and around, despite, against and because of, cultural identity. Their identity work draws upon crucible experiences such as ‘outsider’ experiences where leaders are accustomed to problematising, rather than assuming feelings of belonging (Kenny and Frazer, 2012); and ‘border-crossing’ experiences, such as moving between cultures, where leaders learn to adopt and perform, adapt and relinquish identities depending on context (Sinclair and Wilson, 2002). Scholars like Ospina and Foldy (2009) describe leadership as primarily relational and integrative. They argue that leadership studies exploring race ‘increasingly use a fluid and dynamic conceptualisation of social identity that highlights its collective dimensions’ (Ospina and Foldy, 2009: 877).

In this research, we have also been interested in how the leader identity interacts with other embodied identities, for example, gender identity or cultural identities (Sinclair, 2011). Bodies, physicality and embodiment play an important role in the identity work described in this article. One of the key resources artists use in their leadership are their bodies; and Indigenous art uses the body and the physical world in distinctive ways to express multiple, fluid identities. Senior Wik-Mungkan sculptor Arthur Pambegan Jr ceremonially transforms his sculptural work, from the embodiment of his ancestors into pieces of fine art by dancing them into exhibition spaces, ‘...this is his dance, these are his poles, this is his story, his spirit, his land, his life. This is him’ (author emphasis Sutton, 2007: 36). Scholars of artistic leadership describe the tensions between individual and group that are often mapped onto and through bodies (Bathurst and Cain, 2013). Whose identity is being performed in art – the individual or the group? In the data that follows, these tensions are clearly in evidence, for example, where Indigenous leaders are seeking to practice their art in dance or music, alongside and sometimes simultaneously representing community, mentoring young people and advocating for recognition and innovation. In interviews, leadership, artistic and identity practices are interwoven, for example, in expressions of personal visions and artistic heritage, alongside advocacy of cultural identity and reclaiming cultural values. From the interview data, we identify three common types of identity practices by Indigenous arts leaders: contesting essentialism, containing trauma and creating belonging. Each of these practices can be understood as both leadership challenges and leadership accomplishments, often performed by artists in ways that are embodied, yet reflecting and grounded in spiritual and community values. They may not look like conventional organisational leadership. But, we
suggest that they often constitute leadership and are important to recognise as such, precisely because Indigenous identity is fragmented and politicised, rather than coherent or static.

Method

In this section, we describe our data collection based on interviews and the rationale for sampling. We explain these choices by discussing some of the features of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Our approaches to both data gathering and analysis have been informed by the principles, as we understand them, of Indigenous research (Irabinna-Rigney, 1999; Meyer, 2003; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 1999).

The primary data collection for this research comprised 29 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with named Australian Indigenous artists and arts managers, which were both audio and videotaped. Rather than anonymised or treated as interchangeable respondents, individuals are named to acknowledge artistic ownership (see Table 1). The participants were from all parts of Australia, including urban and remote settings; a mix of established and emerging artists; about half with graduate arts education, and most working independently or in small organisations. In the sample are visual artists, theatre artists, musicians, community cultural development practitioners, arts managers, writers, and choreographers. The Indigenous arts sector is not a static or neutral set of relationships; there are contests for power and scarce resources (Iseger-Pilkington, 2011). We deliberately chose artists and arts managers outside arts bureaucracies but with influential links to Indigenous communities. It was this form of leadership, rather than formal bureaucratic authority, we wanted to examine because it seemed a significant contributor to the flourishing of diverse Indigenous communities, yet was under-explored.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews explored questions of artistic expression and leadership in the lives of artists, as well as critical events in their history and careers, which impacted their ideas about leadership and themselves as leaders. The interviews took place across Australia in the studio spaces, public spaces, homes and offices of participants and the researcher. Ranging between 35 and 100 min, the semi-structured format around 10 to 12 pre-defined questions allowed the opportunity to sense and mine important events and experiences for deeper investigation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemologies), of doing (axiologies) and of being (ontologies) are the foundation on which Indigenous social research methodologies are typically developed (Moreton-Robinson and Walter, 2009). In all methodological decisions, we sought to be aware of, and not reproduce, the colonising modes of much of conventional social science (Connell, 2007). The interviews foregrounded the voices of Indigenous participants and constructed the interview as a site of dual impact: ‘data’ for the researchers to interpret and build contributions for the field; and as social history contributions maintaining a holistic sense of life narrative, to be stored for future generations to access (Martin, 2003). Further, we sought to recognise Indigenous perspectives, such as the construction of time, the nature of multigenerational relational connection and knowledge exchange within the interview. Participants were encouraged to explore early memories and influential figures (family and extended family) as well as their influence on others (the next generations). Indigenous participants described efforts to protect, reclaim, maintain and preserve Indigenous knowledge in their artistic practice and creative contributions, to pass on culture and build a legacy for future generations. Our approach sought to register and validate
individual embodied knowledge and highlight the cultural identity work Indigenous artists do in the public arena on behalf of themselves and their communities.

We were explicit about issues of power and ownership in the research. The first author is self-identified as an Aboriginal woman and seen by most as ‘an insider’ with prior relationships with some of the participants. Her ‘inside’ status aided access to participants, information and trust (Innes, 2009; Lui, 2006). However, being an insider also required

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Artform</th>
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<td>Jason Eades</td>
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<td>Lee Ann Buckskin</td>
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her to resist adopting a positive, non-critical stance during the interview and analyses phases of the research. Insider research requires a balance between humility and critical engagement, made more intensive in the Indigenous research context because of the overwhelming history of extractive research practised upon Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999). Indigenous protocols were also observed: the process, intent and destination of the research were discussed, including the archiving of interview transcripts and recordings as Indigenous Australian social history within a national collection after a period of 5 years, ensuring the research was accessible to, and had potential long-term benefit for, Indigenous communities (Archibald, 2008). Interviewees were free to withdraw material from the research and put conditions on how it was used.

Interviews and their associated analyses, even if conducted with all these principles in mind, have limitations as a means of exploring identity and leadership identity work. Longitudinal ethnographic studies of a few leading artists (see, for example, Duneier, 1999) or studies of leader–follower relationships over time and in particular contexts would give an externally verified, longitudinal sense of the impact of leader identity work. Also inevitably, participants were providing a self that responded to the interviewer and her leadership interests. Further, scholars have pointed out that ‘leadership’ is often a generic and unhelpful descriptor for a range of activities in which influential individuals engage (Sutherland and Gosling, 2010). It could be argued that these artists are doing art, not leadership, and that a sense of being a leader was an imposed, not collaboratively generated designation. While we acknowledge and were aware of these concerns as the research unfolded, our decision was that interviews provided the best, culturally acceptable vehicle to explore the demonstrably important cultural, economic and social role that Indigenous artists often play, not just an artistic contribution but also a leadership. Care was taken to listen to interviewees describe aspects of their practice and work that might be considered leadership according to common understandings, such as communicating hope and a future, advocacy, mobilising communities, enthusing and mentoring. We also sought to explicitly manage the ongoing tension for us as researchers about how to represent culturally rich, embodied narratives as knowledge in a way that contributes to the leadership field, but without assimilating those contextualised accounts within overly rigid pre-formed categories (Cunliffe, 2011).

The same principles and approach informed our analysis of the interview data. We conducted three, successive but iterative analyses of the interview transcripts and recordings (Boeije, 2010). Both authors read all interviews after the first author quality assured each transcript by reading the transcript whilst simultaneously listening to the recording, correcting misheard transcriptions of language, colloquialisms and names. Interview transcripts were shared with each of the participants at this point to confirm the transcribed record represented a true and accurate record of the interview. A few interviewees chose to amend the transcript by editing sections, expletives and other language such as excessive ‘ums’. However, we were very keen to keep the language – which was often powerful and emotional – intact.

All transcripts were initially read, re-read and coded by both authors looking for major and recurring themes that referenced leadership activities. A thematic analysis was conducted to surface what leadership means for Indigenous arts leaders, concentrating on two questions in the interview ‘Describe your best experience as a leader’ and ‘Tell me about leadership, what does it mean to you’. Second, a narrative analysis was employed to explore personally critical themes that linked childhood memories and the development of artistic practice to a broader cultural/identity narrative of Indigenous Australia. This layer of analysis focused on how participants described the development of their practice, setbacks
they have experienced and how they support themselves to do the work they do. The questions provided the opportunity for participants to tell stories of their life, including exploration of their own meaning making around their multiple identities (as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person; as an artist or arts manager and so on).

Finally, we followed the principles of discourse analysis to give emphasis to the way participants talked about their artistic life, culture, identity and leadership. As critical discourse analysis theorists point out, there is no one theory or methodology in discourse analysis (Wodak, 2004; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). What is generally common in discourse analyses is showing how the selection of discursive structures – or ways of talking – is both shaped by power and ideology, and also (re) constitute, in the telling, those power relations and regimes of meaning. We identified recurrent ways of speaking about topics such as artistic practice, Aboriginality, cultural identity, community and leadership. We determined these represented distinctive ways participants generate and construct their world (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). A substantial study within discourse analysis looks at identities and the variety of linguistic means used to construct the alien or different as ‘other’. Although we did not conduct detailed semiotic analyses of the transcripts as texts, we did pay attention to how Indigenous arts leaders actively constructed and shaped an understanding of their ‘work’ through their ‘talk’ (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Gronn, 1983). Importantly, many of the participants had very particular ‘turns of phrase’, including colloquialisms and words that were unencumbered by jargon and the usual, often corporatised and disembodied language of leadership (Sinclair, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2009). We wanted to pay attention to language conventions, such as indirectness when talking about some experiences, which is part of the cultural context and often a feature of Indigenous discourse. Sometimes, the speaking itself, in direct, personal terms, seemed potentially an act of leadership as well as the activity or practice that was being described (Kegan and Lahey, 2001). While there is often value in a fine-grained discursive analyses of interviews to construct categories of identity work (Kreiner et al., 2006), here we wanted to minimise the imposition of categories and preserve the diversity and richness in what we heard. This is why in the ‘Findings: Leadership identity practices’ and ‘Discussion’ sections that follows, we present three broad categories and select quotes to demonstrate an example of the practice of, say, containing trauma. While participants offered their own diverse representations of Aboriginality, characteristics of the discourse around Aboriginalities were repeated across the range of interviews, denoting a potential discourse community (Nystrand, 1982).

Findings: Leadership identity practices

Through the three levels of analysis of interview data, several ways emerged in which Indigenous arts leaders simultaneously responded to, resisted and subverted identity pressures toward narrow constructions of Aboriginality, while also providing leadership to Indigenous and White communities with their stands, their art, their organising and mentoring. We arranged these leadership identity practices into three categories: individuals contest (essentialisation), contain (trauma) and they create (belonging) in the public domain through their artistic practice, community-based and public activities. Identity work includes those social interactions that raise questions of personal and group/social identity (Alvesson et al., 2008). We suggest that when Indigenous arts leaders do identity work, it can be framed as a leadership contribution to their communities and the broader society.
Contesting: Resisting essentialised Aboriginalities and expressing diverse Aboriginalities

Images of Aboriginal culture and community, historically and in contemporary public life, continue to be stereotyped and ‘essentialised’: reduced to a single essence or image, such as ‘noble savage’, the native who has disappeared from modern society or the ‘fringe dweller’ (Langton, 2003). Leadership can then be seen when Indigenous leaders enact discursive and artistic resistance to essentialist images of Aboriginal realities (Deloria, 1998).

Participants describe many different encounters with processes of essentialising, often starting as young children as the example from artist r e a below shows:

I asked the teacher ‘who are these people’, the Indigenous people, all along the banks of the river? And she goes they were the Indigenous people that used to live here, once upon a time. And again – and this is my – I’m glad my mother clarified this. I said ‘who are these people?’ She goes ‘They’re our ancestors’.

r e a builds into her art this affirmation from childhood, not just that Aboriginality has not disappeared but that it continues to live on through Indigenous bodies, including her own. Indigenous artists such as r e a contest public discourses of Aboriginality offering direct and indirect resistance to essentialist images and recurring racial categorisation. When pushed beyond dualisms, participants find narratives that portray diverse Aboriginalities. For example, author Anita Heiss seeks to tell suburban Aboriginal stories:

We shop in supermarkets. Thirty-two per cent of us live in urban centres, 1/5 immigrate to Sydney. You know, where are those stories? You know, and, so I guess wanted to move into an area because I was tired of seeing miserable stories of miserable lives in the public domain all the time...

Indigenous arts leaders described instances of resistance in their personal narratives, which become a source for artistic work and a basis for dialogue. Lee-Ann Buckskin, a community cultural development worker based in South Australia articulates this idea of leadership:

Our responsibility doesn’t come from the artwork that’s hanging on the wall or the performance that ends up on stage. Our leadership comes from the way in which we’re able to negotiate, navigate, and bring communities and a dialogue between our culture and non-Indigenous people.

Lee-Ann curates and participates in local and national arts festivals. These two arts engagement spaces – community and national spaces – elicit tensions for the kind of identity work that can be generated and presented through artistic practice. For example, Lee-Ann critiques urban exhibitions portraying remote Aboriginal art as ‘curios’ or exemplars of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture, saying that such situations perpetuate unproblematised and romantic views of Aboriginality. When moving ‘place-based’ cultural expression from community spaces to festival spaces, there are risks about who frames the work, how it is interacted with and ‘seen’ and how it influences the rest of the festival program. She warns festivals often treat artists as curios or tokens, failing to invest in working with Aboriginal artists at a community level over the long term:

Festivals all over the world have got to stop extracting Aboriginal artists from their communities, plonking them on a stage and going ‘off you go again’. The work’s not being developed.
In Australia, it has been suggested that the Aboriginal world is structured, divided by the Rowley Line (Johnson et al., 2009) between urban and remote, traditional and contemporary. Indigenous art is inspired by both Indigenous culture (designated traditional), and influenced by the western art academy (designated contemporary). Yet, dualisms such as ‘urban/remote’ maintain colonial designations and persistent ideas of ‘authenticity’, and entrap Indigenous artists and arts managers’ presenting/representing the work in a hierarchical struggle of identity positioning (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Stephen Page, Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, responds by adopting a protectionist approach to cultural expression and fostering contemporary adaptation:

I was drawing an Aboriginal motif to something that was just about energy and modern and it was a bit popular, it was a bit commercial-like and so that freaked a lot of people out...it was the urban political activists that were frustrated in their own souls about who they were and what was right and what was wrong, what was sacred and what wasn’t. And it was then that because the traditional mob said ‘no you can do that, you can do that boy’...

Page acknowledges that he needs support from his elders to provide this leadership to navigate how aboriginality gets represented in the pressures between modern commercialism and sacred symbols.

When arts leaders perform or articulate non-stereotypic identities, such as suburban Aboriginalities, they not only resist dominant images of Indigenous artists such as the Western Desert painter. We suggest they create what Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) call ‘identity workspaces’, expanding the social space for other Aboriginal people to be able to live, act and work in less restrictive, stereotypical ways and contesting the ‘dangerous biopolitics of race’ so mobilised in contemporary Australian society (Roberts, 2011).

**Containing: Expressing emotion and containing trauma**

Indigenous Australians have suffered inter-generational, as well as, often, personal experiences of trauma. Among our leadership participants are those who were removed from families as babies and children; those with parents and grandparents who were removed and never re-united with families; those whose families were forcibly removed from land and communities disconnected from culture. Writes Aboriginal author Atkinson ‘...the milieu of destruction [has created] trauma trails running across country from the locations of pain and disorder they experienced’ (2002: 10). These losses continue to impact today, replicated through the socio-economic position and racial discrimination still faced by Indigenous Australians (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

Both leadership and psychological research highlights the importance of acknowledging emotion and trauma in order for affected groups to heal and move forward (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). In psychology and psychoanalysis, ‘containment’ is a term used to describe a ‘...process whereby projections or projective identifications emitted by one person are “held” by the other’ (Frosh, 2002: 105). According to leadership scholars, a key role for leaders is often to ‘respond compassionately to pain’ by acknowledging, feeling and containing it, as well as helping people find ways to live with it (Frost, 2003: 85). To be effective in this role, leaders themselves need an adequate sense of what they contain, to be not
excessively disturbed by it, and to hold the contents for as long as necessary before the contents can be taken back in some form.

Among research participants, many were expressly containing and working to support others in the face of historical violence and disempowerment. They were using their art to express trauma, to take it to a wider audience, or create a space where individuals don’t experience rejection or re-enactment of old traumas. The next excerpt is from an Indigenous arts manager describing his work with Indigenous prisoners. Despite pressures from various places questioning his own Aboriginal identity, he manages to make himself a container for something bigger:

... during a very difficult period where people were really questioning me about who are you... I just had to take it on board. It wasn’t so much about my identity. It was about what I believed in and the things that I was doing that I believed in. What I was doing was creating something for other people, which was much bigger than myself. It was a concept that I wasn’t really used to – being, especially being an independent person most of my life. Then working in the community where there’s lots of other people. There’s a lot of buy into what I do, well I made it so it had buy in.

Individuals deep work with their own or collective experiences of trauma, including enacting traumatic narratives to the public, aids individual and collective sense making about how to relate trauma to self and identity (Atkinson, 2002). Many participants referred to the challenges of expressing emotion in artistic form without being crushed by it, allowing the art to become a container in which others could explore experiences of trauma while also feeling supported and affirmed in the survival and flourishing of culture. Examples include opera singer, Deborah Cheetham’s determination to write and mount the first wholly Indigenous Australian opera, *Pecan Summer*, which documents the experiences of her original family being forced off their land and having their children taken away. Tammy Anderson, a performing artist, has toured Australia and overseas performing her life story *I don’t wanna play house*. Anderson tells her story of growing up in a domestically violent and tumultuous family, ultimately transforming her life story into a universal narrative:

I’ve got 25 sets of eyes looking at me and they’re all thinking, ‘she’s talking about me’. They were all saying that, you could hear their head, and holding breath, you know. And getting to that responsibility thing, I feel so responsible for opening up those wounds, but never once have I ever wanted to hurt anyone or – I just want them to think it’s okay, you’re not the only one. There’s so many people that hold on to this horrible stuff and um, it’s very cathartic to talk, write, sing it whatever, just talk.

Novelist Anita Heiss sees that a task for many artists is telling the stories that need to be told, or ‘writing the wrongs’, before they go on to experiment with the new:

Our books at the moment actually have to redress all the literature that’s misrepresented us or left us out. So we actually have to get that out of the way before we can move into a whole mass of let’s write some fun stories. Because at the moment we’ve got to actually deal with challenging the stories that are already there.

Social and community groups can also act as containers: ‘...safety is what is experienced in the culture of a community when it is well contained: it needs to tolerate severe disturbance so it can witness and then digest violent emotions, and still feel safe’ (Haigh, 1999: 249). Brown and Humphreys also suggest that individuals construct narratives that provide a
collective sense of socio-historic continuity, helping groups and communities resist hege-
monic power, defend against anxiety and offering ‘symbolic resources for coping’ (2002: 155). Ben Graetz, a director and choreographer, describes how he creates spaces where artists can experience freedom of expression:

I’m very sensitive about creating an environment or a space where people can freely express themselves, where there’s no judgement or there’s no taking the piss or, you know… Because it’s a very spiritual place and creating spiritual, you know, special work.

For many Indigenous arts leaders, there is substantial personal sacrifice in this process as they take on placing others, or community needs before their own personal and/or artistic concerns. Further, as arts funding becomes more instrumental in nature, there is pressure on Indigenous arts leaders to demonstrate their social and cultural impact as well through their own commitment to ‘giving back’ to community. Lee Ann Buckskin describes how these bigger pressures land on her and her team:

I’m not a social worker, I’m not a health worker, my team are not that. What we are, are arts professionals using the tools of the arts [as] a vehicle for our community for change.

Indigenous artists contribute to containing the violent history of the colonisation of Australian and Australia’s Indigenous people through their work of telling and re-telling powerful narratives through film, visual and performing arts, literature and music. Leadership activity can be evidenced in the artistic practice and works these artists create for the healing of themselves, their communities and broader audiences (Spiller et al., 2011b). Art works act as mnemonic devices, containing and expressing individual and collective stories and ideas about being Indigenous in Australia today. Indigenous arts leaders ‘…take this pain, work with it, transform it, so it becomes the source of [their] power’ (hooks and Cornel cited in Atkinson, 2002: 1989).

Creating: Spaces of belonging

In postcolonial Australia, where Indigenous people often have been disconnected from knowledge, culture and family, organisations can provide a framework for the operationa-
lisation of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As First Peoples exiled in their own country, much of the work of Indigenous artists and arts managers in the 21st century inevitably is about retrieving, repatriating, reimagining and recreating (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Individuals must work collectively to construct belonging, be that in organisations that are established and run by Indigenous people or in mainstream spaces that require deter-
mined collective effort to establish legitimacy.

Belonging is a sense of relational social value and support, promoting a belief that life is meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013). In Indigenous, as in many cultures, belonging is both an inclusive and exclusive phenomenon, operating simultaneously to embed and deny individual’s access to groups through a contest of power relations (Dalal, 2009). As visioned by Bennis (2007), leadership can be understood as a triangle created by the efforts of leaders and followers towards a mutual goal. Individuals who have a strong sense of belonging experience a relational sense of political and cultural bonds providing for a shared sense of purpose (Castles and Davidson, 2000; Lambert et al., 2013).

Participants in our research spoke of the impact of a sense of belonging like a ‘warm embrace’ on their own capacity to do difficult work. Terri Janke, a solicitor and author,
describes the significance of being accepted and supported as she has identified and then led the creation of legal guidelines for Indigenous intellectual and cultural property rights:

I remember going to events and there’d be this wider community that would just embrace you and wonder where you’re from, you know. ‘I know your mum’, or ‘I know your this’ or ‘I’m from that country’.

The power and experience of belonging works in multiple ways. It supports the individual Indigenous artist in their work and strengthens community cultural identity and solidarity. Filmmaker and producer John Harvey, described how the films he creates bridge past and present, benefitting those living now and future generations:

...the story part of that... I suppose for me these were big around the time [of] my mother passing away and she never got to see that film... but the story of that film is about remembering people who have come before us... So when I watched that and showed the rest of my family, who didn’t get to see it until after my mum passed, but to show them. It was kind of nice with the nephews and nieces and whole family to have that experience.

The creative contributions of Indigenous arts leaders were often seen as gifts of belonging to family and community, transcending the narrative or artform used to convey their individual voice. After being approached by elders, Leilani Bin-Juda describes how she set about working with the community to establish a cultural keeping place for the Torres Strait Islands:

It sort of spurred the idea to make sure that young people get involved in this industry and make sure that we have people who will look after our property and treat it the way that it should, with respect and willing to hear what the old people say.

Beyond the task of designing, constructing and implementing a community vision of a cultural centre, Leilani enacts leadership by involving the younger generation and reconnecting them to cultural practices within an organisational framework.

Indigenous arts leaders also described how they create a sense of belonging for others who are disconnected from family or community. New sites of belonging need to be constructed when physical or emotional communities have been destroyed (Jones, 2007). Indigenous creative organisations, like Boomali5 in Sydney, National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association6 (NAISDA) in Gosford and the Wilin Centre7 in Melbourne, are spaces where Indigenous artists and arts managers create professional, family and artistic identities. For urban-based Indigenous artists who find themselves disconnected from clan and land, spaces provide strength in unity. r e a talks about her feeling of belonging to Boomali:

I was really second-generation Boomali artists. Coming on board at that time was an amazing time. It felt like everything was just the right time for me. Art school, Boomali, international kind of practice. All of those things were nurtured through the contacts and the connections that they made on an international and national level.

As r e a describes, the Boomali collective set the pace for Australian arts in the 90s fostered a connectedness between Indigenous artists and, further, established an urban contemporary Indigenous artistic identity. Indigenous artists at Boomali instigated debates about what was important to Indigenous artists, including post modernism, postcolonial critique, identity politics and authenticity in Aboriginal art.
Even temporal spaces like exhibitions can solidify a collective of diverse voices of Aboriginality. Curator Brenda Croft describes, ‘With the Triennial, I set it up because I wanted people to have a chance like I did’. Establishing platforms for voice for Indigenous artists not only is an act of leadership but also launches new cultural infrastructure as a legacy for future generations of artists (DePree, 1987; Fraser, 2012; Fredericks, 2010).

Connecting biographical and early influences in artistic narratives is also often part of the leadership work of Indigenous artists and arts managers. Stephen Page describes how creating a sense of clan in his dance company is central to the work of the company:

...when kids have to be uprooted from certain areas and they're usually quite a low amount of numbers, so it's uprooting them really from that connected clan energy which is usually in big numbers. So for them to find themselves in that unity is the trigger, whereas in the college [NAISDA] there was an immediate instinct of people connecting even if they weren’t related.

Leadership actions like those described above enlarge the space for individual artistic work, which in turn has relational and cultural outcomes (Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Carroll et al., 2008). Creating a sense and space of belonging builds place for further leadership to emerge. These identity-mediated leadership practices include caring for others in embodied and compassionate ways as artists come together to build innovative and culturally rich work.

**Discussion**

In the leadership field, a substantial body of research argues that leaders can moderate and craft their own identities to match the identities of groups of followers, thereby eliciting higher levels of motivation (Hogg and Van Knippenberg, 2003; Shamir et al., 1993). This ‘turn to identity’ has prompted a shift of perspective in leadership scholarship (Alvesson et al., 2008). As Ford et al. summarise ‘where leadership used to be a series of tasks or characteristics, it is now an identity (authors emphasis)’ (2008: 28).

Yet, we have suggested much of the leadership scholarship on identity focuses at the level of the leader and their follower and neglects context and cultural dimensions of identity (exceptions include Bell and Nkomo, 2003; Liden and Antonakis, 2009; Ospina and Foldy, 2009). In addition to individuals shaping identities, societies with multiple cultural and racial stereotypes also regulate and constrain identities that may be taken up. Individual leaders conform to or struggle against societal and organisational discourses and images of who they should be as leaders. Increasing attention is being paid to mapping these processes of identity regulation, including interactions with other markers of identity such as gender and race; the impact of trends such as globalisation and the international mobility of markets and labour on identities; and of processes of resistance which Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) describe as a form of leadership (see also Prasad and Prasad, 2002).

In our research, we identified three categories of identity practices by which Indigenous artists provide leadership: they contest essentialist and demonstrate diverse cultural identities; they contain historic events and ongoing trauma; and they create, expand and inhabit embodied spaces for belonging in which individual leaders and artists can flourish. In the following discussion, we highlight the significance of these activities, showing why speaking, advocating and influencing, using the medium of art, in our view, constitute leadership.

Historically, Indigenous artists have come under pressure to only produce certain types of art. Yet, Indigenous arts leaders resist essentialism by inserting their personal experiences of being Aboriginal into the public domain, offering embodied, personal narratives and
provocations through their artistic work. They also use humour in their artistic practice to dissemble stereotypes and work around the demands to perform ‘Aboriginality’ (Holmes, 2007). In her research, academic Marcia Langton also points to the ways Indigenous people continue to find agency within public discourses of Aboriginality: ‘. . . it is not a fixed thing. It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white in dialogue’ (Langton, 1993: 31). Diverse forms of cultural identity are thus constantly being produced in dialogue within Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Many of the participants in this research contribute to this dialogue with their words, their art, bodies and performances.

In contesting and subverting public notions of Aboriginality, Indigenous leaders shape public imagination. What supports this work across complex bi-cultural boundaries is often a sense of belonging. Belonging is an experience mediated between the individual and their community, which is strengthened by acceptance and authorisation by group, elders or community. A related leadership practice occurs where Indigenous artists and arts managers present stories that act as a cohesive agent of belonging. Organisational and collective spaces like Boomali, NAISDA and Wilin provide platforms for the development of voice, collaborative advocacy and for nourishing connection, especially for those that are otherwise disconnected and disenfranchised.

While leadership sometimes involves creating a space for belonging, participants spoke of having to sometimes move away from the group in order to provide leadership. Such tensions in leadership work between performing to collective and individual identities are not limited to Indigenous leaders – indeed they are at the heart of what many leaders navigate – they are highlighted in Indigenous leaders’ experiences.

Participants assert their cultural identity as one of the most important understandings of who they are and this sits alongside identities as artist, manager or leader – sometimes in dynamic tension, other times with one foregrounded. For some, connection to family, community and culture provides participants with a rich reservoir for their artistic practice. Participants spoke about consistently accessing Indigenous perspectives in their art and their leadership work, seeking to go outside the limits of a socialised colonial mind and retrieving a decolonised consciousness (Smith, 1999).

But I said . . . we tell simple little stories and the reason we tell simple little stories is because you have got to solve it, make it a bit simple, as though you can – it helps you to solve it, because if it was too complicated you would have no hope. But even simple is difficult. (Uncle Lewis O’Brien, Karuna Elder and author)

From these Indigenous leaders, we can see the power in the identity work they do. While we have explored many examples in this article, a practice of particular significance is containing and expressing trauma so that others can process memories and family histories of genocide and dispossession. Not forgetting, but containing trauma is a leadership practice that enables others to acknowledge history, yet affirm new and old narratives of Indigenous accomplishment.

More broadly, we also suggest that these findings have relevance for non-Aboriginal leaders. Leaders, in general, operate increasingly in multicultural environments and are likely to be navigating multiple identities, including cultural identities each with conflicting social meanings, imperatives and public legitimacy. Approaches, such as those within the ‘managing diversity’ paradigm, are arguably an inadequate response to globally shifting power dynamics where ‘power is context and context is power’ (Ahonen et al., 2013).
In this article, drawing on theorisation of leadership and identities and the case of Indigenous artistic leaders, we have sought to show how identity work can mobilise particular forms of power. Contesting, containing and creating space for dynamic contemporary Indigenous identities to be enacted and expressed functions as leadership, because it inspires individuals towards self-expression and self-determination and expands the landscape and meanings of Aboriginality in the public imagination.

Conclusion

Although interactions between leadership and identity (of both leader and follower) have been extensively theorised, our view is that a rich source of understanding these phenomena has so far been neglected; that is, the experiences of Indigenous leaders. Often Indigenous people come to leadership with their cultural identities foregrounded. They are Aboriginal first and leaders second. In the past, cultural identities have often been fixed or essentialised in the public imagination. For Indigenous communities and leaders, they are dynamic, evolving and contested. For example, among the first dilemmas for most Australian Indigenous leaders is ‘for whom can I speak?’ and ‘whose interests do I represent?’

From this research, we show the extent of individual and collective leadership identity work among Indigenous artists and arts managers. These leaders are regularly involved in the practices profiled in this article: building belonging and containing continuing trauma for Indigenous communities, while also defying and subverting stereotypical Aboriginal identities, expanding possibilities and identifications for succeeding generations. The interview is not a place where researchers can necessarily capture ‘leadership’. It rather offered an opportunity to hear, and sometimes see, first-hand accounts of the events, incidents and daily artistic and influencing work volunteered by participants when asked about leadership.

By enacting identities that are different and resistant to those that have been historically constructed and designated to Indigenous Australians, we maintain Indigenous artists provide leadership through their artistic enactments and embodiments of Aboriginality. This is because artists are involved in the construction of cultural identity in reconciliatory and self-determining ways that transcend discriminatory and essentialist categorisations. Representing and performing socio-cultural identities is important despite, and because of, the post-colonial context and its continuing impact. The identity practices of Indigenous leaders reveal new practices in the contradiction and dynamism that is identity work. But they also suggest the potentially profound impacts of such identity work, well beyond the immediate leader and their followers, on the creativity, self-respect and flourishing of diverse, continuing Indigenous cultures and people.

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Notes

1. The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used interchangeably throughout this article; however, the two terms have different political and community meanings. ‘Indigenous’ is used internationally, for example, in United Nations rights discourses to describe the original inhabitants of particular places. However, in Australia and elsewhere, there is often a preference to be called Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or a tribal, nation or clan name, rather than general Indigenous designation.

2. The term ‘White’ is used here to make visible the powerful and hegemonic ‘epistemology of the West’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2003: 75); and second to highlight the way Indigenous leadership has been historically constructed as ‘other’.

3. The Stolen Generation is a term used to describe the generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families under government policy managed by the Aboriginal Protection Board between 1909 and 1969.

4. Johnson et al. (2009) employ C.D. Rowley’s (1986) description of his simplified division of Australia. The north/west of Australia is described as Aboriginal and the south/east as less authentically Indigenous Australian on the blood quantum scale.

5. Boomali, an inner Sydney Aboriginal art space, was established in 1987 to exhibit the work of artists being denied representation and space in the broader Australian art scene. Two of the founding members r e a and Dr Brenda Croft were interviewed for this study.

6. The National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) developed out of a 6-week dance workshop in 1972. Australia’s leading Indigenous dance training institute, NAISDA Dance College was the crucible for Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia’s major Indigenous performing arts company.

7. The Wilin Centre is an Indigenous arts space within the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) at the University of Melbourne that fosters innovation in the research, development, advocacy and presentation of contemporary Indigenous art. The former Head of the Wilin Centre Deborah Cheetham and many alumni of the VCA were interviewed for this study.

References


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