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GARY LEE

Selected texts  
art & anthropology



Heat  
Gary Lee: selected texts, art & anthropology



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**cover image:** Gary Lee, *Self-portrait with Manish*  
(detail), 2003, from *Skin* series, type C print  
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Dedicated to my Dad, Herbert Francis Lee  
and to my Mum, Mary Agripina Lee (née Cubillo)

# Contents

**Introduction** /8

**Lying about the landscape** /16

**initiate** /30

The Aboriginal Memorial /32

Aboriginal Art: The continuing tradition /36

Aboriginal art ripoff /40

Artefact into Art /42

Turning the Tide /58

Fifth Festival of Pacific Arts - Townsville /60

Kimberley /64

**big eye for Larrakia** /76

Big eye for Larrakia /78

Keep Him My Heart /88

Hiding the evidence /100

Larrakia history snapshots /104

Down memory lane to vimy lane /116

Selling Yarns /124

Nokturne /126

On reflection /128

Kerry & Co. @ MONA /138

**malaga to malaga** /142

Malaga to Malaga: Man to Man /144

So in that sense, Aboriginal gay /160

Us Mob /182

Boys to men /192

Dealing with HIV among Indigenous peoples in northern Australia /196

Love doesn't have a colour /200

Shell collecting /204

Éla /207

Alternative sexualities /208

**picture picture** /214

Gary Lee - Nice Coloured Boys /216

Oh, boy! The portraits of Gary Lee /230

Making Aboriginal Art Work /236

More than my skin /244

adonis pacifica /252

Picturing: Aboriginal social and political photography /256

**curating black** /268

Curating Black /270

Black Glory: Aboriginal erotica /278

Dirula: Contemporary Larrakia art /286

Billiamook: a Larrakia Legend /300

Nice Coloured Dolls /308

**culture warrior** /316

Owen Yalandja /318

Clinton Nain /320

Not terms of endearment /322

Letter to Gordon Bennett /326

Going for (the red, black and) gold /328

The Rainbow Spirit in Aboriginal Australia /334

Breath of the Serpent /350

Sexual Blackmale /356

The Mimi Arts and Crafts Story /364

**Larrakia & Darwin Aboriginal glossary** /372

**curriculum vitae** /374

**bibliography** /388



## Introduction



Gary Lee, *Mayam, Dhaka*, 1994, type C print  
from *Nice Coloured Boys* series

*For in and out, above, about, below  
'Tis nothing but a magic shadow-show  
Play'd in a box whose candle is the sun,  
round which we phantom figures come and go*  
(Hakim Omar Khayyam<sup>1</sup>)

Looking at this photo by Gary Lee of a young Bangladeshi policeman, I am struck by two things. The first is the artist's willingness to confront authority. In this photo the authority figure doesn't appear so intimidating and seems only too happy to pose in his uniform for Gary, the *pariyatak* (tourist) photographer who could pass as his uncle. However the bigger authority or paradigm that Gary challenges with this portrait and with *Nice Coloured Boys* (1994 - ), the expansive series to which it belongs, is that which governs dictums of beauty and related notions of masculinity and ethnicity.

In Gary's case, an Aboriginal artist of mixed heritage born and raised in Darwin, such an authority might be labelled 'whiteness', Western or Eurocentric; part of the legacy of colonisation. This would seem a given although there are no doubt other factors at play.<sup>2</sup> While "colonisation has always been about recreating the colonised in the image of the coloniser"<sup>3</sup> – hence the need for Gary's photographic intervention – there is also the matter of cultural intersubjectivity, the perceptual overlap between cultural divides. Writing in 1989 on the films *Nice Coloured Girls* (1985) and *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy* (1989) by Tracey Moffat, E. Ann Kaplan states: "Just as locating and celebrating Aboriginal racial specificity is one important current intervention, so also is starting the task of seeing cultural inter-relatedness."<sup>4</sup>

The other thing of note about this image is the shadow in the bottom right-hand corner. It's the shadow of Gary, the photographer. We can sort of make out the shape of his head and arch of his arm holding the camera. Normally with a photographic portrait the shadow of the photographer is something to avoid – too subjective and distracting – and it rarely appears in his portraits. The shadow's existence speaks in a sense to Gary's largely street photography methodology: the quick and casual exchange often captured in a single shot. This photograph comes from a less digital age with the film developed post-shoot and the resulting image seen at a later stage.

I am drawn to this shadow because it suggests Gary's presence in an explicit albeit abstracted

way. It blurs any objective 'truth' about the image while making plain Gary's subjectivity which is really what this anthology attempts to do, to give form to the shadow of the artist through those texts over a number of decades which help us understand the motivations and worldview underpinning Gary's practice/s. Gary has often referred to his photography as a kind of visual anthropology. Even though his art practice (in fashion design/at art school) predates his training as an anthropologist, his photography came later. And yet little attention has been paid to the confluence of his anthropology and photography practice, particularly his work in the Indigenous queer sexual health sector. More apparent has been the influence of Larrakia ethnographica in his work through his reappropriation of the photographs of colonial photographer Paul Foelsche (1831-1914), for example, which were also key source material for his PhD. Gary's Larrakianess is intrinsic to his sense of self and self-expression and is reflected throughout this anthology in his writings as an artist, curator, anthropologist and playwright.



Gary Lee, *Self-portrait as Paul Foelsche*, 2023, type C print

The shadow in this photograph also suggests light and 'heat' – the title-word for this publication. Heat conjures several things about the work of Gary Lee. It is the hot and humid climate of Darwin in Larrakia country where Gary has spent most of his life. It is also the air of controversy and tension which has sometimes followed his work including the book's cover image, *Self portrait with Manish* (2003), which the artist coins his 'NATSIAA reject' work. Ostensibly this photograph, with its Indian subject and setting, was rejected from this national award exhibition on the grounds of its questionable 'Aboriginality' and (ironically) because the artist is in the photo and didn't physically take the shot. As Gary suggests in a talk at The Dreaming Festival a few years later, this kind of reception says more about misconceptions about the nature of Aboriginal art and authorship. Nowadays the NATSIAAs accommodates collaborative works by individual entrants as long as they are largely responsible for the work's concept. Notably, Gary's talk at this Dreaming Festival came in the wake of having an exhibition of his male portraits taken down at the Festival because of issues relating to explicit nudity in some of the photos.

Heat also relates to Gary's research and writing in the field of Indigenous HIV/AIDS and gay/transgender sexual health issues, particularly in the '90s when such issues were just beginning to find a voice within the Australian HIV/AIDS sector, and particularly in his highlighting of sexual abuse, and child sexual abuse, with such conviction and evidence-based clarity that the subject could no longer be ignored. I don't think Gary would suggest he ever intended to generate





Gary Lee, *Corroboree*, 1997,  
type C print



Sydney WorldPride 2023 branding by Jessica Johnson including her stylised Aboriginal flag-in-heart motif. The artist has produced several other versions of this motif with the Aboriginal flag in 'the colours': red, black and yellow; see p. 188 for Gary's earlier take on an Aboriginal gay flag motif photo: Maurice O'Riordan

WorldPride 2023 by Aboriginal artist Jessica Johnson was a heart-shaped Aboriginal flag, which seemed not to ruffle any feathers.

In the main, Gary's male photographic portraits make no claims about the sexuality of the sitter even though some commentators have read them in terms of Gary's gayness or as evidence of gay desire.<sup>5</sup> As images of sexual health I would contend that his portraits generally suggest a fluid or incidental sexuality whereby individuality and self-expression ultimately hold more sway.

The book's initial assignation of heat as a title recalls the words of art critic John McDonald

'heat' with this research. It was intrinsically part of its groundbreaking imperative.

In this light we might see Gary's portrait photography through the lens of sexual health, as images which affirm masculinity and ethnicity as open and self-determining entities; as images exuding positivity and celebration in spite of their implicit politics and without the need for labels of sexuality. Of course Gary has made no secret about his own identity as an Aboriginal gay man. Gayness or queerness has been a conscious if not occasional subject of his work such as his documentation of Sydney's '90s Corroboree nights or his photography commissions for the Sydney Anti-Violence Committee/Eora Aboriginal TAFE College, or for the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisation's inaugural national Indigenous gay and sistagirl calendar. Controversy followed Gary with the latter owing to the calendar's reproduction of his Aboriginal gay flag design which replaced the flag's sun with a yellow heart which was seen by some as akin to burning the flag. It's ironic that almost 25 years later, one of the key motifs in the branding for Sydney



Daniel Browning opens Gary's debut solo exhibition, *Maast Maast*, 24HR Art, Darwin, August 2008  
photo: Nici Cumpston

reviewing the book *Lying about the landscape* (1997) which takes its name after Gary's contributing essay. "The book's most striking contribution", writes McDonald, "comes from Gary Lee, who launches his argument like a heat-seeking missile: 'It is blindingly obvious what the function of the landscape tradition is: it is about the theft of Indigenous land.'"<sup>6</sup>

It's fair to say that Gary has been pretty direct in taking aim at certain targets perhaps even more deftly, necessarily, than the ways in which he has been made a target – as a black, gay man, as a Larrakia voice, and with his work contentious even for other black, gay or Larrakia voices. It's also fair to say that such heat is part of the friction, of rubbing up against the status quo or plain ignorance by simply spelling out his perspective. This heat comes with the terrain, is part of the act of seeking to claim or reclaim the terrain.

Gary's *Lying About the Landscape* essay thus opens this anthology, followed by chapter groupings which reflect key periods or themes: initiate, big eye for Larrakia, malaga to malaga, picture picture, curating black, and culture warrior. Some overlap between these chapters is hard to avoid particularly with Gary's Larrakia-related texts which, as suggested above, variously inform his work as curator, artist and anthropologist/historian. In this regard the anthology offers a relative wealth of Larrakia-related material and perspectives brought together for the first time.

The culture warrior chapter brings together Gary's texts about other artists and about broader issues and insights relating to Aboriginal cultures and their representation. The chapter is so-called because it was on the opening night of the National Gallery of Australia's inaugural *Culture Warriors* triennial exhibition in October 2007 that Gary suffered a major stroke which led to months of hospitalisation and rehabilitation and to him being practically wheelchair bound with a right-side hemiparalysis. While post-stroke life has meant a lot less writing and public





top: Gary at a Sydney restaurant with friends and colleagues, 1991 (l - r): Leslie Fogarty + friend, Sandra Phillips, Helena Gulash, Jeffrey Samuels, Fiona Foley, Dean Nieschne



centre: Gary takes Governor of Bihar Mr A. R. Kidwai through the exhibitions *The Image Black* (curated by Tracey Moffatt) and *Australian Aboriginal Art from the Desert* (curated by Anthony Bourke), Patna Museum, Bihar, India, December 1994



bottom: Gary with Marcia Langton and Nugget Coombs, c. 1993, Museum and Art Gallery NT, Darwin photo: Maurice O'Riordan

presentations (all the texts in this chapter predate the stroke), it also freed him up to focus more on his own art practice. His first solo exhibition was held in 2008, a little less than a year after his stroke, and was followed by many other solo and group exhibitions, collaborations and related projects throughout Australia and overseas.<sup>7</sup>

The anthology draws on published articles along with a good deal of newly published texts previously written and/or presented as papers, speeches, a letter, thesis or as catalogue essays, interviews and commissioned articles otherwise lost to obscure archives or projects that never came to light. Here I am grateful that Gary routinely wrote down his oral presentations and kept printouts, along with hardcopies of other unpublished texts which otherwise may not have survived changes in software and digital storage over the decades.

My hand as editor has been fairly light, excerpting or editing for reasons of space or duplication, or contextualising and updating content via additional footnotes, images and captions. Gary has also played an active editorial role here, advising on images and overall context. In some cases, as with *Nice Coloured Dolls*, the anthology presents an opportunity to put the exhibition/text more fully on the record. As the texts span five decades, the anthology is also partly biographical as indeed particular texts are more directly so. The book's images also serve this biographical dimension including an attempt to show the range of Gary's visual arts practice as photographer, illustrator/designer and fashion designer.

As Gary's life partner since 1991, you might say that I am a little close to the 'subject'. I have been in or near the vicinity of production for most of these texts except for those from his university days. We were however both studying at the Australian National University at the same time, me in art history (A.D. Hope Building, upstairs) and Gary in anthropology (downstairs). We share a vague memory of crossing paths in the stairwell, with a sense that somehow I was in his way. When we met in Darwin a few years later he was busy completing the script for his play, *Keep Him My Heart*, finalising texts for the *Aratjara* catalogue and making moves to undertake a PhD under Fred Myers at New York University. He says that I got in the way of his New York plans but I don't think he's ever really been the academic at heart. He's always been more of an independent than institutional agent. That's not to say that he shirks scholarship and I hope this is conveyed by the following texts along with a sense of his development as a writer and the emergence and distillation of his voice.

So while I am a less than dispassionate editor, I believe in the value of Gary's work across various disciplines and mediums which is particularly unique for this diversity. I think his talent is undeniable and to some extent visionary which is more a reflection of his convictions rather than being overly ambitious. I know I'm not alone in these beliefs but I also sense that he has yet to be paid his dues, perhaps again a result of not being overly ambitious. There is always the risk of being written out of history as might be argued, for example, with Gary's role as a curatorial intern at the then Australian National Gallery (ANG) working with ANG curator Wally Caruana on the gallery's *Aboriginal Memorial* commission, or as Sydney College of Art's first Aboriginal student in visual arts. To those who share this belief in the value of Gary's multifaceted body of work I hope this anthology still offers scope for surprise and re-assessment





Gary amidst Paul Yore's *WORD MADE FLESH* installation, 2023, Carriageworks, Sydney; presented by Carriageworks as part of Sydney Festival, Sydney WorldPride and in partnership with the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

photo: Maurice O'Riordan

just as I hope more broadly that it serves to shine a light on a legacy of texts – written and visual – to stand the test of time.

Maurice O'Riordan, 2023



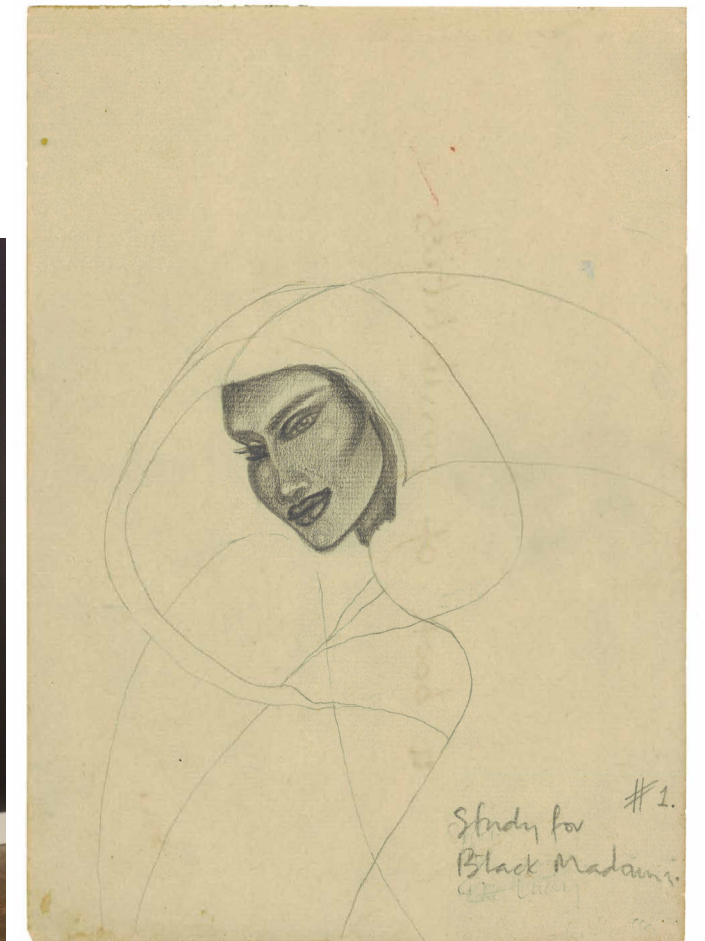
1. From a text in Persian (Farsi) by Hakim Omar Khayyam (c. 1048 – c. 1122); translated by Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, First Edition, no. 46 (no title), first published 1859.
2. India too shares in this (British) colonial legacy which may explain a preference there for 'wheatish' complexion although this may in fact stem from Indo-Aryan occupation in India (from 2000 BCE) rather than the onset of the Raj.
3. Mikaere, A. (2005). *Cultural invasion continued: the ongoing colonisation of Tikanga Maori*. <https://www.austlii.edu.au/nz/journals/NZYbkNZJur/2005/18.html>
4. Kaplan, E. A. (1989). Aborigines, film and Moffatt's *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy: An outsider's perspectives*. In *Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, 1989, 2(1), pp. 13-17.
5. See, for example, Stephen Zagala's catalogue essay *Photographing the Pacific in Cush*, J. (Ed.), *Postcards from the Rim* (pp. 22-25), Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, 2012. In writing about Gary's *adonis pacifica* series of portraits in this exhibition Zagala locates the work within Gary's "libidinal interest in other men" and his "economy of desire".
6. McDonald, J. (1998). Lie of the Land. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 16 May, 1998.
7. Gary's first solo exhibition would have been *Nice Coloured Boys* at the 2006 Dreaming Festival although he took the exhibition down over censorship issues; see related artists' talk page p. 216.

right: Gary Lee, Djotarra / Ms G. Yunupingu, 2004, type C print

Gary's portrait of the late Ms Yunupingu shows her with her 2004 Telstra NATSIAAs award-winning work *Garak, the Universe*. The artist acknowledged to Gary at the time that the white ochre for this work came from Larrakia coastal country, well known for its deposits of 'number one' white ochre.

below right: Gary Lee, *Study for Black Madonna # 1*, c. 1980, pencil on Fabriano 90gsm paper, 24.2 x 17cm

below: Gary's *Moon* haiku was inspiration for Peta-Joy Williams in Boomali Aboriginal Artists Co-operative's 2023 Mardi Gras exhibition *Baya - Ngara - Banga (Speak - Listen - Make)*, 17 February - 25 March 2023; curated by Steven Ross. Artists in the show responded to poems in: Ross, S., & Whittaker, A. (Eds) (2023). *Nangamy - Mana - Djurali (Dream - Gather - Grow)*, *First Nations Australia LGBTQIA+ Poetry*. Sydney: BLACKBOOKS®, a division of Tranby Aboriginal Cooperative Limited. photo: Maurice O'Riordan





*Where is the respect and recognition for Larrakia people? What of the valuable contribution and involvement given by the Larrakia towards the development of Darwin? How were the Larrakia inflicted with enforced incarceration and dispersal on their own lands in the rush to establish Darwin?*

*Even though we have some Asian heritage, we're still very proud of that, but I don't think there's anything wrong with having an identity while also acknowledging your other background.*

*I also became politically active in '82 in Sydney. I was knocking around with a lot of Aboriginal people from Redfern and the art that I was doing on the side at the markets had bloomed into designing clothes, which I found quite lucrative.*

*The implication from this eight-year-old was that his recently deceased friend had committed suicide and that it wasn't really that unusual to be even talking about it.*

*I welcome the idea that my work may be problematic in this regard, that it does consciously set about to test the limits of a particular cultural gaze, but not problematic in terms of my own artistic process and vision, nor in the idea that any art dealing with youth and sexuality should by its very nature be seen as a 'problem'.*

*Oh, we have words, Aboriginal words, from various sources, which we have incorporated into a black gay language which we use.*

*For all the praise and critical attention that has been directed at my work, it's interesting that of all the photographs I have taken and exhibited, it's only those which portray Aboriginal subjects that have been bought by public institutions.*

*Intimacy, like kindness, can easily exist between strangers.*

Gary Lee, selected quotes

