

Belonging and Identity: A Personal Experience of Colour-Based Assumptions in First Nations Spaces

I am writing to share a recent experience that reflects the ongoing ways racism and identity questioning can affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, even within spaces intended to support First Nations voices.

This experience occurred during a monthly meeting of First Nations people working across the field of education. The meeting brings together First Nations professionals who hold leadership roles supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their communities. These are people who work directly with young people and who play an important role in supporting and shaping the next generation of First Nations leaders. The meeting is intended to be a space for collaboration, cultural understanding, and strengthening the support provided to students and families.

During the meeting, a presentation was delivered about research involving interviews with Aboriginal students. During the discussion that followed, a comment was made suggesting that the findings from the students interviewed may not be as accurate or reflective of Indigenous voices because two of the students were fair-skinned and therefore “not as connected” to culture or Country.

As a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, this comment affected me deeply.

The presenter responded respectfully and clearly in the moment, explaining that this assumption was not correct and affirming that the students’ voices and perspectives were culturally valid and important. Her response was thoughtful and grounding. However, the original comment remained with me long after the meeting had finished.

It touched on something that many fair-skinned Aboriginal people quietly carry. Hearing it made me feel as though my identity, belonging, and connection were being questioned in the room. It created a feeling that the colour of my skin could determine whether my voice, my experience, or my perspective would be considered legitimate.

In that moment I felt myself withdraw. Instead of feeling part of a collective space built on shared understanding and cultural respect, I became hesitant to contribute to the conversation. I worried that my perspective might be dismissed before I had even spoken. Experiencing that feeling in a space intended to support First Nations voices was particularly difficult.

These feelings are deeply connected to my family history.

My mother’s family are Stolen Generations survivors. Their names, language, and cultural practices were taken from them through forced assimilation policies. My grandfather was required to apply for what was commonly referred to as a “dog licence” under protection legislation in order to move freely and access basic rights that other Australians were granted automatically. In doing so, he paid a heavy price. Culture, language, and identity were suppressed so that his children and grandchildren could access opportunities such as education.

Because of these policies, I did not grow up on my traditional Country. That connection was disrupted through systems that intentionally separated Aboriginal people from land, family, and culture. However, losing physical access to Country has never meant that Country is not held deeply within our families. Connection continues through our values, our relationships, our stories, and the responsibilities we carry for our families and communities.

Our connection survived despite the systems designed to remove it.

When comments suggest that fair-skinned Aboriginal people are less connected or less authentically Indigenous, it can reopen those historical wounds. It echoes generations of forced disconnection and reinforces the idea that identity can be measured by appearance.

Following the meeting, I raised my concerns with a regional leader within this space. I was told that the comment was likely said “in passing” and that the person who made the comment probably did not mean it in a racist way. While I understand that the comment may not have been intended to cause harm, this response also concerned me.

The idea that a statement like this could be said without thought, and then dismissed as unintentional, highlights how normalised these assumptions can still be. When comments that question identity are minimised or explained away rather than acknowledged and addressed, it can leave those affected feeling that their experience is not fully recognised.

Experiences like this are not isolated. Many fair-skinned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience their identity being questioned both within and outside Indigenous spaces. For some people this creates an ongoing pressure to prove that they are “Aboriginal enough”.

These experiences can bring forward feelings such as the fear of not being considered enough, the sadness of cultural disconnection that was forced upon previous generations, and the instinct to withdraw from spaces where identity may be questioned.

As a mother raising fair-skinned Aboriginal children, these conversations are deeply important to me. I want my children to grow up knowing that their identity is not defined by the shade of their skin.

Aboriginal identity has never been based on appearance. It is grounded in bloodline, community recognition, kinship, lived experience, and the responsibilities people carry to their families, communities, and Country.

Every Aboriginal person should be able to walk in their identity without feeling that they must justify their connection based on how they look.

I share this experience respectfully because addressing racism directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must also include recognising these more subtle forms of harm. Identity questioning and colour-based assumptions can have a real emotional impact and can discourage people from speaking, participating, or feeling culturally safe in spaces that are meant to support Indigenous voices.

Recognising and challenging these assumptions is an important part of ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel respected, valued, and culturally safe.

