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**Australian Indigenous
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Activists in 1970**

by:

MARVIN MARTIN

ABSTRACT

Historians have conventionally stressed the uniqueness and domestic context of the Australian Black Power movement by situating this movement within the longer history of Aboriginal resistance and have only recently investigated its global dimensions. Although these domestic aspects are of great significance, the aim of this article is to focus on an important, understudied global aspect by examining the transnational encounter of five Aboriginal activists with the US Black Power movement in the international Black Power conference, “Congress of African People”, in Atlanta in 1970. Investigating the role that this US trip played for the five activists, this article argues that despite their often-negative conclusions about the usefulness of this trip, their encounter with the US Black Power movement helped them find new answers to the long-term Aboriginal rights struggle. After the US trip, some of the Aboriginal activists implemented and adapted tactics and philosophies of the US Black Power movement for their struggle, the most important being new perspectives on black pride and self-determination. This article therefore argues that the national explanation of the Australian Black Power movement must be complemented by its transnational dimension. The second aim of this article is to address the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples within the field of Global History. Global History has favoured the study of mobile and transnational European elites over Indigenous peoples who have typically been assumed as local and static. This case study of the transnational encounters of five Aboriginal activists however challenges this notion and demonstrates that Global History approaches can also be used to give voice to Indigenous peoples.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a shift occurred within the Australian Indigenous activist movement.¹ From the 1950s until the mid-1960s, Aboriginal activists together with white supporters campaigned for equal citizenship rights in an attempt to integrate Aboriginal people into the Australian nation. This campaign was led by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and culminated in an overwhelming “yes” to the 1967 referendum that amended the Australian constitution. The amendments were mostly symbolic. Aboriginal people were for the first time counted in the official census and the federal Commonwealth government – as opposed to the states and territories only – was granted the right to pass legislation on Aboriginal issues. Many Aboriginal activists nonetheless hoped that the successful referendum would be accompanied by reforms that would improve the lives of Indigenous people. Similar to the situation in the USA after the passing of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, this optimism was followed by frustration about the lack of concrete changes.² By the late 1960s, a younger and more radical generation of Indigenous activists grew impatient with the relatively moderate approach of the FCAATSI. Instead of framing their campaign in terms of equal citizenship rights, the new generation of Indigenous activists emphasised Aboriginal identity and self-determination.³ This new emphasis was highly influenced by the US Black Power movement, which emerged at this time.⁴ Aboriginal activists were acquainted with the ideas and actions of the US Black Power movement through newspapers and the television and they read the texts of Black Power representatives such as Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, or Malcom X.⁵ The visit of the Caribbean Black Power activist Roosevelt Brown in August 1970 is often seen as the moment when Black Power (both symbolically and literally) arrived in Australia.⁶ Brown’s visit to Australia lasted only three days, but it left a lasting impression on the radical and young activists.⁷ More concretely, this visit prompted Brown to invite five Aboriginal activists to the international Black Power conference, “Congress of African People”, in Atlanta, USA, in September 1970. An Aboriginal participant of this conference, Bruce

1 Russell McGregor, “Another Nation: Aboriginal Activism in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s,” *Australian Historical Studies* 40, no. 3 (2009): 343.

2 Kathy Lothian, “Seizing the Time: Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969-1972,” *Journal of Black Studies*, no. 4 (2005), 182; Angeliq Stastny and Raymond Orr, “The influence of the US Black Panthers on indigenous activism in Australia and New Zealand from 1969 onwards,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (2014), 64.

3 McGregor, “Another Nation,” 343-46.

4 Lothian, “Seizing the Time,” 181-85.

5 Lothian, 183-184.

6 Lothian, 185; Alyssa L. Trometter, *The Fire in the Belly: Aboriginal Black Power and the Rise of the Australian Black Panther Party, 1967-1972* (PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2013), 132.

7 Jennifer Clark, *Aborigines & Activism: Race, Aborigines & the Coming of the Sixties to Australia* (Crawley, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 2008), 210-11.

McGuinness, highlighted the usefulness of his trip:

The mere fact that myself and other Aborigines were able to study firsthand the Black American situation on THE BLACK AMERICAN battleground so to speak was in itself an experience, so beneficial that words cannot describe it.⁸

This article will analyse this trip of five Australian Indigenous activists to the USA in 1970, but first it is important to outline the broader historiography of Australian Indigenous activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Despite the significance that McGuinness ascribed to his encounter with the US Black Power movement, the importance of this movement for Australian Indigenous activists does not feature very largely within the Australian historiography of “the long 1960s”.⁹ Most historians have conventionally analysed the Australian Black Power movement within a national framework and have therefore neglected the broader transnational connections that Australian Indigenous activists sought with other movements. The historian Alyssa L. Trometter concludes in her analysis of the scholarship on the Australian Black Power movement that “[s]cholars have typically stressed the uniqueness of Aboriginal Black Power but have failed to address the often surprising relationships that were forged beyond Australia’s borders.”¹⁰ Historians who have looked at the various Australian activists movements of the 1960s more broadly also similarly believe that scholars have not sufficiently addressed the global engagements of local activists.¹¹

Australia has furthermore generally been neglected within the wider “global 1960s” historiography that investigates transnational connections between social movements of the 1960s throughout the world. Today there are many studies of the radical 1960s that examine connections between the USA and West European countries, the “West” and the “East”, or, more occasionally, the “First World” and the “Third World”. Australia is however almost always omitted.¹² On top of the neglect of the transnational dimension, the Australian Black Power movement is generally understudied within the Australian historiography. In

8 Bruce McGuinness, “Report by Bruce B. McGuinness Director Administrative Officer A.A.L.,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.: Report on trip by Five Aborigines to Congress of African People and United Nations*, (Melbourne: ABSCHOL, 1971), 26.

9 For the concept of “the long 1960s” see Simon Hall, “Framing the American 1960s: A historiographical review,” *European Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 1 (2012): 14-17. Henceforth, I will abbreviate “the long 1960s” to “the 1960s”.

10 Trometter, *The Fire in the Belly*, 2.

11 Jon Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s: Global radicals* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13; Clark, *Aborigines & Activism*, 5.

12 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 12.

2001, the 1960s Australian Indigenous activist and historian Gary Foley criticised that “historians have trivialized, marginalized and dismissed the achievements and historical influence of the so-called Australian Black Power Movement.”¹³ Australian historians have indeed often downplayed the significance of the Australian Black Power movement, by viewing this activism as a continuation of previous forms of resistance. Heather Goodall for example stresses that the radical Indigenous activism of the 1960s should be seen within the longer history of the Aboriginal struggle for land rights.¹⁴ Historian Richard Broome in turn thinks that, “for a handful of Aboriginal activists,” Black Power provided “a new way of thinking about the world [...] However, to understand the dominant forces that influenced most Aboriginal people to seek change, we must look to Indigenous aspirations [...]” Black Power was according to him rather a “catalyst for change” or “a spark to ignite” pre-existing long-term Indigenous aspirations for autonomy.¹⁵

Some historians have however recently challenged this marginalisation of the Australian Black Power movement and the conventional national history writing which neglects the transnational context underpinning this movement, arguing that Aboriginal activists turned to Black Power after they had been disappointed with the reformist approach of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ The historians Jon Piccini and Tracey Banivanua Mar have in particular counteracted the previous scholarship by stressing that travelling and the mobility of Australian Indigenous activists played an important role in changing Australian Indigenous activism.¹⁷ Both historians can be ascribed to the emerging studies of Indigenous transnational mobility which highlight the mobility of Indigenous people and thereby challenge the stereotypical notion that Europeans were global and mobile, whereas Indigenous people were local and static.¹⁸

This article contributes to both, this emerging Indigenous mobility studies and recent transnational studies of the Australian Black Power movement, by focusing on the specific case of the US trip by the five Aboriginal activists mentioned above. The aim of this article is not to refute the significance of the domestic aspects of the Australian Black Power movement, but to complement and complicate the national history writing by focusing on this important,

13 Gary Foley, *Black Power in Redfern 1968-1972* (BA Honours Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2001), http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html [last access November 26, 2018].

14 Heather Goodall, *Invasion to embassy: Land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin in association with Black Books, 1996), 335-36.

15 Richard Broome, “The 1969 Aboriginal Takeover of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League - Indigenous and Black Power Inspirations,” *Agora* 51, no. 3 (2016): 22.

16 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 152-54.

17 Piccini, 4; Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 185.

18 Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester, *Indigenous communities and settler colonialism: Land holding, loss and survival in an interconnected world* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7, 9; Jane Carey and Jane Lydon, “Indigenous Networks: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Connections,” in *Indigenous networks: Mobility, connections and exchange*, ed. Jane Carey and Jane Lydon (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1; on Indigenous mobilities studies see also Rachel Standfield, ed., *Indigenous Mobilities: Across and Beyond the Antipodes* (Acton, ACT: ANU Press, 2018)

neglected global aspect of this movement. As historians have conventionally overlooked transnational aspects of this movement, this article will ask the questions: what role did the US Black Power movement play for the five Aboriginal activists of the US trip? Was the US Black Power movement merely a “catalyst for change” or was Black Power central for them?

The US trip is generally understudied and mostly merely mentioned in passing as part of Aboriginal activists’ growing interest in the US Black Power movement,¹⁹ but Piccini is one of the few scholars who has analysed this trip in detail.²⁰ In his analysis, however he rather underappreciates the significance of the US Black Power movement for the five Aboriginal activists, as he stresses how difficult it was for them to implement US Black Power ideas and tactics in Australia. Using mainly a report written by the Indigenous participants of the US trip, but also newspaper articles, oral history interviews and biographies, I will argue in contrast to Piccini that the role which the US Black Power movement played for these activists should not be underestimated. The analysis of the US trip reveals that the movement was an important aspect for the five Aboriginal activists, not because all of them wholeheartedly embraced Black Power, but because the direct encounter with the US Black Power movement sharpened their positions concerning the Aboriginal rights struggle, as they were forced to either endorse or to oppose the methods used by the US Black Power movement. Despite their often-negative conclusions about the usefulness of this trip, I argue that their encounter with the US Black Power movement helped them to find new answers to the long-term Aboriginal rights struggle and the Australian issues of dispossession and colonisation. This case study therefore indicates that the transnational aspect of the US Black Power movement played an important role for at least some of the 1960s Australian Indigenous activists.

The second and more general aim of this article is to address the neglect of Indigenous peoples within the field of Global History. Despite its aspiration to include non-European perspectives, Global History studies have mostly overlooked Indigenous people.²¹ Studies of transnational networks have in particular privileged the study of mobile metropolitan and colonial European elites and have thus given little attention to Indigenous peoples who are typically considered to be less connected.²² The scholar Karen Fox moreover observes that Global History has the potential to “perpetuate the marginalisation of Indigenous voices and stories that took place for so long”, as Indigenous histories tend to focus on the local, whereas transnational histories seek to go beyond the analytical framework of the nation-state.²³ Global History’s common focus on

19 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 160.

20 Piccini, 159-168; another detailed analysis is provided in Trometter, *The Fire in the Belly*, 138-147.

21 Carey and Lydon, “Indigenous Networks,” 7.

22 Carey and Lydon, 6-7.

23 Karen Fox, “Globalising Indigeneity? Writing Indigenous Histories in a Transnational World,” *History Compass* 10, no. 6 (2012): 426.

mobile and transnational actors could therefore be seen as being detrimental to giving voice to Indigenous peoples in history.

This article's analysis of five Aboriginal activists travelling to the USA however challenges the notion that Global history studies unavoidably must favour the study of European elites over supposedly less mobile Indigenous peoples. It contests this by showcasing along with other studies of Indigenous transnational mobility that Australian Indigenous peoples did not stay put and were not isolated from the wider world. This trip shows on the contrary that Aboriginal peoples actively sought transnational connections in the 1960s by travelling to and meeting with other activists. Similar histories of what scholar Ravi de Costa calls "indigenous transnationalism" have shown that the mobility and transnationalism of the five Aboriginal activists were not exceptional.²⁴ These activists in fact followed a longer history of Indigenous people from throughout the world who used travel as a means to assert their sovereignty.²⁵

That such transnational Indigenous histories existed implies that Global Histories and Indigenous histories do not need to be mutually exclusive and detrimental to Indigenous voices in history. This article argues that Global History approaches can be used to give voice to Indigenous peoples when historians reject the notion of static Indigenous peoples and instead foreground transnational connections between different marginalised peoples.²⁶ It demonstrates this by using Françoise Lionnet's and Shu-mei Shih's concept of "minor transnationalism". With this concept Lionnet and Shih advocate for transnational studies that evade the typical global/local binary of Global History approaches. In addition to studying the relationship between the global and the local, the dominant and the resistant, or above and below, both believe that scholars should also focus on "minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether".²⁷ The encounter of five Aboriginal activists with Black Power activists from throughout the world in 1970 is such a "minor transnationalism" between different marginalised groups. By showcasing the minor-to-minor transnationalism between the US Black Power and the Aboriginal Black Power movements in the 1960s, I aim to show that approaches of Global History can also help to reinforce Indigenous voices in history if global historians go beyond an approach that favours the study of European elites. Done differently, Global History can in fact broaden the knowledge about people who were supposedly immobile and left out of the processes of globalisation or have been assumed to be at the

24 Ravi de Costa, *A Higher Authority: Indigenous Transnationalism and Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 1.

25 Other examples of such histories of Indigenous transnationalism are Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*; Coll-Peter Thrush, *Indigenous London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Fiona Paisley, *The Lone Protestor: A M Fernando in Australia and Europe* (Canberra, A.C.T.: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012); Ravi de Costa, *A Higher Authority*.

26 With this, I do not want to suggest that examining mobile and transnational actors is the only way to do Global History. It is also possible to examine transnational connections of relatively immobile actors but examining transnational actors has become a common approach within the field of Global History.

27 de Costa, 8.

receiving end of it.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ASSIMILATION POLICY AND STATE SURVEILLANCE

To undertake a trip to a Black Power conference in the USA and to assert Aboriginality was a radical act on behalf of the five Aboriginal activists at a time when Australian Indigenous people were subjected to the assimilation policy of the Australian government. State and federal governmental representatives officially formulated this assimilation policy in a conference in 1937 and subsequently they constantly redefined what the assimilation policy constituted in conferences in 1951, 1961 and 1965. The principal aim of absorbing the Indigenous population into the white population and forcing Indigenous people to live like Europeans remained however unchanged.²⁸ The 1961 “Native Welfare Conference” for example stated that “all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians [...], observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.”²⁹ Governmental officials therefore saw the rise of a Black Power movement in Australia asserting Aboriginality as a threat and the Australian Security Intelligence Organization monitored members of the Black Power movement accordingly. Staff of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization for example took pictures of Brown, leaving Australia at the Essendon airport in Melbourne. When the Aboriginal activists headed for the USA in 1970, the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization also requested the US Federal Bureau of Investigation to monitor the movements and words of the delegation.³⁰

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF THE FIVE ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS

Despite the assimilation policy and state surveillance, the five Indigenous activists Bruce McGuinness, Bob Maza, Patsy Kruger (who later changed her name to Patsy Corowa and will subsequently referred to as such), Jack Davis,

28 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black responses to white dominance, 1788-2001*, 3rd ed. (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 165, 175-7.

29 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, 177.

30 Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 192, 194-195.

and Solomon Bellear were willing to risk the one-month-long trip to the USA in September 1970. Although most of these activists were based in the Australian state of Victoria, taken together, they came from a variety of regions and institutions ranging from the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, to the National Tribal Council, the West Australian Council for Aboriginal Advancement, and the University of Sydney. However, they were all part of the younger and more radical generation interested in the US Black Power movement.³¹ The US trip did not only comprise of speeches and workshops at the Black Power conference in Atlanta with estimated 2500 registered participants. During the trip, the Aboriginal activists also visited Harlem and Long Island in New York where they met different leaders and organisations associated with the Black Power movement. Amongst others, they had discussions with Native American groups, the leader of the Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan, Queen Mother Moore of the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, the civil rights activists Jesse Jackson, and they listened to performances of well-known artists such as Ray Charles, Nina Simone and Stevie Wonder.³² In New York City, the Aboriginal activists also submitted two petitions to the United Nations, calling for “the relief from the genocide which is being practiced upon our people” and the “elimination of all racial discrimination.”³³ The Australian Indigenous delegates therefore met a broad range of representatives of the US Black Power movement and used the trip to exchange experiences with them.

This section investigates how the five Indigenous activists learned from these exchanges and tried to draw lessons from the situation of African American people for their political struggle in Australia. This was after all the expressed hope of the activists. One month prior to departure, McGuinness, the principal organiser of the trip,³⁴ outlined the purpose of their visit: “[w]e will be studying particularly conditions and race relations at Atlanta University, which has the largest number of negro students.”³⁵ Referring to the self-help programmes of the Black Power movement, he stated that “[i]t will be our aim to try to introduce these ideas into Australia.”³⁶ Shortly after arriving in the USA, Maza repeated this hope in a *New York Times* article.³⁷ The goal of the conference was, according to McGuinness, not only to put pressure on the Australian government, but also to become economically independent.³⁸

The report of the Indigenous delegation reveals that the Australian Indigenous activists did indeed learn from their experiences abroad when they

31 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 161. The only exception in terms of age was Jack Davis who was 53 years old at the time of the US trip.

32 Jack Davis, “5 on U.S.A. Field Trip,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 4-5.

33 McGuinness, “Report,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 19-23.

34 Trometter, ‘*The Fire in the Belly*’, 138-140, 143.

35 “Aborigines to study in the U.S.A.,” *Northcote Leader*, August 2, 1970, available from <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1960s/aalbp/rb33.html> [last access November 26, 2018].

36 “Aborigines to study in the U.S.A.”

37 “World Unity of Blacks Sought at Parley,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1970, 11.

38 “‘Third World’ Seeks Unity at Conference,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1970, 40.

eventually went to the USA. The US trip served as a corrective to the image which Aboriginal activists had of the situation in the USA prior to their first-hand experiences. In his report, McGuinness depicts the image which Indigenous activists had before travelling to the USA:

There was a certain fear in each of the Koorie³⁹ delegates when embarking on this trip. We, like all Australians, had been subjected to the news reports of Race riots, killing, burning, looting, plane crashes, assassinations and sabotage in the U.S., so that the question foremost in each of our minds was, 'will, we ever come home'?⁴⁰

These unrealistic expectations show that the young Aboriginal activists only had a partial understanding of the US situation in the 1970s.

This partial understanding is understandable, given that none of the Aboriginal activists had ever been overseas.⁴¹ In addition to their lack of direct experience of the USA, the Aboriginal delegates' partial understanding of the situation in the USA can more importantly be explained by the way Australian mainstream newspaper depicted the US Black Power movement. The historian Alyssa L. Trometter has analysed Australian newspapers depictions of the US Black Power movement in detail for the first time and she argues that the readers of the mainstream Australian newspapers "were often given an imperfect and rather partial knowledge of the American Black Power movement and Black Panther Party [...]."⁴² Particularly "violent and bloody images of American civil rights movement became well known in Australia," while other aspects such as the community programmes of the Black Panther Party or the justifications behind the Party's actions were mostly not mentioned.⁴³ In 1967, the Melbourne based *The Age* for example reported that there was "a wave of violence" and "roaming bands upturned cars, smashed windows and hurled petrol bombs" throughout the USA.⁴⁴ The Australian press coverage therefore heavily shaped the perception of the US Black Power Movement in Australia.

In accordance with this analysis of Trometter, McGuinness admitted himself that he "had been conditioned for [sic] from the Australian Press and

39 Aboriginal people from Victoria and the south of New South Wales refer to themselves as "Koorie" or "Koori" in order to differentiate themselves from Aboriginal people from other parts of Australia. For this definition see "About," The Koorie Heritage Trust, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://koorieheritagetrust.com.au/about-us/>.

40 McGuinness, "Report," in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 6.

41 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 163.

42 Trometter, 'The Fire in the Belly', 93.

43 Trometter, 93.

44 "Negro Rioters Loot, Burn in Ghetto Area," *The Age*, 30 June, 1967, 2, cited in: Trometter, 'The Fire in the Belly', 101.

previous overseas visitors” and he reported that he had read that almost every Black American was armed. When he arrived in the USA, he found out that this was “a gross exaggeration” and in the report he voiced his “surprise when the first thing that I noticed was a Black man arm in arm with a white girl.”⁴⁵ The direct experiences of the Aboriginal delegates contradicted the Australian media representation of the US Black Power movement. Instead of the reliance on Australian media reports, the US trip therefore gave Aboriginal activists the opportunity to revise their misconceptions of racial relations in the USA.

McGuinness in fact actively explored these racial relations in the USA. His report shows that he was a keen and at times anxious observer who was constantly looking out for signs of racism. The delegates first arrived in San Francisco where they had to change flights and had to go through customs. They feared that their boomerangs would not go through and they “deliberated for some time” whether they should approach white or black customs officers. The decision was eventually taken from them as an airline steward pushed McGuinness to a white customs officer. It took him only two minutes to go through the custom, while a black customs officer questioned the other Aboriginal delegate Davis “at length on his tablets and their uses.” McGuinness simply remarks that these are “[n]ot very important points, but nevertheless worth mentioning.”⁴⁶ His description of the delegation’s arrival in the USA however demonstrates that McGuinness paid very close attention to cross-racial interactions.

His report is indeed full of descriptions of mundane interactions between white people and people of colour that he thought were very much worthy of mention. When arriving at his hotel in Atlanta, McGuinness witnessed a white porter picking up a tip from the ground after his host, Roosevelt Brown, had dropped it. McGuinness did not believe that Brown intentionally dropped it, “but you should have seen that guy on his hands and knees picking up the nickles [sic] and dimes while us poor lowly coloured folk stood around watching.”⁴⁷ For McGuinness, this reversal of the common racial hierarchy was apparently unimaginable in Australia. McGuinness also flirted with white women in order to examine how widespread discrimination was in the USA. He took a walk through the city and “made passes at White girls receiving some very favourable results.”⁴⁸ However, when he did so alongside the comparatively darker-skinned Indigenous activist, Belleair, he “received nothing but cold stares.”⁴⁹ He “experimented further”, asking a barmaid of his hotel for a date. She accepted initially, “but when she found out who and what I was, she suddenly

45 McGuinness, “Report,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 8.

46 McGuinness, “Report,” 6.

47 McGuinness, “Report,” 7.

48 McGuinness, “Report,” 7.

49 McGuinness, “Report,” 7.

remembered a previous engagement.”⁵⁰ The purpose of this flirting was to test what constituted socially acceptable behaviour for black or Indigenous people regarding white people in the USA. McGuinness thus consciously used the US trip to explore the differences in racial discrimination between Australia and the USA.

These experiences more generally helped Indigenous activists to better comprehend their situation in Australia, since they could now compare the situation of African Americans in the USA with that of Indigenous people in Australia. As Corowa reflects in her report, only after the US trip was it possible for her to “stand back and look *objectively* at what is happening to Australians.”⁵¹ The US trip gave her a reference point for evaluating Australia’s position within the global issue of racism. Concerning the trip’s usefulness, McGuinness similarly concluded: “[t]he Education I received re: race relations cannot be obtained from text books.”⁵² As McGuinness’ unrealistic expectations of the US trip have shown, media reports about the US Black Power movement were not sufficient. Only through first-hand-experience of the US Black Power movement could he, through comparison, truly understand the situation of Aboriginal people. The retrospective reflections of Jack Davis additionally stressed how the US trip changed his previous beliefs: “[a] fleeting trip could not produce soundly based scholarly conclusions, but it did produce some deep impressions and challenging opinions which influenced and directed my activities after I returned to Australia.”⁵³ Altogether, these quotes show that the US trip gave the Indigenous activists the possibility to reflect on their own situation in Australia by comparing it with the US American one. The engagement with the US Black Power movement was in conclusion an important learning process for the young Indigenous activists.

THE USEFULNESS OF ENCOUNTERING THE US BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

But when comparing the USA and Australia, many of the Aboriginal delegates believed that the USA was an unsuitable example to follow. They concluded that the contemporary situation of racial relations in the USA would become the future Australian situation if no actions were taken. McGuinness

50 McGuinness, “Report,” 7.

51 Patsy Kruger, “A Year in the Revolutionary Education,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 31, emphasis added.

52 McGuinness, “Report,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 23.

53 Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: A life-story* (Melbourne: Dent, 1988), 149. Keith Chesson states that he has merged his own written passages with the transcripts taken from recorded conversations with Jack Davis. This quotation might therefore not be a literal representation of what Davis said. As Chesson admits himself, his book is neither a true oral history, nor a true biography. For this see Chesson, *Jack Davis*, 3.

phrased this view particularly eloquently, stating that “Australia in the future will be a mirror of America today”⁵⁴ and that the current situation in the USA was “a projection of the Australian situation in years to come.”⁵⁵ Bob Maza also thought that Australia would follow the same trajectory as the USA if nothing was done. In a later interview with the Indigenous activist Kevin Gilbert, Maza recounts that “[t]he black situation in the USA made me realize that if our black movement here in Australia is going to be left in the hands of whatever ego-trippers there are around, [...] then we are going to head the same way that the black Americans did.”⁵⁶ Experiencing the poverty of African American welfare recipients in Harlem firsthand gave Davis similarly the impression that “this was a process already begun in Australia amongst the Aborigines.”⁵⁷ The USA therefore served as a negative example of what Indigenous Australians should avoid.

In accordance with this assessment of the USA, many Aboriginal activists later drew negative conclusions about the usefulness of participating in the Congress of African People. Corowa expressed her disappointment that many other Black participants of the Congress “didn’t KNOW there were black people in Australia.”⁵⁸ After returning to Australia, McGuinness also criticised the lack of interest during the conference in Aboriginal peoples: “[t]he Congress of African Peoples was about as much use to Australian Aborigines as me having a hole in the head. [...] There was virtually no awareness of our particular problems at all.”⁵⁹ Davis later retells how a workshop about self-defence in which he took part during the Congress rather alienated him: “[a] peace-loving man, I watched the demonstration without any real attempt to absorb the techniques or acquire the skills.”⁶⁰ He consequently did not return to the next session and reports that, after his return to Australia, he didn’t become “personally involved” in the Australian Black Power movement as he preferred “other, non-violent initiatives.”⁶¹ Most of the Indigenous delegates thus concluded that representatives of the US Black Power movement were not interested in the struggle of Aboriginal people and that the situation in the USA was not comparable with Australia.⁶²

This article however contends that the US experiences helped sharpen the convictions of the Aboriginal delegation even as a negative example. The

54 McGuinness, “On Reflection in Brief!,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 27.

55 McGuinness, “Report,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 23.

56 Kevin Gilbert, *Because a white man’ll never do it* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973), 115.

57 Chesson, *Jack Davis*, 151.

58 *The Herald*, June 5, 1971, collected in Barry Christophers Papers, MS 7992, Box 3, NLA, quoted in Clark, *Aborigines & Activism*, 216.

59 “Native Rights Plea Ignored,” *The Australian*, October 3, 1970, 5. Not to be confused with the wrong newspaper quoted by Trometter, ‘*The Fire in the Belly*’, 144 and the wrong date quoted by Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete demands: The search for Black power in the 20th century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 232, endnote 93.

60 Chesson, *Jack Davis*, 147.

61 Chesson, 152.

62 The report of the US trip therefore suggest that the Aboriginal activists were often frustrated by the lack of interest in and knowledge about the Aboriginal struggle in Australia, but this should not rule out the possibility that Aboriginal activists could have influenced their US counterparts as well.

Aboriginal activists acknowledged that the USA was too different to simply imitate the methods of the US Black Power movement, but as seen above they nonetheless drew lessons from their experiences in the USA. McGuinness in fact hoped that the delegates' knowledge obtained during the US trip would "short circuit the expensiveness of trial and error, by illustrating to the prementioned [Aboriginal organisations, Aboriginal people and governments] the inadvisability of procrastination [...]."⁶³ And he added:

[i]f previous American Governments had done their job, had they of [sic] tackled the Black situation in the US in a more mature manner, then their racial problems could be well on the way to solution. We have to learn by other peoples [sic] mistakes, isn't that what progress is all about?⁶⁴

The Aboriginal delegates therefore perceived the USA as a dystopian future of Australia which made immediate changes in Australia imperative. Encountering the US Black Power movement gave them the opportunity to learn from past mistakes in the USA even when they considered the USA to be an inapt example to follow for their own struggle in Australia.

THE ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS' IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IDEAS AND TACTICS OF THE US BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

Because of the Aboriginal activists' negative comments about the usefulness of participating in the Congress of African People, the historian Piccini stresses in his analysis of the US trip the "limits of transnational politics" rather than the benefits.⁶⁵ He believes that the US trip showed the "real challenges and difficulties" of implementing ideas and tactics of the US Black Power movement in Australia.⁶⁶ Although it is true that the activists contested the usefulness of some aspects of the US trip, I argue that he undervalues the subsequent influence of the encounter with the US Black Power movement on Indigenous activism in Australia.

There are for instance some concrete examples of how some Australian

63 McGuinness, "On Reflection in Brief!," in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 27.

64 McGuinness, "On Reflection," 27.

65 Piccini, *Transnational protest, Australia and the 1960s*, 151.

66 Piccini, 160.

Indigenous activists implemented the tactics used by the US Black Power movement. Bob Maza for instance visited the National Black Theater in Harlem and met its founder, Barbara Ann Teer, during his stay in New York City. This encounter with Teer inspired him to help create the “National Black Theatre” of the same name in the suburb Redfern of Sydney two years later.⁶⁷

The US Black Panther community survival programmes that McGuinness alluded to before visiting the USA furthermore inspired Australian Indigenous activists to set up similar programmes in Australia. The 1970s marked the time when Aboriginal communities set up Aboriginal controlled organisations in major cities throughout Australia to provide housing, legal and health services. The Aboriginal Legal Service of New South Wales was established in the suburb of Redfern in Sydney in October 1970 and was soon followed by similar organisations in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.⁶⁸ Kathy Lothian compellingly makes the argument that the numerous Aboriginal organisations that were formed in the 1970s maybe did not share the name of the US Black Panther Party or necessarily adopted the programmes of it systematically. They however “embodied the spirit of these programmes.”⁶⁹ The historian Trometter also believes that the idea of Aboriginal community control was “[p]erhaps one of the greatest developments to arise out of the Black Power era in Victoria.”⁷⁰ She thinks that the medical training programmes of Aboriginal controlled organisations like the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service established in 1973 embodied the US Black Panther Party’s principle of self-determination.⁷¹ McGuinness experienced the breakfast programmes of the US Black Panther Party first-hand in Harlem and praised the Party’s work as “the essence to the Black Movement.”⁷² He noted that the militancy of the Black Panther Party is well known, as “[t]he Australian Press never lets us forget it, but there is one aspect of their activities which is never publicised, ‘their breakfast programme’. In Harlem alone, they supply 500 free breakfasts to Black School kids.”⁷³ After experiencing these programmes in the USA, McGuinness was involved in setting up Aboriginal-controlled health services in Australia. He was a founding member of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and also helped to establish the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation which was established in 1976 and represented Aboriginal health services from throughout Australia.⁷⁴ While these Aboriginal-controlled self-help programmes were not mere copies of their US counterparts, McGuinness’ report reveals that the US trip contributed

67 Trometter, ‘*The Fire in the Belly*’, 146.

68 Lothian, “Seizing the Time,” 193.

69 Lothian, 197.

70 Trometter, ‘*The Fire in the Belly*’, 147.

71 Trometter, 148.

72 McGuinness, “Report,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 14.

73 McGuinness, “Report,” 14.

74 “A History of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service,” Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc., 11, 32, 44, <https://www.vaccho.org.au/assets/01-RESOURCES/TOPIC-AREA/CORPORATE/A-HISTORY-OF-THE-VICTORIAN-ABORIGINAL-HEALTH-SERVICE.pdf> [last access April 26, 2019].

to a growing awareness and knowledge about the US programmes and thus facilitated the establishment of similar programmes in Australia. The establishment of Aboriginal controlled community programmes was therefore one aspect that resulted out of Aboriginal activists' seeking of transnational connections with the US Black Power movement.

Arguably the biggest role that the US Black Power movement played for the Aboriginal delegates was however the idea of self-determination and of proudly identifying as being black or Aboriginal. Particularly the report of Corowa, who was the incoming president of the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne, highlights the importance of identity. Her report is full of examples that show how her encounter with the ideas of Black Power enabled her to connect with the people and home of her ancestors. Corowa's grandfather, John Corowa, came from the Pacific Island Tanna of what is today Vanuatu and he was traded at the age of ten to work as an indentured labourer in Queensland. He was therefore part of the Australian South Sea Islander community which descended from Pacific South Sea Islanders who were often forcefully taken to Queensland in the nineteenth century in the course of Queensland's indenture labour trade.⁷⁵ Patsy Corowa's encounter with the US Black Power movement and her participation in the Australian Indigenous activism of the 1960s made it possible for Corowa to identify with and feel part of the Tanna Indigenous community of her grandfather. After the US trip, she did not immediately return to Australia and took a detour to Tanna to visit the homeplace of her ancestors for the first time.⁷⁶ She recounted that she planned on going to Tanna once before, but that she ended up working in the secretary of the Aborigines Advancement League instead. Looking back at this time of her life, she believed that her experience of working with Australian Indigenous activists of this League was a necessary step for appreciating her own Indigenous background:⁷⁷

I realize now that that time would have been premature for me to return. I had too many changes to go through before I could go home and see through the eyes of a Tanna child, and appreciate what was happening to Tanna and my Brothers and sisters there and in other parts of the New Hebrides [today Vanuatu].⁷⁸

“Until a short time ago,” she indeed disregarded “traditional life styles of peoples, other than Europeans as primitive and inferior” and she was “striving,

⁷⁵ Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 196.

⁷⁶ Kruger, “A Year,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 32.

⁷⁷ Kruger, “A Year,” 35.

⁷⁸ Kruger, “A Year,” 35.

because it was the ‘civilized’ thing to do, to become European orientated.”⁷⁹ These quotes indicate that her dealing with the Black Power movement in the Aborigines Advancement League prompted Corowa to reconsider her perception of Indigenous people and her own Indigenous identity. The Aborigines Advancement League, of which Corowa was part of, in fact discussed ideas of the Black Power movement prior to the US trip. Inspired by the idea of self-determination of the Black Power movement, the League passed a motion in September 1969 requiring all non-Aboriginal officeholders to resign and to fill the appointments with Aboriginal people. This motion was shortly afterwards replaced by a more moderate motion that required only the majority of officeholders to be Aboriginal.⁸⁰ The basic principle of self-determination that Aboriginal people should take their affairs into their own hands was nonetheless preserved and the whole debate reveals how Aboriginal activists took up the ideas of Black Power and considered their applicability for Australia.

The US trip of 1970 was in addition to her experience of the Aborigines Advancement League influential for Corowa’s reconsideration of what it means to be Indigenous and black. Adopting the language of the Black Power movement, Corowa stated that it was only *after* this trip that “I recognised my duty, as a relevant sister in the struggle for liberation of black people wherever they are and whoever they are.”⁸¹ The direct encounter of the US Black Power movement enabled Corowa therefore to identify with her Indigenous ancestors who she previously would have dismissed as “primitive” and different. The ideology of the US Black Power movement empowered her to adopt a different perspective in which she could claim that “the moment I was in the New Hebrides was so emotionally fantastic. I felt that I was HOME.”⁸² The US Black Power ideology therefore helped Corowa to re-connect with the land of her grandfather.

Identity was also an important aspect of McGuinness’ experience of the Congress of African People. The Black Power ideology propagated at the Congress allowed McGuinness to identify as being black and Aboriginal. To do so was not always straightforward for McGuinness because he often felt uneasy about the relatively lighter colour of his skin. During his childhood, his colour of skin played already a role as his siblings “with whiter skin called him ‘nigger’.”⁸³ Before the Congress, McGuinness was rather concerned with the opposite, his relative whiteness. When Brown visited Australia, McGuinness asked Brown whether “part-Aboriginals [would] be accepted into these Black Power Conferences,” to which Brown gave him a positive answer.⁸⁴ This quote shows

79 Kruger, “A Year,” 35.

80 Clark, *Aborigines & Activism*, 218-219.

81 Kruger, “A Year,” in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 31.

82 Kruger, “A Year,” 31.

83 Reko Rennie-Gwaybilla, “The Dr. Bruce Mac Interview,” available from <http://www.kooriweb.org/bbm/reko.html>, cited in: Trometter, ‘The Fire in the Belly’, 144 [the URL no longer functions].

84 Bruce McGuinness, “Exclusive Interview,” *The Koorier* 1, no. 10 (November 1969): 5, cited in: Trometter, ‘The Fire in the Belly’, 144.

what impact state colonial definitions of Aboriginality could have on Aboriginal people. As the 1961 Native Welfare Conference's definition of assimilation policy quoted earlier indicates, Australian settler-colonial officials were constantly preoccupied with racially categorising Aboriginal people into "full bloods", "half bloods", or "octoroons" in order to determine whether Indigenous people were eligible for welfare benefits. The most extreme example occurred in Western Australia where officials determined that some people were 1/128 Aboriginal.⁸⁵ Black Power gave McGuinness however a way of rejecting such colonial categories of Aboriginality.

Reiterating his doubts before the Congress, McGuinness reported that "[i]nitially, I felt out of place because of the fairness of my skin. However, the Brothers and Sisters soon showed me that I was like them and in the Black Bag, 'I was accepted'."⁸⁶ Particularly the visit to Harlem gave him a feeling of belonging. He described Harlem as a place "[w]here part Blacks are regarded as 'all Black'. Where there is no 'I'm Whiter than you' or 'I'm Blacker than you'. Where equality is reality."⁸⁷ In this quote McGuinness evidently referred to the quarrels around the colour of his skin which had plagued him since his childhood. And to be sure, in a later interview just before his death in 2003, he claimed that he was "hurt" and "left out of things and not being encouraged to take part in workshops [of the Congress of African People] because [he] was a bit fair skinned and straight haired."⁸⁸ These contradictory remarks perhaps show his ambivalent feelings towards the Congress. However, at least for a brief time, he seemed to have been inspired by the promises of the Black Power movement. To claim that so-called "half bloods" were just as Aboriginal or black was indeed a radical act which undermined Australia's assimilation policy and the attempt of the Australian government to divide Aboriginal people into different categories. As the historian Banivanua Mar put it, "[i]dentifying as Indigenous, like mobility, was becoming its own act of liberation."⁸⁹ She therefore considered this question of identity next to the means of travelling as one of the crucial aspects of the global Indigenous decolonisation movement.

The idea of self-determination and the rejection of imposed settler-colonial definitions of Aboriginality was of course nothing new and predates the emergence of the Black Power movement in the USA.⁹⁰ "Overseas influences" in the words of the historian Broom however "provided a new language, that of Black Power, and a newfound pride in their traditional culture. It gave a new way to frame their thinking about the world [and] a connectedness to other

85 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, 164-165.

86 McGuinness, "Report," in *Aborigines Visit the U.S.*, 8.

87 McGuinness, "Report," 15.

88 Rennie-Gwaybilla, "The Dr. Bruce Mac Interview," cited in: Trometter, *The Fire in the Belly*, 144-145.

89 Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 109.

90 Indigenous organisations and movements throughout the Pacific region, including Australia, defied caste and blood quanta discourses of settler-colonialists in the 1920s and 1930s. For this see Mar, *Decolonisation*, 103-113.

oppressed peoples [...].”⁹¹ Despite these remarks, Broome overall believes that Aboriginal people sought change in the 1960s because of the “long-term and local Indigenous aspirations for community control” rather than the influence of Black Power.⁹² It is certainly true that the Australian Indigenous activism of the 1960s was embedded in a longer history of resistance and protest. The situation of Aboriginal people and their history of invasion and dispossession was also different to the situation and history of African American people, as some of the expressions of disappointments of the five Aboriginal activists testify. But the analysis of the US trip demonstrates that it is important to not just consider and explain the radical Indigenous activism of the 1960s within a national framework and to stress the uniqueness of this activism, but to take transnational aspects of it into account as well. At least for the five Aboriginal delegates, the transnational encounter of the ideas and the people of the US Black Power movement was an important part in finding their own answers to the long-term struggle for Aboriginal rights. They drew positive and more often negative conclusions about the usefulness of the US trip. But regardless of whether the conclusions were positive or negative, the direct engagement with the US Black Power movement consolidated their beliefs and thus helped them to find an approach more appropriate to Australia. McGuinness, Maza, Corowa, Davis and Belleair all in their own way learned from their overseas experiences in the USA.

REINFORCING INDIGENOUS VOICES IN GLOBAL HISTORY

This article analysed these five Aboriginal peoples’ transnational encounter with the US Black Power movement in order to make a second and broader argument that Global History approaches do not necessarily have to neglect Indigenous agency by privileging the study of mobile European elites or colonial agents. As mentioned above, Indigenous peoples do not generally speaking feature largely within Global History studies and when they do, they are mostly portrayed as victims of colonisers.⁹³ In order to not continue to marginalise Indigenous peoples, Global history must be done differently. This case study demonstrates that it is possible to write global histories which avoid this marginalisation by foregrounding the actions of the five Aboriginal activists. Far apart from being merely victims of the Australian governmental assimilation policy and of state surveillance, the five Australian Indigenous activists evaded

⁹¹ Broome, “The 1969 Aboriginal Takeover,” 22.

⁹² Broome, “The 1969,” 22.

⁹³ Carey and Lydon, “Indigenous Networks,” 1-2.

state control and met with other marginalised people from throughout the world to learn about new ways of addressing settler colonialism in Australia. The main actors of this transnational case study were not the government officials who monitored the delegates, but the Indigenous activists who were determining the course of action.

The existence of this transnational Indigenous history demonstrates that Global History approaches do not necessarily have to marginalise Indigenous peoples, but that they can be used to gain new insights into the histories of non-European peoples. European colonial agents were not the only ones who formed transnational networks. Marginalised peoples such as Indigenous peoples also crossed border and took advantage of new means of travelling. The five Aboriginal activists were not static but formed their own “minor transnationalism” or what Banivanua Mar called “counter-imperial and subaltern networks”.⁹⁴ Global historians can therefore write histories that are beneficial for Indigenous peoples, but in order to achieve this, they need to put Indigenous peoples at the centre of their studies and must reject the assumption that Indigenous peoples were immobile and static.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed the specific case of five Aboriginal activists’ encounters with the US-Black Power movement in 1970 in order to assess what role the US Black Power movement played for these activists. I demonstrated that the US trip served as a corrective for previously held beliefs about race relations in the USA. The trip gave the five Aboriginal participants the possibility to gain first-hand experiences of racial discrimination in the USA that differed from the depictions in the Australian media. It also enabled them to compare their situation in Australia with the situation of African American people in the USA. The lessons they drew from this comparison were often negative. I have however argued against the historian Piccini who, as a consequence of these negative assessments, jumps to the conclusion that the US trip shows the “limits of transnational politics”. Even when the five activists assessed the usefulness of the US trip negatively and did not see the USA as a suitable example to follow, I argue that their encounter with the US Black Power movement sharpened their own positions concerning the Aboriginal rights struggle as they had to decide whether the tactics and philosophies were applicable to Australia. Some of them in fact implemented and adapted some tactics and philosophies of the US Black

94 Tracey Banivanua Mar, “Shadowing Imperial Networks: Indigenous Mobility and Australia’s Pacific Past,” *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 3 (2015), 340; see also Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 9-10.

Power movement to the Australian context, such as the National Black Theatre and the idea of self-determination and black pride. The latter idea enabled Corowa to reconnect with the people and home of her grandfather and allowed McGuinness to defy settler-colonial definitions of Aboriginality.

A closer look at the US trip of 1970 therefore reveals that national explanations of the Australian Black Power movement must be complemented by the transnational dimension of it. As Clark points out, “Australia’s experience [of the global radical 1960s] must by definition be unique and cannot simply be extrapolated from what happened elsewhere.” Our understanding of this experience will however “remain chronologically and culturally skewed” if we do not take transnational aspects such as the Indigenous movement’s “direct links to events and developments overseas” into account.⁹⁵ The analysis of the US trip in 1970 showed that these direct links played an important role for at least the five Aboriginal activists. For them, this encounter was in fact a crucial learning process to develop their own answers to the Australian long-term issues of dispossession and colonisation, as it gave them a way of finding their voices vis-à-vis the older generation of Indigenous activists who campaigned for equal citizenship rights in the 1950s and 1960s. Our understanding of the Australian Black Power movement therefore indeed remains incomplete if historians consider this movement merely as an extension of earlier forms of Aboriginal resistance and the transnational connections only as a “catalyst for change”, as Broome puts it. The Australian Black Power movement must also be considered on its own, transnational terms.

The second aim of this article was to argue against the notion that Global History approaches inevitably privilege the study of mobile Europeans over supposedly less mobile Indigenous peoples. This article has shown that the five Aboriginal activists were on the contrary highly mobile and transnational actors as they crossed borders, took advantage of new means of travelling and formed their own transnational networks which circumvented governmental policies and surveillance. Instead of focusing on European governmental officials, this article foregrounded transnational connections between marginalised groups. The existence of these transnational connections implies that Global History studies do not necessarily have to marginalise Indigenous peoples. Global History can in fact reinforce the voices of Indigenous people – but only if it is done differently.

⁹⁵ Clark, *Aborigines & Activism*, 11-12.