The Proximate Advocate: Improving Indigenous Health on the Postcolonial Frontier

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This thesis is dedicated to Yin Carl Paradies

without whom it would not have been possible.
Abstract

This thesis presents an ethnography of white researchers who work at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research. This group of ‘proximate advocates’ is made up of predominantly middle-class, educated and antiracist white health professionals. Their decision to move from more populated areas to the north of Australia, where Indigenous disadvantage is most pronounced, is motivated by the hope of enacting postcolonial justice so long denied to the nation’s first peoples.

This ethnography thus contributes to the anthropology of postcolonial forms, and specifically benevolent forms. The Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research is an example of a postcolonial space where there is an attempt to invert colonial power relations: that is, to acknowledge the effects of colonisation on Indigenous people and remedy them.

The thesis begins with an account of suburban life in contemporary Darwin focused on the figure of the ‘longgrasser’ who threatens to create disorder at my local shops. This is an example of the postcolonial frontier, the place where antiracist white people encounter radically-different Indigenous people. Part 1 develops a conceptual model for understanding the process of mutual recognition that creates the subjectivities of Indigenous people and of white antiracists.

Drawing on critiques of liberalism and postcolonial theory, in Part 2 I describe the knowledge system dominant in Indigenous health discourse, postcolonial logic. It is postcolonial logic that prescribes how white antiracists should assist Indigenous people by furthering Indigenous self-determination. I argue that postcolonial logic can be understood as the junction of remedialism (a form of liberalism) and orientalism. The melding of these two concepts produces remediable difference: a difference that can be brought into the norm.

In Part 3 I describe how white researchers at the Institute experience radical difference, or at least its possibility. These experiences challenge the concept of remediable difference.
If Indigenous people are not remediably different, but radically different, the process of mutual recognition breaks down, and the viability of a white antiracist subjectivity is called into question. The ensuing breakdown of postcolonial logic threatens to expose white antiracists as no different from their assimilationist predecessors.

Part 4 explores the underlying dilemmas of the postcolony that are revealed when postcolonial logic unravels. The dilemma of historical continuity emerges when the discursive techniques that enact historical discontinuity between postcolonisers and their predecessors break down. The dilemma of social improvement is the possibility that the practices of the self-determination era not only resemble assimilation, but are assimilation. It is the possibility that any attempts to extend the benefits of modernity enjoyed by non-Indigenous Australia to Indigenous people will erode their cultural distinctiveness. The postcolonial condition is the experience of living with these aporias.

In the conclusion, I consider the implications of my argument for the current Australian political context, for the project of liberal multiculturalism, and for the broader problem of power and difference. I look to friendship as a deceptively simple, perhaps implausible, and yet powerful trope that can relieve the postcolonial condition and offer hope for peaceful coexistence in the postcolony.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

________________________________________
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Ethical Clearance

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Introduction

Locating the postcolonial frontier

It’s Open Day at the community of Gunbalanya, three and a half hours from Darwin down the Arnhem highway, through the northern section of Kakadu National Park, past floodplains and savannahs, to where the road dips down through the East Alligator river. My friend and I work in Indigenous health (she a doctor, me in public health research) and we relish the day ahead, an opportunity to relax with friends, listen to bands, maybe buy a nice piece of art, all while supporting an Aboriginal community. Now in the late dry season the water is low except at the peak of high tide, so you can reach the community by road. We drive through the river and see the serrated prehistoric backs of crocodiles swish through the water, hunting the same barramundi as the fishermen standing bravely on the edge. Cahill’s Crossing, usually closed to those without a permit to visit Aboriginal Lands, is open to all today. When I, my friend Sarah and her two young sons get out of the car to look at the crocodiles, I see friends and colleagues from the Institute crossing in their cars, everyone’s exhilarated to be so close to their destination after the long drive, see you later on, yeah see you there. The 40 km from the crossing to the community is breathtaking, the most beautiful part of Kakadu, people say. The road of corrugated red earth winds along the escarpment, under the stark blue sky, big uneven rocks surely hiding many spectacular rock paintings in their clefts, small groves of paperbark trees at their base, and then behind the community the billabong noisy with a thousand birds that stands under the graceful watch of Injulak hill, with the most art sites of any place in Kakadu.

As we drive into the community we go past some dilapidated houses and some new-looking ones, painted bright colours. “Some of those houses are filthy”, Sarah says, and it’s certainly true of the outsides, every yard we can see is strewn with rubbish. No people though, and no dogs, they’re all at the oval watching the footy. The civic part of the community where the open day activities are held, the school, the oval, the club, the youth centre, the arts centre, are all spotless and shining. Local musicians from Darwin and from other remote communities play music all day to the couple of hundred visitors, the arts centre makes a killing as baskets woven the traditional way, screen-printed T-shirts and small bark paintings change hands. Later on we watch the folk singer Neil Murray play in
the club, and everyone is on their best behaviour there too. But there is evidence of misconduct on the large blackboard behind the bar where dozens of names are written in white chalk: “JOSIE NABURLAMAN – LUNCH ONLY TIMMY MORRIS – NO LUNCH”. We are all too familiar with the reputations of Clubs on communities, or ‘wet canteens’ as they’re called, that are held responsible for much alcohol-related violence and sexual assault. But supporters’ arguments are also familiar: providing alcohol in a controlled environment is better than the exploitative trade in grog that flourishes in ‘dry’ communities.¹ This one is open only from 10.30am – 12.30pm and 5.30pm – 8.30pm, bouncers (who at least today appear to be all white) stand at the door and make sure no banned or underage people enter, and harm minimization messages are prominently displayed a banner over the bar – DRINK LESS FOR YOUR FAMILY. As the sun goes down all the visitors sit on the lawns, slowly drinking beer and watching the band. Some old Aboriginal ladies sit towards the back of the lawns on benches, but most of the locals crowd under the shelter of the bar, watching the visitors.

Later, I go to the youth club where more bands will play till midnight. As I walk in the bouncer, Aboriginal this time, asks me if I’ve been at the club that evening, I lie and say no, and he lets me pass. I tell myself that I haven’t drunk a thing so it’s okay to break the rules. Most of the visitors have gone back to Darwin, only a core of youngish white people remain, those who are prepared to camp out on the oval. I know nearly all of them from my social circle in Darwin, artists, musicians, film makers, teachers, community development workers, a few doctors and lawyers, environmental scientists. We congregate around the sound man, a musician from our circle, towards the front of the basketball court that tonight is a concert hall. The stage is the tray of a long truck. The side bleachers are full of young local kids, chattering and laughing at full speed, and families fill the court behind us. People barred from entering the youth centre stand quietly behind them, on the other side of the wire fence. Soon after I arrive, the next band comes on, the Letterstick Band from Maningrida. As with most community bands, there are at least a dozen people on stage, including four guitars, four singers, a didgeridoo, and unusually a man that looks African playing a djembe. Young kids flood the dance floor and scream and jump up and down.

¹ When I was visiting one dry community an hour from another Territory town, I was told community residents would pay the $360 demanded by taxi drivers to drive out from town on the unpaved road, take them into town to spend their welfare money on alcohol, and drive them back. Presumably they made the money back, and then some, through selling some of the alcohol at an exorbitant price to other residents.
Young girls in tight-fitting clothes gyrate their hips to the music, arms held high, then run back to the bleachers between songs. Older teenage girls in big basketball shirts over long skirts form small dancing circles, swaying from side to side, some holding their babies on their hips. Us whiteys are too shy to dance at first, telling ourselves we don’t want to take over, to intrude on their cultural space. We sit on the court behind the dancers, watching, but after a few songs some people work up the courage and soon quite a few of us are dancing too. It feels great, dancing with good friends in the cool dry season evening, black smiling faces all around, the music a fusion of reggae, rock, traditional singing, and sometimes a hint of country or gospel.

They sing about their country, their clan identity as Gidjingarli speaking An-Barra people of Northern Arnhem Land, hunting, and the history of their people, but also about lost love and the harms of petrol sniffing.\(^2\) Then I hear a catchy song with the distinctive chorus “Tiwi Warriors, Tiwi Warriors.” My cultural radar, honed by ten years of engagement with things Indigenous, senses an incongruity. Why is a Maningrida band singing about the Tiwi Islands? We know it is a cultural faux pas of the highest order to speak for or about another mob. But I do not expect to find an explanation for this. Being a white person who knows a little about Indigenous culture is so often an experience of knowing just how much we don’t know, and knowing also that even if we had an opportunity to ask the right person, as often as not we would not understand the answer.

As it happens, I was lucky enough to solve this particular mystery not long afterwards, care of a musician friend whose wife is a teacher at Maningrida. He tells me that the song is not about the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin at all (who are, incidentally, famous for being fierce warriors\(^3\)), but about the much less famous locality of Tiwi in the northern suburbs of Darwin - the suburb where I live. The ‘warriors’ the song refers to, as it turns out, are not Tiwi Islanders at all, but people from Maningrida people who are living in Darwin, and who congregate at the Tiwi shops.

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\(^3\) Most famously for forcing the withdrawal of a British military base on Melville Island in 1829 after 5 years of warfare, and for being the first to capture Japanese prisoners on Australian soil in WWII.
Figure 1: Text of *Tiwi Warriors* by the Letterstick Band

I was camping outside in the bush
When I saw that person there, he made me cry
He was sleeping on the ground, I called out An-mujumburr

Tiwi Warriors, Tiwi Warriors
Tiwi Warriors, Tiwi Warriors, yeah.

Nighttime, we made a fire
Everyone sitting around, the wine’s no good
It made us sick

Tiwi Warriors, Tiwi Warriors
Tiwi Warriors, Tiwi Warriors, yeah.

In the morning, I woke up and saw someone
It was An-mujumburr, the wine’s no good
He was sitting drinking wine, I came and sat with him

This ethnography is about people like me, and about what happens when we encounter people radically different from ourselves. It concerns white, left-wing, professionals who spend their working days trying to help Indigenous people: help educate them, help them to get land rights, to manage the environment, or to become healthier. Specifically, it is about white, left-wing professionals who work at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research. The social environments we live and work in are heavy with racial politics, politics which are central to the story I want to tell. As an introduction to place, I begin this ethnography in the urban spaces where people like me live: the suburbs of Darwin. I explore this urban space – a space I call a *postcolonial frontier* – through the figure of the “longgrasser”, an Indigenous person who lives in Darwin without a roof over their head and often drinks alcohol to excess. While the “Tiwi Warriors” and other longgrassers are highly visible in the urban landscape, they make up only a small minority of Indigenous people who live in Darwin. As I am trained in medicine and health research, it’s only fitting I draw on a statistical archive to illustrate this.

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4 Music and lyrics by Terence Wilson. Thanks to CAAMA Music for permission to reproduce the translation here. Sincere thanks to Dulcie Malimara for translating the song and Bill Day for facilitating this. An-mujumburr is the familiar or ‘bush’ name of a relative of the songwriter.

5 In this thesis, I mostly use the term ‘Indigenous’ to refer to the Indigenous people of Australia, which include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Tiwi is one of many of Darwin’s suburbs that are named after Aboriginal ‘tribes’ (as they were known then) of the Northern Territory. Darwin was first settled by Europeans in 1869, and over its first century it became a centre for local pearling, cattle, mining and defence industries. In the twentieth century, the industry that came to dominate all others was government administration, and by the 1960s the transient but growing population of public servants and construction workers urgently required more accommodation. The “northern suburbs” of Darwin, as they are called, that form an arch from Jingili to Karama (Figure 3), were rapidly developed and filled with basic three bedroom government houses on large blocks, which were later sold off (Chakrabarty 2000; Hall 1992; Cooper & Stoler 1997; Trouillot 1991; Todorov 1999[1984]).

Figure 2: Map of Australia showing Darwin, Australia’s northern capital city.

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6 This post-war urban expansion of Darwin (the population increased 9-fold from 5,000 in 1947 to 46,000 in 1974) was cut short by Cyclone Tracy, flattening much of the town and the northern suburbs most severely on Christmas night, 1974. Despite the evacuation of the vast majority of residents, the massive reconstruction that followed again lured people to Darwin, and the population had recovered its size in barely two years (Heatley 1986).

Figure 3: Map of Darwin with the northern suburbs.  

The geography of each northern suburb varies on a theme – main roads form the borders of the suburb, two winding, intersecting avenues shape the arterial infrastructure, and smaller circuits branch off them, ending with cul-de-sacs galore. Most of the houses are ground-level, three-bedroom houses on 900m\(^2\) blocks, interspersed with “elevated” two-storey houses and the occasional block of flats. Walking paths link the winding roads, and every house is within 100m of a small park with shade trees and colourful play equipment. Minimal, slow traffic was the aim, and planners are generous with speed bumps. At the center of the suburb, a large park: oval, community facilities (usually a child care centre and primary school, in the case of Tiwi, a child care centre and old age home), and shop. The shops are also identical – concrete bunker design, wire mesh shutters that cover the windows at night (see Figure 8). Each will have a ‘supermarket’, really just a store, and maybe a fish and chip shop, hairdresser, or restaurant. Perhaps reflecting its proximity to the services of Casuarina shopping centre (the only mall in Darwin), Tiwi shops have only a supermarket, and the Darwin premises of Diabetes Australia.

**Figure 4:** Satellite image of Tiwi showing hospital campus (white box), Daisy Y Aboriginal hostel (blue star), coastal reserve (yellow star) and Tiwi shops (red star).\(^9\)

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Like most of Darwin, the northern suburbs are ethnically and socially mixed. In a deliberate attempt at social diversity, the “Part-Coloured Housing Program” in the 1950s saw blocks retained as public housing scattered through areas of private dwellings. With few exceptions, most white, middle-class people in the northern suburbs (the subjects of this ethnography) live in close proximity to poor, non-white households. The 2001 Census recorded the population of the northern suburbs as 40,337, over 10% of which is Indigenous. Tiwi has the highest proportion of Indigenous people of any suburb, recorded as 16%. The Indigenous population that makes it into the statistics will be mostly renters, with a few homeowners among them. Most of them will have non-Indigenous ancestors, many of whom would be Anglo-Australians, but some Filipino or Chinese, some Japanese or Indonesian, some Greek or Croatian or Dutch. Their surnames reflect this – Damaso, Ahmat, White, Murakami, Souey, Tambling, Lewfatt, Cubillo. Many of them would have been born in Darwin, others in Tennant Creek or Broome or Brisbane. Many of these families would include members of the ‘Stolen Generations’, where children of mixed ancestry were removed from their families and institutionalised (Austin 1993; Cummings 1990; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). The descendents of these children have varied class positions, from well educated professionals to the chronically unemployed. Many of them have married non-Indigenous people. Standard English or Aboriginal English would often be their first language, perhaps peppered with words from Indigenous languages they identify with.

The group of those counted in the statistics who do not have any non-Indigenous ancestors are very unlikely to own their homes. Most would have been born at the Royal Darwin Hospital, but all would identify with one or more remote communities where they or their parents lived. This group would be further down the social gradient: less educated, less likely to be employed, more likely to have welfare as their only income, to have chronic heart or kidney disease, to be incarcerated. They would also be more likely to speak an Indigenous language at home. The cultural capital these people possess sometimes gains

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10 Although the effect of those social policies is a kind of multiculturalism we might celebrate, at the time they were aimed at preventing the development of ‘colour consciousness’ among Darwin’s ‘half-caste’ population that might arise from residential segregation. Government policy of the time saw their future in full assimilation with the white community (Wells 2005:128).

11 While we are talking statistics, here are other important numbers: At the 2001 Census Darwin had 72,000 people, of which 8% overall were Indigenous. Across Australia, 410,000 people identified as Indigenous, making up 2.2% of the total population of 19 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001a).
them employment as hospital interpreters, Centrelink officers, or Indigenous support workers in primary schools. They often act as a town base for visitors from the remote communities they have connections to (see Figure 5), and the house can get grossly overcrowded when a big football game is on, or an important elder is sick in town.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Figure 5:} Map of remote communities in the Top End of the Northern Territory\textsuperscript{13}

Another group of Indigenous residents of Darwin counted on census night would be visiting temporarily from remote communities and staying at an Aboriginal Hostel, where an airconditioned room and three meals can be procured for $21 a night. The hostel in Tiwi, called Daisy Yarmirr Aboriginal Hostel or Daisy Y for short, is named after a famous Aboriginal Health Worker. Its 75 beds are mostly taken up with hospital travelers, funded

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Most of this information is informed by statistics on income, education, home ownership, and so on. The exception is my comments about the degrees of non/Indigenous ancestry, which reflect only my local knowledge. Australia data collection on ‘ancestry’ is still in development. The 2001 question found that most Indigenous people claimed “Australian” ancestry, along with 35\% of the general population. The question did not identify non-Indigenous people who claim Indigenous “ancestry” (Kunz & Costello 2003). Unlike the United States or New Zealand, where you can have multiple ancestries (US) or gradations of Indigenous ancestry and identity (NZ), in Australia the only reliable information classifies people as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or non-Indigenous.

\end{flushright}
by the Northern Territory Government to come to Darwin for medical treatment at the Royal Darwin Hospital 400 metres down the road (see Figure 4).

The Tiwi Warriors song that puzzled me is not about any of these categories of Indigenous people I have roughly sketched here. It is about those who are not counted on census night\textsuperscript{14}, widely known and self-identifying as “longgrassers”, people from remote communities who are staying in town, homeless and often on an alcohol binge. In Darwin’s tropical climate, there is plenty of long grass along inland creeks and the coast where people can illegally camp and keep out of sight of the three sets of uniforms that seek to move them on: the police, parks officers or council staff (depending on whether they are camping on Government or council land) and Community Patrol (an Indigenous-run service). Specifically, the ‘warriors’ the song is about are people from the Maningrida songwriter’s extended family who come to the longgrass in Darwin and get into drunken fights at the Tiwi shops.

The ‘longgrasser problem’ at the Tiwi Shops

Longgrassers have probably been a part of the Darwin landscape since the establishment of the settlement.\textsuperscript{15} While initially it was local traditional owners directly displaced by white settlement who populated unofficial camps on the fringes of town, in the last 30 years at least many people from communities across the Northern Territory and beyond have found their way into longgrasser camps.\textsuperscript{16} There are many such camps around Darwin, most of them populated largely by people associated with a particular language group or neighbouring language groups, others with ‘mixed’ groups of people. The area around Tiwi shops has been dominated for a long time by Maningrida people, who make camps at

\textsuperscript{14} I do not mean here to criticise the Australian Bureau of Statistics who go to great lengths to include Indigenous people in all types of social situations in the 5-yearly Census, even employing anthropologists to assess their efforts (see Sanders 2004).

\textsuperscript{15} Note though that ‘longgrass people’ is a term that has been in use for less than a decade (see Day 2005a and Langton, Morris, & Palmer 1998). As homeless Indigenous people in Darwin readily self-identify as longgrassers, I use the term unproblematically in this chapter.

various places along the coastal reserve and meet at Tiwi shops to access food and alcohol (see Figure 6 for an example of an established camp) (Day 2001: section 2.2).  

**Figure 6: Lena Fry's camp near Palmerston.**

Longgrassers have been politically active for many years, fighting alongside their allies (local Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists) against the council and government for recognition of land rights to their camps and services (Day 1994). They have had some successes, and have a representative organisation that produces its own newsletter (Anonymous 2001). Advocates such as prominent Indigenous academic Marcia Langton draw on Sansom’s ground-breaking work *The Camp at Wallaby Cross* to explain the longgrasser ‘lifestyle’:

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17 Recently, a Maningrida man who had been active in the longgrasser movement died of throat cancer. A ceremony was held for him at the Tiwi shops: “Although the Darwin City Council has permanently locked and barred the public toilets at the Tiwi shopping centre, this did not deter the campers from organising a smoking ritual at the centre the day following Sandy’s passing. Smoke wafted into the shops as the surviving ‘Warriors’ sang traditional laments accompanied by didgeridoo and clap sticks.” (Day 2005b)

18 Left to right: Stanley Fry (inside van), unknown woman, Pauline Stewart (mostly obscured), Lena Fry, Bonita Dempsey, Lewis Stewart, Len Stewart. Photograph: Bill Day. Reproduced with kind permission.

19 See also http://longgrass.tripod.com
Longgrassers are a community of people with a distinct culture, not of alcoholic homeless urban poor, but rather a fluctuating and rule governed community of permanent resident hosts and cashed up guests who by sharing their money with their hosts come under their camp’s protection. Camp life requires detailed insider knowledge of the social rules and laws. [Sansom] describes how alcohol often functions as a system of savings and amongst the camp residents because it is easy to calculate credit (by the can), whereas it is difficult to use foodstuffs as a currency with consistent units. (Langton, Morris, & Palmer 1998)

What appears to the casual observer to be “alcoholic homeless urban poor” are revealed as a “rule governed community” by the anthropologist-advocate. In addition to this culturalist line of argument, that demands the respect we might show to ‘traditional’ Indigenous culture also be shown to these people, Langton emphasises a sociopolitical cause of the longgrasser problem, namely the public housing shortage in Darwin, and sets this in a historical context of colonial displacement and frontier violence:

What is happening to the “homeless” of Darwin is what happened to the Aboriginal nations in the nineteenth century, without the unfettered murder. Instead, the laws and regulations pertaining to “illegal camping” and “trespass” are used by the Northern Territory police to achieve the same result. (Langton, Morris, & Palmer 1998)

Advocates stress the racism inherent in the harassment of Indigenous homeless people forced to live outdoors, while the white population, who displaced the Larrakia in the first place, profits from tourists attracted to the art and culture of the very people they oppress. The final, incontrovertible fact used to argue for longgrasser rights is their Aboriginality:

Homeless Aborigines feel that despite their apparent lack of rights insinuated by the derogatory ‘long grass’ and ‘itinerant’ labels, they have more claim to be Darwin residents than most of those attempting to expel them. (Day 2005a)

On the other side, the outraged residents in Tiwi and elsewhere nearly always draw on their personal experiences of proximate social disruption, portraying themselves as the real victims, powerless against the forces of political correctness that scare the authorities into inaction. Their outrage spills into the letters page of the local paper, the Northern Territory News:
Every, and I mean every, night for the past month I have had this mob set up camp near my residence with the accompanying consequences of fights, foul language, using my fence as a toilet and leaving a mountain of rubbish behind. Everybody that matters knows about it -- the local member, Darwin City Council, the police and night patrol but does anybody do anything about it?...

I have had visitors from south staying with me for a fortnight. One evening, after a pleasant night out at the theatre, we decided to sit on the veranda and have a cup of coffee before retiring. Fat chance. The sound of branches being snapped off trees to hit each other over the head with, yelling and screaming and language that would make the drover's dog wince put paid to that idea. (Kerr 2005)

Leaving aside the drunken fights, foul language and distress caused to nearby residents, the major concern is the lack of toilet facilities. Campers [at the Tiwi shops] use the nearest tree or shrub to do their ablutions. No action has been taken by any authority to rectify the problem and the health risks grow daily. Only this morning, I witnessed 30-odd people doing what comes naturally first thing in the morning. It is offensive and an ever-present health danger. (John 2005)

Tiwi is one of the hotspots for longgrassers in the northern suburbs, to judge from the volume of letters to the local paper from outraged residents. Although to a degree it is merely Tiwi’s share of a generalised ‘problem’, there might be more longgrassers in Tiwi than other suburbs for a few reasons. First, there’s the hospital. Official reports blame longgrassers in part on the high rates of hospitalisation in the Indigenous community, with family members accompanying the sick person to town or coming to visit (Maypilama et al. 2004:3; Memmott & Fantin 2001:71). The solution to the problem of lack of accommodation near the hospital, the long-established Daisy Yarmirr Aboriginal Hostel, is sometimes perceived as the cause of further problems. Remote community visitors staying at Daisy Y may attract their drunken longgrasser relatives, who rely on them for support, to the surrounding longgrass camps. And Tiwi’s proximity to both the services of Casuarina Shopping Centre (including Centrelink and the Traditional Credit Union, the bank that operates in many remote communities) and to the many camping places along the coastal reserve may make it a coveted longgrasser option. Driving home in the evening in the rainy

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20 A database search of the Northern Territory News performed on 9/11/05 found that only one other suburb (Nightcliff) was mentioned in as many articles and letters that also mentioned ‘itinerants’.
21 One NT News letter writer put this in a morally negative light, claiming he asked a man from Maningrida why so many people were camped at Tiwi shops and was told that it was a convenient place to wait for a young relative in the hospital to give birth in order to share in the $3000 dollar ‘baby bonus’ the Federal Government grants to new mothers (John 2005).
Introduction

season, if I choose the winding internal roads of the suburb rather than the main roads around it, I will usually see groups of people bedding down for the night on the concrete under the shop awnings.

The Northern Territory Government’s approach to longgrassers has shifted 180 degrees since the historic change of Territory government in 2001. Since self-government was granted by the Federal Government to the Territory in 1974, the Country Liberal Party (CLP) had won every Territory election. This right-wing party was openly hostile to Indigenous self-determination. Their last major racist policy introduced in 1997, and one that proved to be politically fatal, was ‘mandatory sentencing’ which prescribed tough jail sentences for repeat property offences. As critics of the policy foretold, young Indigenous people were disproportionately effected (Office of Crime Prevention 2003), and the media raged with cases like 15 year old Johnno Warramarra from Groote Eylandt who hung himself while in custody in Darwin for stealing pens (Toohey 2000). The 2001 Northern Territory election was fought along race lines. The reigning CLP stuck to its law-and-order line, while the Labor Party (the historically left-wing party), led by ABC newsreader Clare Martin, preached tolerance. Labor’s historic victory marked a profound shift in the Territory’s political fabric. The group of left-wing professionals that had started moving here after the cyclone were no longer consigned to the do-gooder margins. Activists and agitators from the non-government sector found themselves policy advisors and speechwriters. No longer was the NT the butt of left-wing jokes, the land of the redneck. I had moved here as an interstate migrant the previous year, and handed out how-to-vote cards for the Greens Party at my local polling both. I was proud to be able to cast a vote that helped to eject the CLP.

Soon after the election, Clare Martin’s government turned their attention to the longgrasser problem with a report (Memmott & Fantin 2001) and then a strategy, initially called the ‘Itinerant Strategy’ but later changed to the more melodic ‘Community Harmony Strategy’. In a stroke of postcolonial genius, it was decided to use a large part of the $5.25 million allocated to fund the Traditional Owners (TOs) of the Darwin area, the Larrakia Nation, to run the program. With the aim of curbing ‘anti-social behaviour’, a term encompassing
begging, public drunkenness, public defecating, fighting and sleeping in public spaces (as well as the occasional assault against a non-longrasser (for example see Jackson 2003)), signs explaining the traditional Larrakia laws governing visitors from other Aboriginal lands were to be erected throughout Darwin (see Figure 7). The Larrakia Nation was funded to employ teams of ‘Larrakia Hosts’ in Community Harmony Project T-shirts who would operate in the city and suburban markets popular with tourists, negotiating with longgrassers to cease their anti-social behaviour and access services or return to their home communities (with the cost of their flight deducted from future welfare payments), and providing information to tourists, perhaps explaining that the display before them was merely corrupted Aboriginal culture on show. 

Figure 7: Excerpt of poster - 10 laws of Larrakia country

The limited resources of the Community Harmony Project did not allow coverage of the suburban spaces beyond the tourists’ reach, like Tiwi. Perhaps to avert political backlash from the neglected northern suburb residents, the Darwin City Council recently allocated $200,000 to ‘upgrade’ the Tiwi shops. As per protocol, meetings were called to facilitate public consultation on the upgrade. If the minutes of the public meeting below are anything to go by, many of those involved saw an opportunity to deal with the ‘problem’ of longgrassers. Two stakeholders with a keen interest in the outcome were the proprietor of the Tiwi Supermarket, and the only other tenant of the shopping strip, Diabetes Australia. This is a resource centre where Darwin diabetics can access diabetes education, subsided health equipment, support groups and so on. According to a friend who used to work there, the service is used mostly by white people, although they have tried to remedy this with the employment of an Aboriginal Health Worker.

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22 As a doctor working in the Emergency Department of the Royal Darwin Hospital I would treat injuries sustained as the result of drunken fights in the longgrass on a daily basis, with women commonly the victims.
The meeting, held in February 2005, was attended by two Council representatives, two from the landscape architect firm, one from the NT Government Department of Infrastructure Planning and Environment, the proprietor of Tiwi shops (who appears from the minutes to have been surprisingly silent, as I will explore below), a representative from Diabetes Australia who seemed the most vocal, and four members of the public, one of whom was my father-in-law, who lives on the other side of the Tiwi shops to me (and incidentally, rarely feels troubled by longgrassers). None of those attending the meeting appeared to be Indigenous. Here are the abridged minutes, circulated afterward to concerned residents:

Discussion was then opened by [government man] concerning the under awning building lights. [Government man] was keen to share responsibility to replace and maintain these lights. [Tiwi shops] suggested the fittings be recessed. [Architect] added that the awning could also be painted white to assist in reflecting greater light… [Member of public] expressed concerned about the style of proposed seating and the lack of hand support these seats have for aged/disabled needs of local residents. Segregation of seating for elderly people to be away from noise and gatherings.

[Diabetes Australia] concerned that proposed continuous ramp along shopfronts will provide a ‘comfortable’ rather than uncomfortable surface for people to gather. [Architect] responded that the aim of the continuous ramp was to prevent people from walking hard up against the building.

[Tiwi shops] asked whether their proposal for a fence outside Diabetes Australia was still on the agenda. [Diabetes Australia] explained Diabetes Australia have submitted a proposal to Darwin City Council for a fence to be included, but have not had formal response. [Diabetes Australia] and [Tiwi shops] convinced that fencing idea would work. [Member of public] suggested style of fencing to be robust. [Diabetes Australia] believes fencing could add an aesthetic quality. She has realistic concerns that stem from 3 of her clients refusing to visit Diabetes Australia due anti-social behaviour issues…

[Diabetes Australia] concerned that $200,000 may be wasted if other measures are not taken to stop anti-social behaviour. [Darwin Council] suggested this may be kerbed through the Larrakeyah Nation’s Harmony Project. [Tiwi shops] suggested that the new concrete paving may not be able to wear the intense use (up to 120 people congregating at one time) over the long term. General agreement that the proposed extra lighting will help this issue. [Member of public] stated that all Larrakeyah Nation’s Protocol signs installed around Casuarina have been damaged. [Darwin council] offered to conduct a CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) Audit on the Shopping Centre. All agreed…

[Diabetes Australia] concerned about the ‘homeless’ issue – will it be taken further than this meeting? [Darwin council] confirmed he will be feeding back to Darwin City Council. [Government man] also confirmed that this
The ‘longgrasser problem’, the drunken fights, foul language and excrement of the NT News letters are reduced in these minutes to much more palatable terms – ‘the ‘homeless’ issue’; ‘other issues’; and a favourite of mine, ‘anti-social behaviour’. The solutions suggested are robust but aesthetic fencing (presumably locked at night), sloped surfaces that will hopefully be uncomfortable, strong lighting reflecting off bright white surfaces, segregated (they actually used that word) seating for the (white) elderly from the old people’s home, and a shelter and tap “elsewhere” coaxing longgrassers away from ‘public’ spaces. There is even a technical term for this careful, deliberate shaping of longgrasser-repellent surrounds: ‘Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design.’

This euphemistic discussion of making life harder for Tiwi longgrassers would not be condoned by all residents. Many of those living in Tiwi and other northern suburbs have devoted their professional lives to helping Indigenous people, and don’t have time for meetings like these. Sitting on a bench in the courtyard of the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research with one of the subjects of my ethnography who is also a neighbour, I talk about reading the record of the meeting. She is quick to defend longgrassers:

There isn’t such a bad problem there at Tiwi shops, there’s not much vandalism or anything. You know, I walk the dogs with my kids every day for years now along the Casuarina reserve, that’s practically my backyard, and there’s only been one time I’ve called the police, one time there was a man there and he was letting it all hang out [exposing his genitals] and calling out to us, I was there with my kids, so I went back and called the police. That was the only time. The people there, you see them everyday, there’s some that are connected with people staying at Daisy Y but there’s permanent camps there, lots of Maningrida people camping there, and every day you wave, or say hello, I’ve never had any trouble. [Fieldnotes 05/09/05 4:91]
She goes on to tell me two other incidents of ‘trouble’, once when a woman burst out on to the path from the mangroves, crying and saying she was being assaulted, and another time when a man lay drunk, barely-conscious across the path (“Normally people would go and lie in the bush, but he was right across the path”). But these are the exception. For middle-class, left wing people like her and me the rule is happy co-existence. Note though that she does not appeal to evocations of longgrasser culture, housing shortages or histories of dispossession to make her arguments; they are based on experience, if expressed rather differently from our NT News letter writers above.

One of the employees at Diabetes Australia is the wife of a colleague. I ask her later about whether, as the Diabetes Australia representative claims in the meeting (and as I had previously heard), white people are really too afraid to access their diabetes education and discounted health equipment because of the longgrassers:

A few people are too scared to come, but only a few of them. It’s not a problem most of the time. Last year a woman smashed the glass though and she had blood running all down her onto the ground. The main problem is the area around the back is used as a toilet so it smells really bad. They want to put up a fence like a pool fence around the shops, but it’s like keeping people out that way… What do you think they should do?

EK: I think long grassers are a part of life up here. I mean Daisy Y is just there, but you can’t stay there if you want to drink. And people aren’t comfortable with giving over most of their pay because they are used to not paying much rent at all, and any rent they pay comes out of their pension before they get it so they’re not aware of paying it.

[Fieldnotes 9/5/5 4:28]

She too minimizes the possible harm, in contrast with her colleague who warns that the $200,000 upgrade will be ‘wasted’ without urgent action. Her line of “not a problem most of the time” seems incongruous with the dramatic image of a women in a rage standing in a pool of her own blood outside Diabetes Australia. Then, like some of my research participants, she turns the question back onto me, knowing I work at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research, perhaps knowing I am an anthropologist and thus a potential

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24 Aboriginal English for any government income support including unemployment benefits (UB), sole parents allowance, parenting payment, etc.
expert. And I am happy to ‘anthropologise’ the issue, sympathetically explaining, perhaps logically if not culturally, why Tiwi longgrassers resist what the average person would consider a good deal, a clean bed and three square meals for a pittance if you can manage to keep off the grog.\textsuperscript{25}

The quote above again mentions the all-too-human smell at the back of the shops. Recall that an NT News letter writer claims longgrassers camped at the shops use “the nearest tree or shrub” for their outdoor toileting. The minutes of the consultation meeting also say, without explanation: “Toilet Block is a big issue.” I am told by a neighbour that the toilet block behind the Tiwi shops was continuously in a filthy state and frequently vandalised (despite the anti-crime measure of a ‘supervised graffiti’ project evident on the outer wall of the toilet block), presumably from the level and type of use outstripping the maintenance and cleaning provided. Eventually the Darwin City Council put a big padlock on the metal doors, and only the sports clubs that used the oval had a key. Soon, there were whispers of racism, because most of the sporting club members were white, and most of the longgrassers black, so one day, someone from the council came and blowtorched the doors closed. No-one could use them. They are fused shut to this day, a kind of shrine to the awkward stalemate of the postcolonial frontier.

Getting back to the consultative meeting, I noted before that the proprietor of the Tiwi shops, a man one would think should be keen to stop longgrassers harassing his legitimate customers, was strangely silent. His silence may be explained by another peculiar arrangement of the postcolony relating to longgrasser banking preferences.

The contents of the Tiwi shops, like most suburban shops of the northern suburbs, are poor on nutritional content. Very little fresh fruit and vegetables, mostly canned goods, fizzy drinks, lollies, alcohol, all of it overpriced compared to any of the three supermarkets at Casuarina Square shopping centre just 3 minutes drive away. White residents generally use the Tiwi shops only to buy the NT News and the odd grocery item. What probably keeps the business afloat is the steady business of longgrassers who prefer to use a ‘book-up’ system of credit not available at larger outlets. This way, they can purchase what they want,

\textsuperscript{25} Note though that hostel fees, though cheap, represent about 70\% of the income of a single unemployed person (this proportion would be less for people with children, and less again for people caring for children).
when they want, without having to handle money, as long as they don’t overspend beyond the next fortnight’s pension. Perhaps the longgrasser lifestyle makes keeping track of possessions as small as cards and remembering PIN numbers impractical. They prefer, it seems, a system where their ATM cards and PIN numbers are held by the proprietor, who keeps a record of their purchases, including alcohol, and simply swipes their card on pay day and withdraws the money owing to him. Doesn’t this leave them at the mercy of the proprietor? It certainly does. Is this exploitative? It certainly could easily be. Is it legal? Definitely not. Yet it happens, nonetheless, as demand for the service is met with clandestine supply.  

I first saw the book-up system when I worked in Utopia, a collection of outstations 300km north-east of Alice Springs, in 1998. Everyone would use the book-up system at the local shop, although I don’t recall whether their keycards and PINs were held by the shop owner. I did notice the long list of people with figures beside their names denoting the size of their bad debts (usually in the hundreds, probably for purchases of washing machines or bicycles, but not alcohol – it was a ‘dry’ community). I noticed too that my beloved weekend hunting trips with the families I became friends with seemed to always incorporate a visit to the next closest store, at a station nearly 2 hours drive away down dirt tracks. Having accumulated a bad debt at the local store, they would cancel their accounts, and organise for their pensions to be paid into a new account at the next store (a massive administrative feat for people with only conversational English and halting experience with bureaucracy). I did not discover would happen if and when they accrued a bad debt at that store too.

I had heard of this happening at the Tiwi shops and other urban shops from numerous sources, but I found it officially recorded in the decisions of the Northern Territory Licensing Commission, which heard complaints regarding the sale of liquor to intoxicated persons and the ‘book-up’ of liquor on a number of occasions. The decision handed down on 24th February 2005 concerned 5 complaints much like this one:

26 Compare with Carter’s description of an informal pawnshop acting as “in an unorthodox sense, a community resource” for an Aboriginal community on the south coast of New South Wales (Carter 1988:67). Note that the practice of holding cards and pin numbers in shops can reflect a need to protect one’s keycard from one’s kin, rather than the inability to keep track of the card. In shops that do not sell alcohol (the case in ‘dry’ remote communities, but not Tiwi shops), women can then use their pension to buy food and circumvent relatives who demand the money for other reasons.
Complaint 4: About 12.10pm on Thursday, 8 July 2004 an employee of the Tiwi Supermarket sold liquor, being one 4 litre cask of Buronga Ridge wine, seven 375ml cans of Melbourne Bitter beer and six 375ml cans of Jim Beam and Cola, to Mr Ignatius Narjic by way of utilising a credit facility known as “book-up” in that the purchase was recorded in a book retained for the purpose of recording grocery purchases and Mr Narjic’s debit card was retained by the store. His PIN was also known by the storekeeper from previous grocery transactions. (Northern Territory Licensing Commission 2005)

The decision in this case was to suspend Tiwi Supermarket’s liquor license for 5 days – the longest suspension ever given by the Licensing Commission. Another decision about the supermarket in the neighbouring suburb of Alawa described the book-up system employed by the proprietor Mr Lim in detail:

Although he denies allowing liquor to be booked up, he does allow aboriginal customers to book up groceries and non-liquor purchases. He keeps the credit cards of all those who book up groceries, in envelopes in a shoebox at the till, and the respective pin numbers are kept written (in Chinese) on the backs of the envelopes. He keeps the cards as security for the food accounts. From time to time he swipes the cards to check if they are in sufficient credit to authorize payment of his accounts, in which case he then processes the debit to the customer’s card and pays himself. He goes in to the shop each Sunday morning and routinely tries them all. (Northern Territory Licensing Commission 2003, emphasis in original)

Although still illegal, the effort of recording the numbers in Chinese as a form of security seems touching. Perhaps the gesture stems from Mr Lim’s fear of this very occurrence – official scrutiny of his exploitative practices – but it could just as well also point to a real concern for the security of his customers’ accounts, a sense of professional if not personal responsibility. A number of times in urban shops and bottle shops I have seen a clearly drunk Indigenous person (reeking of alcohol, slurring their words, who can’t stand straight let alone walk straight) refused service at the checkout, sometimes in a gruff way, but sometimes gently, almost like a friend, as the employee may well feel from their daily interactions with that person, both drunk and sober.

Despite any affective ties the owner of the Tiwi Supermarket might feel towards his customers, or perhaps because of them, he has been trying to sell the business for a while now. The advertised price keeps falling.
Figure 8: Advertisement for Tiwi shops

The white residents of Tiwi shop at the large, ‘proper’ supermarkets of Casuarina Shopping Square - the “stable population base” mentioned in the ad (Figure 8) must be an oblique reference to longgrassers. Though not included in the census, they are in the background of so many development decisions, election promises, tourism campaigns, dinner-party conversations, tea-room stories, and letters to the local paper. They are defended by ‘antiracists’ who minimise their impact and excuse any offensiveness with talk about kinship obligations and lack of appropriate accommodation or substance misuse treatment services. They are attacked by ‘racists’ who dismiss them as drunks and emphasise their environmental and social impact on the rest of the (white) population. Depending on the kind of white identities we seek to inhabit (racist or antiracist), longgrassers help us show our racism or our tolerance, and above all, help us distinguish ourselves from ‘Southerners’, those south-eastern urban city dwellers who have no idea what it is really like up here, how terrible or how wonderful.

I have dwelt on longgrassers because they are emblematic of alterity, meaning ‘radical difference’, a term I will distinguish from the more benign concept of ‘remediable difference’ which animates the dominant discourse about Indigenous people. Longgrassers are a polyvalent symbol. To racists, they denote the logical limit of postcolonial tolerance – surely even those crazy pinkos could not expect us to put up with such social disorder on our doorstep! – and are a demonstration of both the futility of the self-determination project (given every opportunity, they just spend their welfare on grog and beat each other up) and the irrationality of those whites who seek to extend it. For antiracists, they are an emblem.

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of colonial victimhood, reduced by generations of oppression from carrying on the ‘oldest living culture’ to violent, homeless, alcoholic oblivion far from their country and kin; or, for a few, the ultimate symbol of political resistance, defying white liberal sentiments to live a free bush life wherever they like, refusing to be hidden away from public view in remote communities, demanding, through the presence of their deviant black bodies, a reckoning with the colonial past.

One of the themes of this thesis is the intersection of two levels of contemporary life: the experiential and the official; the affective and the reasonable; private talk and conscious self-presentation. White antiracist discourse about Indigenous people (explored in Chapter 6 as postcolonial logic) is highly-developed and evolving. Organisations with their roots in the early 1990s such as Reconciliation Australia and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation provide white Australians who aspire to anti-racism with the tools they need in this era: a knowledge of the history of racial injustice, complex explanations for contemporary Indigenous disadvantage, ideas for how the government can improve the situation of Indigenous communities, and action that they themselves can take (donating money, volunteering, signing e-petitions, writing letters, attending rallies).

When these aspirations and beliefs meet the reality of life on a postcolonial frontier like Darwin, interesting things happen. Not one of the young left-wing professionals who, like me, have come to make their homes in the north and work with Indigenous people, have found their political views unaltered. We do not become right-wing – far from it – but we talk about things in a different way. I call the space where the discourse of antiracism meets the alterity of cross-cultural contact a postcolonial frontier. To be sure, such spaces certainly exist in the centres of Sydney and Melbourne (where the bulk of antiracist discourse is generated), but they are less accessible to the average white antiracist, often fleeting (lasting the length of a meeting or conference) and confined to official and symbolic settings (as I explore in Chapter 2). In the north, with a much larger proportion of Indigenous people, who are themselves more likely to be ‘cosmetically apparent’ (Huggins 1998:141) as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, experiences of radical difference are not

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28 See http://www.reconciliationaustralia.org/ and http://www.antar.org.au/. See also Chapter 1 for discussion of my use of the term “antiracist”.
29 Mary Ellen Jordan’s book Balanda (2005) is a recent example of this kind of transformation.
hard to come by, and importantly, are experienced *routinely* as part of everyday life, both professional and personal.

Here’s another interesting product of the postcolonial frontier: an alternative report of the longgrasser issue, this one not commissioned by government, but instead a product of the Indigenous health research institute that this ethnography will shortly hone in on. “Yolngu Longgrassers on Larrakia Land” was a collaborative project conducted by two Yolngu researchers from Galiwin’ku (a northeast Arnhem Land community), a linguist and teacher each with decades of experience in Arnhem Land, and an anthropologist from the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research. The report states that the research used Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, a method described in a report influential at my field site as “compatible with the goals of the emerging agenda for reform of research involving Indigenous peoples in Australia and internationally” (Henry et al. 2002a:7; Pyett 2002). Forty-three longgrassers were interviewed in their first language, and the reasons they gave for living in the longgrass were complex:

The main findings from this research were that for most people drinking alcohol was not their reason for living in the long-grass...The main reason for coming to Darwin was fear - fear of violence, including suicide, mental illness, aggressive behaviour and galka’ (sorcery). Some people who are living in the long-grass in Darwin have come to seek medical treatment, or to look after a relative receiving medical treatment, and have been unable to find acceptable, appropriate and/or affordable accommodation. When these people want to return home, they sometimes find themselves stuck, unable to afford the cost of the airfare, and having to wait until their family can afford to buy them a ticket. Other reasons why people chose to leave large settlements in East Arnhem Land to live in Darwin are grief at the loss of a relative, or seeing their elders being treated disrespectfully. They leave to escape disputes and conflict in the community. People also leave because they feel alienated by those in power, and cannot get jobs or access to other resources such as housing. Some leave because they do not want to live in large settlements, and some live on outstations in the dry, but return to Darwin for the wet season. Many people say they enjoy the freedom of living in the long-grass.

(Maypilama et al. 2004:3-4)

It is interesting to compare these arguments with those made by Langton and Day cited above. This report, like the government-sponsored report mentioned above, tackles the

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question of why individual people end up in the longgrass. The discourse of those like Langton and Day would be loathe to engage at this level (and its implication that people have made conscious choices on their path to the longgrass) and look instead at the wider sociohistorical causes of dispossession and racism. Like Langton, these researchers also use culturalist arguments, but rather than explaining the traditional nature of longgrasser camps, they describe the hard realities of contemporary remote communities, where violence, conflict and inequality (often glossed as ‘poor governance’) are inescapable. Of all the reasons discussed, the report makes it quite clear that fear of sorcery is the main reason people flee their communities and end up living in the longgrass:

**Fear is probably the most common reason given by people for why they have left East Arnhem Land to live in the long-grass in Darwin.**

There is almost universal fear of galka’ - sorcerers/assassins - among the Yolngu, and is particularly the case at Galiwin’ku [community in northeast Arnhem Land]. Some people may have been accused of sorcery, while others fear being accused. Some people are frightened of being contracted by sorcerers to perform assassinations and are threatened with violence if they refuse to perform sorcery. People who are accused of being a galka’ will run away in fear of their lives. It is important to understand that when a person dies, someone will almost always be accused of having caused that person’s death. As long as there remain questions about how someone has died, then others will live in fear of being accused, and of being the victim of bayarra’ [payback].

Some people living in Galiwin’ku are so afraid of galka’, and so tired of arguments and violence, that they stay inside their houses all the time, and won’t go out. Many people are frightened of the suicide, violence, mental illness and uncontrolled anger back at the “mission”[31]. These people said they feel much safer in Darwin.

(Maypilama et al. 2004:11-12, emphasis in original)

In contrast to the prominence given to sorcery in this report, only one of the 47 longgrassers who were interviewed for the official research commissioned by the NT Government mentioned sorcery (Memmott & Fantin 2001:71)[32], and Day mentions “alleged” sorcery in a home community only once in his thesis (Day 2001:Section 9.9).[33] This is an example of

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[31] Galiwin’ku and many other remote Indigenous communities were established as missions, most being handed over to Indigenous control in the 1960s and 1970s (other communities were established as Government ration stations or cattle stations). See Chapter 8 for further exploration of mission history in contemporary antiracist discourse.

[32] Note that a further 15 people did not answer the question (Memmott & Fantin 2001:71).

[33] Bill Day’s work was mostly with people from Maningrida, and it may be that sorcery is more prominent in northeast Arnhem Land communities.
the great discrepancies that arise at the postcolonial frontier – are longgrassers the victims of colonial displacement and institutional racism, or the victims of their own ruthless countrymen, their own backward culture? How do antiracists respond when an Indigenous-controlled research project tells us that the major cause of Indigenous homelessness is beyond our control? An antiracist may argue that the contemporary proliferation of sorcery is a product of the colonial establishment of settlements that brought different clans into uncomfortably close proximity, but for most even the mention of sorcery strays too close to orientalist depictions of Indigenous people, either romanticising their difference or denigrating their primitiveness. It is this inevitable disquieting of antiracist discourse that I believe holds much analytical traction for understanding the inner workings of the postcolony.

One evening soon after I read this report, I stood with a friend outside the nearby Jingili shops waiting for our gourmet pizza. A longgrasser who must have spied my friend rolling a cigarette came stumbling towards us. He was about 50, grey beard, friendly-looking, dirty clothes, reeking of alcohol. “You got two dollar?” “Nah, mate, nothing.” “You gimme tobacco?” “Sure”. My friend presses a wad of tobacco into his hand. As he skillfully rolls a cigarette with his free hand I ask him, “Where you from?” “Maningrida.” “Why you in town?” He answers without hesitation. “Ah, for drinking! No grog in Maningrida.” We all chuckle, and he wanders off into the darkness behind the shops where presumably he is camped.

Now, this man was from Maningrida, not Galiwin’ku (although there is merely 150km as the crow flies between the two communities), but I was struck by the contrast between what I had learnt in this Indigenous-authored Participatory Action Research report and what he told me. Did this indicate that the attribution of itinerancy to sorcery was fanciful, wrong – perhaps the authors of the report pandering to the desires of anthropologists to elevate to the status of ‘culture’ what is merely alcoholism? Or maybe, as many antiracist whites might argue, he was ‘just saying that’ – did I expect him to tell the true cultural reason for

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34 While visitors and those new to Darwin are generally troubled by these approaches, above all concerned they might appear racist if they refuse to give money (especially if approached in front of other antiracist whites) longer-term residents learn to be comfortable refusing to give money. Some will say, ‘I don’t know you’, as a way of showing there are other known Aboriginal people to which help would always be offered.

35 Note that three of Memmott’s respondents also said that they did not want to return home because there was no liquor supply there (Memmott & Fantin 2001:71).
his exile to a complete stranger, and a non-Indigenous one at that? Maybe he was pandering to my expectations, performing the ‘drunk blackfella’ that the white locals of Darwin expect him to be. And what about my part in the performance? Longgrassers don’t approach just anyone – racist white locals can be dangerous (Watt 2002). Maybe it was our young appearance, our colourful clothes bought from local markets, or my friend’s dark South Asian skin that signaled to him that we were a safe target for humbugging. My use of Aboriginal English also showed my willingness to cross the cultural divide. His honesty (if he was in fact being honest) provided me with an opportunity not to be shocked, displaying my tolerance and understanding of addiction, or maybe even displaying my knowledge that there would be other, deeper reasons behind his stereotypical reply. In Part 1 I will put forward a theoretical model for understanding multiple, intersecting performances such as this one that characterise race relations at the postcolonial frontier.

Contrary to my focus thus far, this thesis is about neither longgrassers nor Tiwi. This introduction to place was intended to be a window onto the musings, longings and resentments of those white people that choose to make their homes on the postcolonial frontier. Already, we can see at least three sub-groups of white people in the sketch I have drawn here. There are the ‘racist’ letter writers who complain openly of longgrasser disorder intruding into their otherwise tranquil urban spaces, and the more polite concerned citizens who seek to erect aesthetic fences around public facilities. There are the ‘antiracist’ longgrasser advocates who discern laws of etiquette in longgrasser behaviour and point to their prior dispossession. Then there are those ‘antiracist’ whites who live amongst anti-social behaviour and downplay its impact on their lives. It is from this latter group that the subjects of this ethnography are drawn, a group I call postcolonisers (see Chapter 2). These whites are highly influenced by their cross-cultural experiences, but are also, of course, a product of their histories. The recent political tussles over longgrassers I have outlined here are indicative of the wider political context of this ethnography. I will relate this wider context, which is the source both of the object of the ethnography, and the impulse to anthropologise that object, through my own story.

36 ‘Humbugging’ is an Aboriginal English term for begging (to strangers) or repeating asking a known person for something.
The self-determination era made me

When in 2001 the Northern Territory finally shed its reputation as the last bastion of conservative racism abhorred by the proponents of multicultural Australia, this was a late but probably inevitable move, as official sentiment towards Indigenous people had been reasonably warm for decades. The anti-colonial and civil rights movements that swept the world in the 1960s were also felt in Indigenous affairs in Australia, with the 1967 referendum commonly remembered as the time that over 90% of Australians voted to grant full civil rights to Indigenous people (although the referendum only meant that Indigenous people were included in the Census count and that the Commonwealth was able to legislate in relation to Indigenous people (see Chesterman & Galligan 1997). Since the early 1970s, the political landscape has been irreversibly changed by the development of land rights (that vary in their power across the country), the establishment of Indigenous community-controlled organisations, the creation of government strategies directing efforts to improve every aspect of Indigenous life, and the 1990s reconciliation movement. Funding for Indigenous-specific programs in areas of health, education, employment, housing, law and criminal justice, sport, and arts/culture has been, for the most part, continuously increasing over the past three decades.

This has been the self-determination era, with its catch-cries of ‘Indigenous control of Indigenous affairs’, ‘culturally-appropriate services’, ‘community consultation’, and ‘two-way learning’ (see Rowse 2000). An army of Indigenous professionals and para-professionals has been created – the Indigenous Community Cultural Development Officer, Aboriginal Health Worker, Community Policing Officer, Community Liaison Officer, Senior Indigenous Policy Advisor, Indigenous Counsellor, Customer Service Officer (Aboriginal) and the generic Indigenous Project Officer.

The rationales underlying these reforms are threefold: Indigenous people are the first peoples of this country; they have a distinct culture which is valuable in its own right, and valuable to the Australian nation; and Indigenous peoples have been subject to European...

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37 In stark contrast to the Commonwealth Government’s stand on refugees, which has become increasingly inhumane since the 1990s.
38 These titles are from the employment section of the Koori Mail (one of two national Indigenous newspapers), August 10th 2005.
invasion, and up to two centuries of poor treatment and ongoing disadvantage. These three arguments – **prior occupation**, **cultural distinctiveness**, and **disadvantage** – are invoked at different times, with different weightings, and often implicitly, but taken together they are surprisingly consistent and comprehensive justification for a variety of claims to special rights. This tripartite appeal means that the claims of indeed people are neither simply for justice (on the grounds they are disadvantaged), nor for minority justice (on the grounds they are a disadvantaged minority), but for **postcolonial justice**. As we will see, postcolonial justice is inflected with a historical narrative of invasion, dispossession and the more recent crimes of the ‘assimilation era’. The goal of the self-determination era has been to improve the lives of a disadvantaged minority, and through this, make up for the past.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the self-determination era has been the collection and analysis of Indigenous statistics by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and an array of research institutions, providing the information base for the Indigenous service industry. These statistics provide grist for the mill of sensational bad news that the media seems to thrive on: Indigenous people live about twenty years less on average that non-Indigenous Australians; only 34% are employed compared to 64.1% in the general population, and 50% are primarily dependent on welfare payments as opposed to 34.4% of all Australians; their average income is a paltry $387 a week, compared to $665 for other Australians, and so forth (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002a; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b; Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003).

These days, many of these ‘Indigenous’ figures are broken down into the categories of ‘remote’ and ‘non-remote’, categories determined by “the physical road distance to the nearest Urban Centre” (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b:78). About a quarter of the Indigenous population live in areas classified as remote, and the ‘remote’ statistics are always further from the norm than the aggregated Indigenous rate. For example, home ownership rates are 73% for the general population, and 26% for the total Indigenous population. But this figure of 26% is made up of a home ownership rate of 33% in non-

39 The figure for Indigenous employment excludes people participating in the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), a ‘work for the dole’ scheme where communities administer government training programs and participants receive the equivalent of the Unemployment Benefit for working 20 hours a week. People participating in this program are often counted as ‘employed’ in Indigenous employment statistics.
Introduction

remote areas, but less than 9% in remote areas. Employment, education, income, and most health indicators repeat this pattern. When we are told the all-Indigenous rates, as is usually the case, things are not as bad as they seem for the non-remote, and worse than they seem in remote areas. The statistics reveal other important differences. For instance, 38% of remote households report speaking an Aboriginal language at home, compared to only 0.6% of non-remote households. In Part 2 I will explore how the people in my ethnography deal with these differences and their implications, celebrating some statistics and ignoring others.

But in the mid 1990s, when I first came to care about Indigenous people in a specific, compelling way, remote and non-remote statistics were not provided, and even if they were, I would not have paid much attention. Any distinctions within the Indigenous population seemed academic when compared to the gross inequalities between Indigenous and the rest. I am a product of the self-determination era, the first generation for whom it was not novel that Indigenous history and culture was taught in schools, that affirmative action programs accompanied all major institutions, that all kinds of major events would commence with a ‘Welcome to Country’ speech from a local Traditional Owner, and that Indigenous people called Australia Day ‘Invasion Day’ and protested in great numbers.

It is important to note that, writing in 2006, it is likely that we are in the dusk of the self-determination era (see Cowlishaw, Kowal, & Lea 2006). After a decade in office, the conservative federal government have initiated major changes in Indigenous affairs, abolishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and declaring that government would deal directly with Indigenous communities as part of “new arrangements in Indigenous affairs” (Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination 2004). The catch cries of self-determination – Indigenous control, community consultation, cultural-appropriateness – are being replaced with ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘shared responsibility’ as neoliberalism stealthily replaces the liberal ideologies I describe in this thesis. Self-determination is increasingly equated with benign neglect and ‘throwing money’ at a

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40 Largely because efforts to collect accurate statistics in remote areas had not yet commenced.
41 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was an Indigenous arm of government run by an elected Indigenous board that was responsible for much service provision to Indigenous people. Note though that health services have been administered by the mainstream Department of Health since 1995 and the impact of these “new arrangements” on health is unclear (see Anderson 2004).
problem. In this time of paradigm shift, the phrase ‘the last 30 years’ is becoming code for everything that is wrong in Indigenous communities. However, the subjects of this ethnography, like me, are products of the self-determination era (mostly aged between 30 and 50), and in 2006 Indigenous health research is still largely buffered from attacks on community control. Keep in mind, though, that the world I present in this ethnography may be a vanishing one.

The central questions of this thesis arose from an underlying theme of my life thus far: an ongoing quest for social justice. These questions are liable to be misunderstood out of context, and so I must indulge in a little autobiography. I was born and raised in Melbourne, the grandchild of four Jewish Holocaust survivors who fled rural Poland after the war stripped them of everything save their lives. Australia was an unknown haven from the massive cemetery that their native land had become. They had different reasons for choosing Australia over Canada, Argentina, Israel, or America: my maternal grandmother because Australia was the place on the globe furtherest from Europe; my paternal grandfather had a distant relation here. They eked out an existence working in factories and sent their children to public schools where they excelled, went to university, and made the transition to the middle-classes. I was brought up in an inner Melbourne suburb full of old white ladies and private schools. As I was a smart girl, good at maths and science, medicine was the obvious option, though I tempered it with a concurrent arts degree in history and anthropology. From the time I started at Melbourne University in the early 1990s, I was an activist, fighting against the introduction of university fees (we lost), a free East Timor (won that eventually), and women’s rights (at least a partial victory). It seemed obvious to me that since I was so lucky, blessed with education and material security, I should devote my spare time and energy to helping those less fortunate, the oppressed of this world, whose suffering my privilege depended on. I wanted to give something back to the world that I took so much from.

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42 This example from Noel Pearson: …over the last 30 years government has intruded in terms of delivering services into normal family functions of child rearing and aged care and everything else and that's produced a numbing and crippling passivity (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2000).
I first became interested in Aboriginal justice issues in 1996 when I was in the national capital Canberra protesting the Howard government’s first budget which slashed funding to the tertiary education sector. I was vaguely aware that as well as attacking education, Howard was cutting the budget of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the government arm for Indigenous service delivery led by elected leaders. A group of students from Melbourne University drove up to Canberra in a university minibus. Naïvely, we had not organised any accommodation and planned to camp on the grounds of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy\textsuperscript{43} opposite Old Parliament House. We left late, and by the time we completed the 9 hour drive it was 3am. We found a group of people still awake, playing guitar and singing around a campfire, and asked them if we could camp there. They happily agreed, and it wasn’t until the morning that we realised we were the only non-Indigenous people camping at the Embassy. We participated in the vigorous protests led by the union movement, even breaking the glass doors of Parliament House. The following day was the Indigenous Day of Protest. A huge number and range of Indigenous groups participated, and I was deeply affected by their stories. I realised then that the struggle for justice for Indigenous people was the primary struggle of this country. This became a kind of mantra, directing my energies away from East Timor, free education and women, and into Indigenous activism.

After that, I became involved in a newly formed student Indigenous solidarity group which became the primary focus of my activism. Our work centred on educating non-Indigenous people about the history of colonisation and of Aboriginal resistance; issues in the contemporary Aboriginal community; and racism and the workings of whiteness in our society. We worked with the local Koori community, and particularly with Kooris studying at Melbourne University. In the fifth year of my medical degree, I arranged to spend three months based at the community-controlled health centre at Utopia, a remote community 300km north-east of Alice Springs. I fell in love with the country and the people there. I felt for the first time that I had found a medical job I could imagine myself doing – a doctor in a remote Aboriginal community. As soon as my marathon 8 years of undergraduate education was over, at the age of 25, I bought my first car, a second-hand Toyota four wheel drive, packed it up with my belongings and drove 4,000km to Darwin to begin my

\textsuperscript{43} A protest camp established in 1972 and maintained since by a contingent of Canberra Indigenous activists.
internship at the Royal Darwin Hospital (RDH), the only public hospital in Darwin and the tertiary referral centre for all of the Northern Territory and the neighbouring parts of Queensland and Western Australia.

**Figure 9:** Picture of the author at Utopia with Patsy Ross, Robin Ross and child, 1998

I arrived between Christmas and New Years Eve to stay with friends until I found my own place. The humidity was at its annual peak, and for three days I felt I was in a fog, unable to think of anything but the oppressive heat and the ineffectiveness of the fan over my bed. I recovered in time to start work at RDH, where at least 60% of the patients at any one time were Aboriginal. The air-conditioned hospital was too cold for most of the Aboriginal patients, and the concreted area outside the main doors was always buzzing with life, cute young kids running around, family groups sitting and talking in various Aboriginal languages, eating chips from the cafeteria and passing around a cigarette with tubes and bags of bodily fluids protruding from hospital gowns.

During my last years of medical study I was drawn to prevention and public health, as it seemed the most effective way to improve the health of everyone, and counter the massive spending of public money at the disease end of the spectrum on overpriced drugs and
diagnostic tests. Once someone sought medical attention, while you could usually treat their immediate needs, it showed you had already failed to improve the social conditions that made them sick, and would make them sick again. At Utopia, and later in Papua New Guinea where I did my anthropology honours fieldwork for my arts degree, it was clear to me that public health was where investments should be made.

It wasn’t long after starting work in the hospital that I became interested in the Indigenous health research institute next door, the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research. They held weekly meetings that many hospital staff attended, and I eagerly listened to tales of community health promotion projects where researchers supported the local people to identify and resolve their own health priorities. Their presentations were littered with happy snaps of Indigenous people cheerfully participating in the research, family groups, kids playing up for the camera, beautiful island beaches and lily-strewn billabongs, fresh crabs and damper roasting on the fire. In my personal journey of methodically applying myself to what I thought to be the most important cause, and by the most effective means I was capable of, the Darwin Institute seemed the next logical step. Having trained as a doctor, Indigenous health was the most important area to work in; within Indigenous health, public health was the most effective way to improve health; and to ensure that public health methods worked as well as they could, we needed good quality public health research. So I began infiltrating the Institute, introducing myself to people after lunchtime meetings, having coffee with researchers after ward rounds, even learning a local Indigenous language in anticipation of remote community work, and after a year of exhausting hospital work I had lined up my first job at the Institute as a public health researcher.

Finally, it was me that was flying on a tiny plane to a remote community, shyly meeting the council chairman and thanking him for letting me visit, explaining our project to Aboriginal Health Workers at the health centre with the aid of a brightly-coloured flipchart, tentatively trying out the language phrases I had learnt. Soon I was adopted into the community I visited most, as the sister of a single woman I was working with, and I could then learn the kinship relationships I had with the people I already knew – my mother-in-law, my brother’s son, and my maternal grandmother. I tried hard to organise the hire of a car on the

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44 In Aboriginal English ‘language’ refers to an Indigenous language, for example, ‘speaking language’ means speaking an Indigenous language.
community, knowing from my time at Utopia that it would pay off in the form of a weekend hunting trip. I enthusiastically went into the mangroves with the women, immediately covered in thick black mud and sandfly bites, and tried to follow their instructions about the particular attributes of a hole in the mud which indicated that digging there will produce a juicy mussel. Afterwards, sitting exhausted around the fire afterwards as we cooked up the catch, legs partially washed off in the sea and a slight breeze relieving my sunburn, a cup of strong sweet tea and warm damper with golden syrup was like heaven.

After two years of intermittent remote community work, combined with long stretches in front of a computer in town, translating the work into quantifiable outcomes and lists of remaining challenges (accompanied by happy snaps just like those I had once envied in the weekly meetings), as well as a few consultancy jobs coordinating-research-to-inform-national-Indigenous-health-policy-agendas, I felt I was developing a good sense of what the Indigenous public health research game was about. There were plenty of fabulous non-Indigenous people working at the Institute, skilled, friendly, committed to Indigenous self-determination, and there were a few people who seemed to be primarily concerned with furthering their own careers. The Indigenous staff at the Institute, while in general less formally educated than most of the non-Indigenous staff, were mostly diligent and great to work with, although a few seemed to work very short hours and to be more interested in self-promotion than getting the job done. While many staff tried to be innovative in their work, they sometimes complained that their bosses or their funders would not let them work in a way the community really wanted them to.

In other words, the Institute was not that different from any other bureaucracy. But the rhetoric of the Institute promised so much more. The buzzwords were all there: Indigenous control of research, working with communities, capacity building, doing things differently. There was an Indigenous ethics committee with veto rights over projects that failed to meet Indigenous ethical principles, and the major funder of projects demanded that research proposals demonstrate a high level of real Indigenous participation - not just token Indigenous research assistants but Indigenous co-investigators, Indigenous reference groups, and the incorporation of Indigenous methodologies into research designs. I had read Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s Decolonising Methodologies (Smith 1999) and Richard Trudgen’s
Why Warriors Lie Down and Die (Trudgen 2000). I knew the legacy of exploitative, disempowering research practices (Humphery 2001; Thomas 2004), and I saw that the only solution to Indigenous health was for researchers and their funders to truly commit to supporting Indigenous communities to identify their own health priorities and find culturally-appropriate solutions (Henry et al. 2002a; Humphery 2000). I had tried to work that way for two years, the most obvious example being the online resource I produced for a community development organisation at Galiwin’ku on Elcho Island.45

Having reached the pinnacle of my own instrumentalism, the place where the rhetoric and level of resources meant there was the most potential of anywhere to find the real solutions to Indigenous health, I found myself somewhat disillusioned. My callow enthusiasm was disappointed, for instance, at the power plays that went on between staff that overshadowed the cooperation that was needed; at the way that some projects which were widely promoted by the Institute and government as ‘the answer’ seemed full of dysfunction on the inside; at the ease with which staff would criticise other projects as disempowering or even racist, but would not offer any useful assistance. Above all, I was disappointed in the faulty logic of some of the arguments explaining why research hadn’t worked in the past and why Indigenous control would fix the problem. The tendency to demonise white researchers in particular seemed a highly inadequate way to explain the situation, once I had got to know many of them, and of course become one myself.

All of these scenarios were saturated with the moral politics of race and identity, sometimes explicit, sometimes just under the surface but no less powerful. A question from a seminar audience member about a project, such as the method of payment of Indigenous community research staff, could imply that the white researcher was not paying their Indigenous staff sufficiently and was thus exploitative and perhaps racist, and require a detailed justification to deflect the implication. Where projects were presented to the public, white researchers would take great pains to present an ‘Indigenous face’, editing themselves out of videos, preparing presentations for Indigenous colleagues but remaining silent themselves, and perhaps exaggerating the role of community members in the project. Conflicts between Indigenous staff could include questioning of the person’s stated tribal affiliation or their

45 See http://yalu.ntu.edu.au
very Indigeneity. Whites were reluctant to question anything an Indigenous person said, even if it was clearly wrong. As I cynically wrote in my PhD journal in the first months of my candidature: *In the political world of research reform we don’t have arguments, we have positions. And the position of the ‘authentic Aboriginal voice’ [see Chapter 4] trumps even the most eloquent argument, and has no need for it.*

Let me stress that this thesis is not an airing of dirty institutional laundry. The pages that follow do not outline the sordid details of scenes I have briefly sketched here. My gesturing towards these stories is only to show how I came to realise that a lot of the effort expended in the name of improving Indigenous health was actually more about creating and maintaining racialised identities. In an *Indigenous* health institute, those who walk through the front doors every day are not just *people*, they are Indigenous people or non-Indigenous people. The space of the Institute is an always-already racialised space. And if we look more closely at the racial identities circulating around in people’s minds, they immediately multiply: the Indigenous people could be ‘community people’, or ‘urban people’; the non-Indigenous people could be ‘white people’ or non-white *and* non-Indigenous, the whites could be ‘rednecks’ or antiracist (people who are both non-white and non-Indigenous are somewhat immune from being racist); and there might be people who are not yet known to the viewer and best classified as ‘possibly-Indigenous’. There seemed to be a lot of work going into maintaining one’s racial identity, and for whites, maintaining a specific racial identity as a *good* white person, a part of the solution and not the problem, *not* an ignorant, exploitative, racist white person. I finally found the start of an answer to that fundamental question I sometimes asked myself in times of frustration - ‘what the hell are we white people actually doing here??’ At about that time I decided to do a PhD in anthropology, and soon realised that the perfect topic was right under my nose.

The personal story I have told here is one of activism followed by a degree of disillusion. It is a story repeated, in many different forms, by many people who populate this ethnography. From analysing these narratives, a larger picture emerged of the entire postcolonial project of remediating the effects of colonialism. Following the form of this story, this thesis is structured around two questions: *What does it mean to be a white antiracist? What does it mean to question white antiracism?* The first question is the subject of Part 2, and the second is the subject of Part 3. Part 1 lays the theoretical ground
for the thesis, and Part 4 brings the analysis to its conclusion and considers some implications.
Part 1 – Theoretical locations

In the Introduction, I located this research geographically and politically. In this section, I locate the project theoretically. I begin with a review of some relevant work in anthropology and related disciplines. I discuss some problems inherent to an anthropology of liberalism, some of which have been evident in the conduct of this research. I also review the methods used in this project and provide an overview of the argument of the thesis. My analysis of white antiracists centres on the concept of the ‘postcolonial’. In Chapter 2, I explore what is meant by ‘postcolonial’ and related terms, and show how the location of this ethnography fits this description. In Chapter 3 I draw on a range of critical theories to explore the encounter between Indigenous people and white antiracists at the Institute, encounters through which knowledge and identities are created and sustained.
Chapter 1: The anthropology of white liberals

This thesis presents a postcolonial ethnography of white left-wing people, or in U.S. terms, white liberals.\footnote{‘Liberals’ is the name of the conservative party in Australia, so the term can be confusing in Australia. This thesis mostly uses the more specific term ‘white antiracists’. See Chapter 6: Postcolonial logic = Remedialism + Orientalism for a discussion of liberalism.} Although such ethnographic research is an emerging area of interest in anthropology, there is currently relatively little scholarship in this area, Historically, anthropology’s subject has been the non-white ‘Other’, and it is only in recent decades that the study of white people has become an accepted part of the discipline (for instance, the American Anthropological Association’s Society for the Anthropology of Europe was first convened in 1986).\footnote{Anthropology also came late to the study of urban places, with the increasing acceptance of “anthropology at home” only since the 1970s (Smart & Smart 2003). The exception is medical anthropology, which has been examining Western biomedicine for longer. However, as concerns of race and colonialism have not been prominent in much medical anthropology, and vice versa (Anderson 2002a:647), I have only drawn on recent literature in this subfield (for example Nichter & Lock 2002) and the related field of postcolonial science studies (Anderson 2002a).}

For the most part, I depend on anthropological work that draws on and contributes to postcolonial theory (which greatly overlaps with what is known as race critical theory (Essed & Goldberg 2002)). This theoretical trajectory takes as some of its luminaries Fanon, Said, Bhabha, Spivak, Asad, Hall, Gilroy and Appadurai, and draws on European theorists including Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Benjamin, Althusser, Deleuze, and always, always Foucault. This takes in a large part of contemporary U.S. cultural anthropology that considers how race and difference play out in a rapidly changing, postcolonial and globalised world.\footnote{For a selection of representative work see Inda & Rosaldo 2002 and Ong & Collier 2005.}

Although postcolonial anthropology is concerned with the effects of Western colonialism on the colonised world and vice versa, actual white people are often absent from this anthropology.\footnote{This can in part be attributed to the fact that the discipline of anthropology, anxious to transcend its political and practical association with the colonial legacy (Asad 1973; Clifford & Marcus 1986), has been more eager to employ liberal critiques than to critique liberalism.} For most of the ethnographies I cite at various points, their treatment of white people is marginal to their main fare. The tourists who consult Ayurvedic practitioners (Langford 2002), the jetsetting development consultants (Mosse 2005), and
the mountain-climbing friends of Sherpas (Adams 1996) all hover on the periphery, while their direct and indirect effects on the subaltern is the focus.\(^{50}\) In this ethnography it is, conversely, the subalterns whose ethereal presence haunts the white people. While critics could argue that fieldwork with Indigenous people is also required to tell the full story with its interconnected, multivocal complexity (Fischer & Marcus 1999), this ethnography risks breadth for depth of analysis in the hope that elucidating the logic of white antiracism will tell a new story about the postcolonial frontier.

As development workers share many features with antiracist health researchers, ethnographies of development have proven particularly useful resources for this study. Both groups consist predominantly of white, educated and left-wing people who have sought out proximity to the disadvantaged, non-white others they seek to help. The current discourse of development, with its emphasis on four key words - “participation, empowerment, local and community” – is concordant with the emancipatory discourses of white antiracists that are the focus of this thesis (Fisher 1997:442). Early anthropological work in the 1990s challenged the idea of development as a wholly positive process, emphasising the flaws in its logics and its continuities with colonial imperialism (see for example Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990), and the complicity of anthropology in such deficiencies (Escobar 1991; Little & Painter 1995). More recent work has built on these earlier insights to create a more nuanced picture of the complicities and resistances of development (Baviskar 1995; Mosse 2005; Tsing 1999, 2005).

Australian anthropologists have not featured greatly in the work cited thus far. I have said that the subject of this ethnography (white liberals) makes it a rarity in anthropology generally. Its theoretical stance makes it a rarity in Australian anthropology. Australian anthropology has historically been influenced more by U.K. than U.S. scholars, and thus the reach of postcolonial theory has been both limited and controversial (Lattas 2006).\(^{51}\) In the twentieth century Australian anthropology moved from ‘salvage anthropology’ to a ‘continuity and change’ approach that emphasises the continuation of the ‘traditional’ or the

\(^{50}\) This, of course, is one of the main points of whiteness studies: whiteness is a dominant, but invisible force (see Dyer 1997).

\(^{51}\) The label “cultural anthropology” is still considered by many to be a liability for an Australian anthropologist, and many that use postcolonial/race critical theories self-identify with the U.K. term “social anthropology”.

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influence of the ‘traditional’ on the ‘modern’ (Hinkson and Smith 2005). Attention to colonialism as a relational phenomenon has remained a minority approach (see for example Beckett 1988; Cowlishaw & Morris 1997). While postcolonial theory is eschewed by many Australian anthropologists, it is employed in the small body of work that examines the benevolent white domain associated with the self-determination era (parts of Morris 1989 and Collman 1988 are early examples, Cowlishaw 1999; Cowlishaw 2003a; Hinkson & Smith 2005; Lea, Kowal, & Cowlishaw 2006; Levi & Dean 2003; Povinelli 2002; see also Muecke 2005). I draw on this Australian work, complemented by brief descriptions of white people that are sometimes included in accounts of Indigenous organisations (for example Myers 1985; Rowse 1992; Sullivan 1996; Tonkinson 1985). For their insightful analysis of the Australian liberal multicultural state, I am heavily indebted to Elizabeth Povinelli’s work, as well Tess Lea’s ethnography of a group of white liberals similar to my subjects: bureaucrats in the Northern Territory health department in the 1990s (Lea 2002).


The two interchangeable terms I use for the subjects of this ethnography are white antiracist and postcoliser. The second of these two terms I will consider in the next chapter. Just as I ask there, ‘Can Australia be postcolonial?’, one could ask, ‘Can white Australians be antiracist?’ In considering the term ‘white’ in this question, whiteness studies is a useful starting point.

Whiteness studies is a transdisciplinary field of scholarship that emerged in the 1990s. Initially through historical studies of how social groups such as Jews and the Irish moved from being non-white to being white (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995), and how class politics intersect with whiteness (Roediger 1991), whiteness studies revealed how being white is not a ‘natural’ category based on skin colour, but the structure through which white cultural

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52 Note that my use of “white domain” is in relation to the “Aboriginal domain” as it is understood in Australian anthropology (Rowse 1992).
dominance is reproduced and maintained (Frankenberg 1993). Whiteness is the invisible (in the sense of “unmarked”) yet pervasive set of cultural practices that work to maintain the privileges of those identified as white by designating people and structures that differ from them as ‘other’. This seamless dualism erases the sociohistorical context of both white privilege and subaltern oppression, making it ‘natural’ that some people (mostly, but not always, those with white skin) can look, talk, and behave in ways that guarantee they will, for example, be served promptly in shops and be treated with respect by the police (see McIntosh 1990).

My use of the term ‘white’ in this ethnography follows this concept. It does not intimate that all my research participants had white skin, or even that they all identified as white (though both of these conditions apply to most of them). Rather, it implies that they willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly participate in the racialised societal structure that positions them as ‘white’ and accordingly grants them the privileges associated with the dominant Australian culture. According to this schema, a non-white person with sufficient Western education, income and other forms of status (including an Indigenous person) can enact whiteness (through dress, talk, behaviour) and receive its associated privileges.

Having dealt with the issue of whiteness, let’s return to the question of whether a white Australian can be antiracist. In the Introduction, I signaled some potential signs of antiracism that emerged in the 1990s: membership of a local reconciliation group, supporting campaigns for increased funding for Indigenous health or for compensation for the Stolen Generations, attending a NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration) march, and so on.

These cultural phenomena might suggest a shift in power relations that can reasonably be called antiracist. However, scholars in the field of critical race theory are suspicious of the

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53 Whiteness studies has been taken up by a number of scholars in Australia (see for instance Haggis 2004, Moreton-Robinson 2004 and Probyn 2004).

54 Although I use ‘white’, the most salient term that my research participants identify as is ‘non-Indigenous’. The term reflects the fact that in my field site (as in all postcolonial spaces, of which see the next chapter) Indigeneity is the indexical identity. I dislike this term as it is a negative identity, and enacts the discomfort that postcolonisers have for their own agency (see Chapter 8) and the invisibility that whiteness studies has taught us about. I prefer ‘white’ as it names a distinct identity, and because the unease it produces in my research subjects acts as a catalyst for further inquiry.
idea that multiculturalism, reconciliation and the like signal an end to racism. Rather, they contend that racism takes on new forms or adopts new veils, such as “cultural fundamentalism” (Stolcke 1995) or “neo-racism” (Balibar 1991). Even worse, multiculturalism and antiracism are co-opted by neoliberals who try to dismantle affirmative action by arguing it is ‘racist’ to judge someone on the basis of their race (Mullings 2005).

While critical race theorists have considered whether a society can be antiracist or postracist, whiteness studies scholars have focused on whether a white person can be an antiracist. From its inception in the 1990s to recent work, whiteness studies has been primarily concerned with highlighting how whiteness functions to privilege white people. The figure of the white antiracist – the white person that actively acknowledges and seeks to give up their privilege - has thus provoked profound ambivalence and much debate. Although there is a strand of scholarship on “white allies”(Aveling 2004), generally the white antiracist is an object of intense critical suspicion (Ahmed 2004; Bush 2004; Jensen 2006). Lipsitz, among others, writes of the “impossibility of the antiracist white subject” (Lipsitz 1998). In a recent popular book, Jensen argues that white privilege is so fundamental to the workings of Western society that unless white people are willing to “negate their whiteness”, the best a white antiracist can achieve is to move from “naïve white supremacy” to “profoundly conscious white supremacy” (Jensen 2006). Other scholars have argued that antiracist workshops act to reinscribe the racial categories that purport to subvert (exploiting non-white workshop participants in the process) (Srivasta 1994), and that “liberal whiteness” is both dependent on white privilege and serves to conceal it (Wiegman 1999).

While this study may inform work on whether white antiracism is possible, it does not directly engage with it. As this is an anthropological study, I am concerned with the culture and discourse of antiracism. ‘Antiracism’ functions here as a belief system, rather than as a philosophical position that must be justified, or even a psychological state (the absence of racism) that must be proven (Bonnett 1997 and 2000a). When I call the subjects of this

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55 Of course, these arguments assume a ‘level playing field’, obfuscating the historical and ongoing systematic disadvantage that affirmative action is designed to counter.

56 Hartigan (2005:231-256) makes a similar critique of U.S. antiracism (see also Bonnett 1997).
Part 1: Chapter 1

ethnography antiracist, this does not imply that the white people who use antiracist discourse and identify with an antiracist subjectivity are ‘genuinely’ antiracist. I consider ‘antiracism’ here as a facet of subjectivity and hence, for my purposes, an antiracist is simply someone who identifies as an antiracist.\(^{57}\)

This would prove profoundly unsatisfying for a whiteness studies scholar, who would argue that my position reinscribes white privilege by taking ‘antiracists’ at face value, colluding with their attempts to evade their implication in the “new racial order” (Winant 2001).\(^{58}\) In turn, I would argue that much work in whiteness studies is blinded by its emancipatory politics to the nuances of the very object of their study. Although some aspects of white subjectivities act (either by design or effect or both) to fortify white dominance, others do not. Insightful analysis of white liberals is thus limited when the sole purpose of the inquiry is to engage in the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1970), revealing their liberalism as false and their subjectivity as invalid.\(^{59}\) While this study is likely to contain work useful for whiteness studies scholars, it could not have been conducted through the prism of whiteness studies.

**Critiquing liberalism, urgent need, and reality**

Critiquing liberalism is a hazardous exercise. To take as an anthropological object those things most people see as inherently good – be it participation of villagers in development projects (Mosse 2001), AIDS activism in the Ivory Coast (Nguyen 2005), or self-determination remote Indigenous communities (Cowlishaw 1999) – is to invite suspicion. Why would one want to analyse these things except to criticise them? And why would one want to criticise them except for two possible reasons: either you are a neoliberal who

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\(^{57}\) In this thesis, I deliberately use the word “antiracist” without a hyphen as I conceptualise antiracism as an autonomous knowledge system rather than the opposite to “racism” (analogous to my use of “white” rather than “non-Indigenous”).

\(^{58}\) In his ethnography of whiteness in Detroit, Hartigan deflects parallel criticism of his “minoritarism” approach to whiteness by arguing that analysis of the “ambiguities and uncertainties” of contemporary racial dynamics are better suited to post-civil rights US society where the hegemony and invisibility of whiteness are highly contested (Hartigan 1999:17).

\(^{59}\) This is what I call an *inauthenticity critique*. In Chapter 6 I argue that this style of argument is itself a key feature of the brand of liberalism adopted by the white anti-racists in this ethnography.
thinks that liberalism is wrong (e.g. worrying about participation is a waste of time); or you agree with liberalism, and think that it is not being properly executed (e.g. participation is important and should be done better). As either option spells trouble, the liberal objects of anthropological attention are likely to be wary.

In describing his ethnography of a development project in India, David Mosse details the political obstacles he overcame to see his work in print. While most of his development colleagues and research participants agreed wholeheartedly with his analysis of how a successful aid project was constructed, a number of those in managerial positions objected strongly to his work. They thought he was unfairly critical of their development project, and made their concerns widely known to the book’s publisher, his head of department, the ethics committee of his university and the chair of his professional organisation (Mosse 2005:ix-x).

This project is an anthropology of liberal activism (in the form of Indigenous health research), and it has produced a similar discomfort in some. But more than that, the recipients of the succour on offer are interpellated in a direct relationship to the liberals concerned as colonised to coloniser. While Mosse’s experience was certainly fuelled by a fear of organisational blame, in my case, to be perceived as casting aspersions on white Australian liberals is tantamount to calling them colonisers and racists. And often, the corollary is even more crucial: to be perceived as being ‘soft’ on them is tantamount to colluding with their racism and thus being racist. These effects are demonstrated by my experience in negotiating this project.

On the one hand, I benefited greatly from the intense interest in the ethics of Indigenous research and the efforts to “decolonize” it (Smith 1999), especially as my project was initially framed in broadly utilitarian terms. It is a commonly held belief that Indigenous research should be in the control of Indigenous people and there are structures in place to facilitate Indigenous control (like Indigenous ethics committees and special requirements of funding bodies), but were these reforms making a difference to the research practices of non-Indigenous researchers? Far from closed doors and institutional anxiety, I instead encountered widespread interest and support for my project. For who could object, unless they wanted to hide their unscrupulous research practices?
Where there was anxiety, it was more likely to be about possible epistemological violence to Indigenous people rather than possible damage to white reputations. An academic from my university department asked me point blank whether I supported the ‘Indigenous Research Reform Agenda’ (an approach to research characterised by emancipatory politics that privilege Indigenous voices (Rigney 1999)), and when I responded by trying to explain that my approach to anthropology meant that nothing was immune from critical analysis, he replied that if he thought that my work would ‘in any way harm the [Indigenous] community’, he would intervene [Journal 2/5/05:9]. Another white academic was openly hostile to my project because “analysis/representation of non-Indigenous health researchers and of Indigenous co-researchers has the potential to offend and harm both groups.” In a paper about the ways that ‘culture’ is used in constructions of Indigenous ill-health, one researcher objected to my use of the phrase “the construction of a fragile, damaged but revivable culture” (see Kowal 2006). Using the word “damaged” was offensive, they said. I pointed out that the sentence did not say that Indigenous culture was damaged, but that some people wrote and talked about it if it were ‘damaged’, but this made little impact [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:20]. Such criticism stems from a distaste of mentioning any negative concept alongside Indigeneity. If such a reference is made for the purposes of understanding a racist discourse, then it may be acceptable, but only if dripping with caveats.

These experiences stem partly from my colleagues’ concerns about reinforcing negative stereotypes of Indigenous people, a legitimate and important concern that I share. This was part of the reason I chose to research white people and not Indigenous people. As prominent Indigenous activist Gary Foley used to tell my student activist group, “don’t worry about us, you work on your own mob”. But rather than allaying anxiety among my colleagues, this analytical choice seems to have heightened their apprehension. This reflects two phenomena: a general discomfort about the role of white people in Indigenous affairs, (an issue I take up in detail in Chapter 8), and a related unease about research that is not overtly utilitarian.

As my project progressed, my interests became less utilitarian and more theoretical. Parallel with this was an increasing skepticism among some white antiracists regarding the value of my research. A few of the participants in my ethnography have also expressed criticism of
my research (while many others have been interested and supportive). One researcher thought it was ‘indulgent’ to try and understand the position of white researchers, asking bluntly, “Who benefits from your research?” [Fieldnotes 10/10/04 2:5]. My pleas that Indigenous people might indirectly benefit from the improved research practices that might result from my research were far from convincing. Another found my case for the inherent value of anthropological understanding morally unacceptable: “it’s not good enough any more, just to understand…because, meanwhile, Aboriginal communities are still having inexcusable rates of violence and chronic disease” [Transcript 8:7]. After one encounter with this researcher where both of us become frustrated discussing my research, she photocopied for me a Linda Tuhiwai-Smith quote that she keeps pinned to her cubicle:

Research continues relentlessly and brings with it a new wave of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation. Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets, they bring medicine into villages and extract blood for genetic analysis. No matter how appalling their behaviours, how insensitive and offensive their personal actions may be, their acts and intentions are always justified as being for the ‘good of mankind’. Research of this nature on Indigenous people is still justified by the ends rather than the means, particularly if the indigenous people concerned can still be positioned as ignorant and undeveloped (savages).

I gloss the cause of this set of experiences as ‘My Political Problem’. It is a hazard of working as a cultural anthropologist in an arena where discourses of “urgent need” circulate freely. Here’s a crude but effective exercise: type into a Google search the words “Indigenous”, “health”, “Australia” and “urgent need”, and you get 500,000 hits. The links on the first page tell us that housing, the alleviation of poverty, youth suicide, and disadvantage, Indigenous health personnel, education on cultural safety, better planning and coordination of funding, better Aboriginal health promotion, and research that preserves cultural heritage are all urgently needed.60 In this environment, some see research of any kind as a waste of precious resources. As one audience member commented at a seminar on mental health research, “Isn’t it trite to give people a questionnaire when kids in Arnhem...”

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60 I should make it clear that I also experience a sense of urgency and desperation at times, most acutely in the delivery of medical care to Indigenous people through my clinical work.
land are hanging themselves every night? Shouldn’t we be trying to find out how to fix the problem instead?” [Fieldnotes 4/4/05 3:64].

While this discourse of urgent need casts moral uncertainty over any research effort, it is particularly difficult to carve out a foothold for critical analysis. For a start, it is difficult to justify spending ‘Indigenous money’ on researching white people, even if you can make an argument that Indigenous people may benefit indirectly. And if I am looking at research practices, surely I must be aiming to improve them, to give control more effectively to Indigenous people and to improve health outcomes. How can I justify my research project otherwise?

This is the converse of the problem that Charles Hale recently discussed. Hale is an anthropologist of Latin America and a proponent of ‘activist research’, a type of anthropology that unashamedly admits dual loyalties to the intellectual endeavor and to the emancipation of the oppressed (a method that produces “emancipatory knowledge”)(Hale 2006). While he complains of being ostracised by anthropological colleagues for practicing activist research, my problem is the risk of being ostracised at my field site for not doing activist research. It may be that all subjects of anthropological research expect anthropologists to take up the subjects’ moral positionings as their own, but when one is “studying up” this expectation has particular weight.

A number of theorists have addressed the political consequences of critiquing emancipatory discourses. Muecke explains that a literary criticism of Indigenous texts that could transcend the automatic praise of the authentic Indigenous voice would result in “an intensification of the scrutiny of these social fields where power relations are exercised,

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61 For a relevant discussion of the ethics of social research in a community beset by environmental health issues, see (Kroll-Smith & Couch 1990).
62 A number of times I pointed out to people that my PhD was supported by a Public Health scholarship, not an Indigenous Health scholarship (thus ‘Indigenous’ money was not being spent on researching white people), and offered an explanation as to how Indigenous people might benefit, if indirectly, from my research.
63 In negotiating this tricky terrain, made more hazardous by being white, young and outspoken, my best defence was my supervisor, an Indigenous professor of public health, perhaps the most influential and respected figure in Indigenous health in Australia, and luckily for me, also a critical theorist and supporter of my work. My perceived ability to have captured his highly-sought-after attention was crucial in the acceptance of my work and my presence in my field site, and in Indigenous health forums generally. Although I would prefer to defend my work on its own merits, I suspect that this trump card of identity politics was an indispensable aid in maintaining the viability of my project.
rather than the endorsement of romances of liberation” (Muecke 2005:119). Anna Tsing’s ethnography of environmentalism in Indonesia takes these moral and political dilemmas seriously. She sees the kinds of issues I have discussed above as an opposition between scholarly theory and activist practice. Since the outright support for activist projects lessened in the 1990s, anthropologists have made important contributions to activist discourses (such as questioning the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘participation’), but they have also “dampened the spirit of advocacy, making those who wanted to change the world seem self-aggrandizing, if effective, or silly, if not.” (Tsing 2005:265) She argues that academic scholarship needs to re-engage with practitioners, learning to “tell a story that both acknowledges imperial power and leaves room for possibility…to encourage critical purchase without cutting off the strings of hope” (Tsing 2005:267). While these concerns remain a backdrop to this thesis, my goal here is to delineate a white antiracist subjectivity notwithstanding the political implications of this task.

‘My Political Problem’, then, consists of negotiating the racial politics of white-person-speaking-about-things-Indigenous (ironically, as I explicitly set out to speak about things-white), and carving out a space for non-activist research in a climate of urgent need. A crucial tool for this task is to insist on a distinction between critique, which seeks to understand an object of study through careful analysis of its construction; and criticism, which can include critique but which also seeks to judge and, in many instances, reform an object of study. As Foucault put it, “A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.” (Kritzman 1988:155 cited in Palsson & Rabinow 2005:91).

This distinction is at the heart of the “gap” that Mosse identifies between him and some of his research participants:

[כ]Ethnographic writing opens a rift between different epistemologies, meanings and views of responsibility, between the domains of managerial optimism [or emancipatory research] and critical reflection; a gap which now separated me from some other members of the project community. (Mosse 2005:xi, parenthesis added)
In my experience, this gap is often too wide for the anthropologist to bridge. The two concepts of critique and criticism are invariably conflated by those in the field, and I am quickly interpellated onto either the left or the right of the political spectrum. It is assumed that either I think that white antiracists are actually racists in disguise (the left-wing position), or that all this antiracist codswallop is just a politically-correct waste of time and money (the right-wing position). Addition explanatory models are needed to sustain a space for critical reflection on liberal assemblages. Two methodological formulations that I have found useful for explaining my approach are the now-banal caveat about representations, and methodological agnosticism.

When ‘Indigenous people’, ‘white people’, ‘cultural appropriateness’, ‘self-determination’ or any other term are discussed in this thesis, there are always implied quotation marks around these terms, even where I do not include them for aesthetic reasons. Where I evoke such categories, I am not talking about the reality of individual people, ideas, and situations. Rather, I am talking about representations which correspond to ‘reality’ with varying accuracy. These representations are produced and reproduced in documents, the media, public seminars, and corridor and dinner party conversations. (In Chapters 3 and 4, I flesh out this idea with regard to how representations of Indigeneity and white antiracism are created and inhabited.)

But my research participants, and perhaps readers of this thesis, are still unlikely to be satisfied, and with good reason. It’s all very well to talk about representations and discourse, but how can you just ignore their relationship to reality? In reply, I would argue for what I call methodological agnosticism. That means that for methodological purposes, I have no opinion about what white antiracism, cultural appropriateness, or self-determination really do or should consist of. The anthropologist should engage in critical analysis, and leave it to others to make axiological and ontological judgments.

This agnosticism has two distinct aspects: moral agnosticism, and agnosticism about reality. Moral agnosticism is the insistence on distancing oneself from political or moral stances. I reject the idea that all research in Indigenous health must be aligned with

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64 Being asked for my opinion by research participants on, for instance, on why Indigenous health is bad is another manifestation of this concern.
emancipatory discourses, for the same reason that I maintain some distance from whiteness studies: I think that anthropological analysis is hampered by moral commitments. In this I am again following Foucault who argued that critical inquiry required that one “circumvent the anthropological universals (and, of course, those of a humanism that would assert the rights, the privileges, and the nature of a human being as an immediate and timeless truth of the subject) in order to examine them as historical constructs”. Foucault is quick to point out that this “does not imply that what these notions refer to is nothing, or that they are only chimeras invented for the sake of a dubious cause.” (Foucault 1998a:459) This anthropology of liberal white people does not aim to degrade their quest of minimising human suffering and distributing wealth evenly, but to understand it better.

The second aspect of methodological agnosticism concerns reality. This means that for the purposes of understanding how discourses (or Indigenous people, white antiracists, or self-determination) are constructed, the ‘objective reality’ of these things are taken to be unknown and unknowable. Where representations contradict each other, as they often do, it is not my role to privilege one source over another as the authoritative one. Rather, my task is to understand how certain representations come to be accepted as truth, and others come to be contested.

Take the fused toilet doors of the Tiwi shops as an example (see the Introduction). On a recent, rare visit to the Tiwi shops, I found myself thinking of those toilet doors, fused shut by the council to stop longgrassers using them, as my neighbour had related. I decided to inspect them closely myself, and walked over to the toilet block behind the shops, ignoring the smell of urine and careful in my bare feet not to step on the broken glass that peppered the concrete. Finally, the truth was revealed – the gates, made of iron bars, were chained and padlocked, but not fused. Although part of me was disappointed that the ‘objective’ truth did not correspond to the story, another part of me was even more fascinated by it. That story, that fabulous image of doors fused shut, sparks flying around the council man in full safety gear, perhaps as longgrassers looked on (amused? puzzled? angry?), was an elaboration of the truth, a figment of someone’s creative imagination. As it circulates, the image becomes part of the collective local knowledge of life in Tiwi, my own slice of the postcolonial frontier. My approach does not demand the verification of my informant’s stories, although where I can pinpoint a discrepancy, the story tells me more, not less.
Again, the reader may raise an objection: it’s all very well to say that we can’t know reality, but reality matters. Indigenous people really get sick and die, and governments spend real money on the problem. How can you simply turn your back on this?

Bruno Latour (2004) has recently seriously considered the political implications of critique. He was motivated among other things by the science wars over climate change, and how some climate change skeptics use the idea that knowledge is a ‘social construction’ to argue against cutting greenhouse emissions. In regretting that a basic principle of critique he helped to create (Latour & Woolgar 1979) had gone so awry, he reiterated the distinction between social constructivism (as it is commonly understood) and constructivism. To say something is socially constructed is taken to mean that it is not ‘real’, but merely an effect of either pressing social forces or the projection of individual desires. So to say that Indigenous culture is *socially constructed*, in this sense, might be to say that it is really the effect of colonisation and oppression, or that it is a projection of white people’s romanticisation.\(^{\text{65}}\)

In contrast, constructivism rejects the idea that ‘reality’ and ‘construction’ are opposites: rather, reality is the result of sound constructions. To say that Indigenous culture is *constructed* points to the numerous discourses that give it meaning, from anthropological concepts of culture to global discourses of indigenous rights. Thus the goal of a constructivist analysis is to “add reality and not subtract reality” (Latour 2004:232) by elucidating “the collective process that ends up as solid constructs through the mobilization of heterogeneous crafts, ingredients and coordination” (Latour 2003:31).\(^{\text{66}}\)

In my everyday life, I am very grateful that the representation of a red light for stop, or the civil discourse of refraining from violence toward strangers, are compelling to most people. I take the authority of these constructions for granted. But as an anthropologist, my job is to analyse compelling representations that occur in my field of interest.

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\(^{\text{65}}\) Latour rightly points out that these familiar critical moves depend on a displaced positivism where the object identified as the ‘underlying’ cause of the construction (be it social forces, the unconscious, or genes) is arbitrarily and implicitly the only thing granted the status of ‘reality’.  
\(^{\text{66}}\) For a full account of constructivism see Latour 1993 and 1999.
Methods and Process

Interviews and Participant-Observation

Participant-observation is “the foundation of cultural anthropology” (Bernard 2002:322). As the name implies, it involves participating in an environment at the same time as observing it. Notes are taken in the form of field jottings, a diary, and field notes proper (which can be descriptive, methodological and analytical). Field notes and diary entries are analysed in an iterative fashion as the fieldwork progresses, with special attention to reflexivity, that is, reflecting on my own ethnographic practices and effects on the field site. Theoretical constructs are continuously developed further (initially as analytical field notes) and tested against new data.

In this project, the participant-observation consisted of working 0.5 FTE for a variety of research projects within a research division at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research under the direction of the division head, a senior researcher at the Institute. Eighteen people gave their written consent to participate in the participant-observation part of the project. I observed them as I worked with them on various research projects, in every office interaction, and in seminars and events we attended together. I accompanied researchers on five visits to remote communities.

There are many varieties of participant-observation; my role in this project would most aptly be called an observing participant, meaning that I am a full participant in the field site (as a qualified and experienced public health researcher), and at the same time I am openly observing others in the field site (Bernard 2002: 328). I am also a teacher, running a course on race and cultural politics at the Institute, and participants in one cohort of this course generously consented to the use of their paraphrased, deidentified comments in this research. My embeddedness in the research site is reflected in the use of the plural pronoun in this thesis. I frequently use ‘we’ and ‘our’ to refer to my (non-Indigenous) research participants, or white antiracist people in general, as I willingly include myself in these

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Following Lea (2002), I also use the term native ethnographer, an idiom most commonly used for ‘third world’ Western-trained anthropologist working in their home countries (Abu-Lughod 1991:141; Bernard 2002: 443-9). I prefer this term as it draws attention to researchers as a cultural group, and both invokes and subverts the colonial language of ‘natives’ and ‘tribes’ that I will argue is a crucial influence on postcoloniser subjectivities.
groups. I also refer to research participants as ‘colleagues’. However, this use of collective pronouns should not be read to automatically include the reader, thus implying a white, middle-class or left-wing audience.

The role of observing participant offers both advantages and disadvantages. My experience in Indigenous health in general, and in the field site in particular, gave me a tremendous ‘head start’ in at least two ways. First, I identified the area of my research question and the issues of interest to me early in the project. Second, I had established rapport with many of those in my field site, and being an ‘insider’, I had the means to rapidly establish rapport with those new to me. Thus the official fieldwork period was probably more productive than it would have been if I was naïve to the field site. In addition, physical participation in the activities of the field is considered a research method in itself. Methodological theorists predict that to “operationalize by bodily activity” practices such as filling out questionnaires in a remote Aboriginal community and constructing the narrative of a published paper (for example Kowal et al. 2005) will yield insights not obtainable by recording the experiences of others (Fernandez & Herzfeld 1998).

Intimacy with the field site also poses methodological challenges. My dual engagement with the field site as a participant and an ethnographer required careful management to ensure that people I interacted with in the course of my participation were sufficiently informed of my observer role and that ethical risks to them were minimised. An example of the ‘downside’ of being an insider was that one member of the research division had a pre-existing prejudice against me and declined to participate in the research. However, as this personality clash would have probably precluded effective data collection even if we had not previously known each other, and as this person did not attempt or was unsuccessful in persuading others to withdraw from my study, it was not a disadvantage overall. The close relationships I had with many people in my field site are certainly methodological assets, but they also entailed additional work to manage these relationships through the duration of the project.

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68 This issue was addressed specifically in my ethics application. The protocol approved by the ethics committee is available on request.
Being an insider also posed the risk that I will miss potential ethnographic insights that are second-nature to me, such as the use of jargon and linguistic conventions. Maintaining a critical distance was a difficult task at times, particularly as I have a strong professional ethic, and wholeheartedly took on the volunteer research tasks I was allocated. Spending time working time away from the field and writing and reading at home were important strategies to maintain a critical distance, as were visits to Melbourne to my supervising department, and numerous reflective conversations with colleagues and mentors in Darwin, both inside and outside the field site.

Another aspect of participant-observation was the less formal work I carried out in the course of my everyday life, such as having friends over at my house for dinner and party conversations. In line with my ethics application protocol for dealing with people who may risk only a fleeting and decontextualised representation in my thesis, only verbal consent was obtained to include a story someone had told me or an interaction I had. The familiarity that my friends had with my project ensured that the ethical risks to them were minimised, and the frequency with which relevant conversations came up ensured that the data I collected was rich and ample. In all, I generated 160,000 words of field notes (in addition to another 160,000 words of interview transcripts) during my year of fieldwork.

Interviews with public health researchers was the second form of data collection. ‘Person-centred interviewing’ aims to investigate relations between individuals and their contexts by treating the interviewee both as an informant, commenting on the general experiences of their cultural milieu, and a respondent, commenting on their own experiences. Interviews of this type consist of informant questions (e.g. What is the ethical review process like for researchers?), respondent questions (e.g. What has been your experience of ethical review?) and probes that aim to elicit a response from the interviewee (e.g. Tell me more about the difficulties you’ve had with ethics applications). Rather than a structured or semi-structured interview schedule, the interviewer has topics of inquiry they wish to cover in the conversation (Levy & Hollan 1998).

I have chosen this method over, for instance, semi-structured interviews, because of the nature of my research questions, and my relationship with the majority of interviewees. I am attempting to extend a theory of postcolonial race relations based on the subjectivities
deployed by researchers in my field site. The nature of the information that I want to elicit from each interviewee is personal, highly individual and idiosyncratic. The topics of inquiry are not designed to necessarily gather information about every one of the topics listed, but to raise issues that the interviewee has strong views about. It is the form and context of these views, rather than just the content, that has informed the theory of postcolonial subjectivity presented here. Thus allowing the interviewee to talk about issues of most concern to them (within the general rubric of the topics of inquiry) is the method most suited to the task. In addition, I am not attempting to generalise any theoretical constructs to *all* public health researchers in my field site or elsewhere (another key aim of structured interview methods).

I conducted 17 interviews in total that lasted an hour on average. Most (10) were conducted with people from within the research team in which I was situated as a participant-observer, four were conducted with researchers outside the research team, and three with researchers in other states of Australia. The selection criteria for interviewees were those with experience in Indigenous health research, who were interested in the issues I was researching, and with whom I have developed sufficient rapport such that the interviewee felt comfortable that their honest views would be welcomed and dealt with sensitively. This is appropriate to person-centred interviewing, as this method is designed for use by anthropologists in field sites they are familiar with, and not for ‘objective’ data collection from interviewees previously unknown to the interviewer. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes made after the interview. Once the initial transcription was completed, I would listen again to the interview to ensure accuracy and adequate de-identification and to begin the analysis of the transcript.

Overall, participant-observation and person-centred interviewing enabled me to develop a complex theoretical understanding of postcolonial race relations which was firmly grounded in my field experiences.

**Deidentification in this thesis**

The importance of deidentification in any anthropological work is paramount. This importance is compounded when the anthropologist is working with educated, white
people, who may be particularly concerned with the way they are represented or misrepresented, compounded again when the subject matter concerns sensitive issues, and compounded even further when the professional group of concern is small. I have taken a number of steps to ensure deidentification and protect the confidentiality of my research participants. I have changed all names of people and institutions, and changed important details such as individual’s origins and their area of research interest. Different pseudonyms are used for the same person if they appear in different parts of the thesis. Gender-identifiers have been assigned randomly (maintaining the original proportion of male to female researchers quoted), except where the gender of the speaker is of particular relevance (and the reader will remain unaware of where I felt it was of particular relevance). Bold is used within quotes where the speaker emphasised a word. Importantly, deidentified versions of all interview transcripts have been approved by interviewees, and passages where research participants are described at length have undergone a further process of approval by the research participant. On the institutional scale, one of my PhD supervisors was a senior researcher at the main research site, and part of their role was to ensure that this thesis did not represent any threat to the interests of the Institute.

Specific Indigenous communities are commonly referred to by research participants. As a wide range of communities are cited, inventing plausible pseudonyms to stand in for each community name was thought impractical and unnecessary, particularly as this thesis is not about Indigenous communities, but about the way white antiracists talk and think about Indigenous communities. Thus where research participants cite the names of Indigenous communities, these have been changed to the name of another community (usually in a different region of the Northern Territory), with associated relevant details changed to match the replacement community. On the rare occasion where a community name is cited in a context that could be interpreted as derogatory, the phrase ‘[remote community]’ is used instead of inserting another community name.

Despite all of these measures, in practice various levels of deidentification will have been achieved in this thesis, depending on the prior knowledge of the reader. For those outside the field, total deidentification of all people and institutions is not difficult, although by identifying the geographical site of the ethnography, there is a possibility a nosy reader could fathom the institutions where I may have been based. For those inside the field,
deidentification is trickier. There are only a handful of research institutes that conduct Indigenous health research in Australia. Although I have used a pseudonym and changed some details of the research site, most people involved in Indigenous health research could tell roughly where my fieldwork took place. Those readers who are from the research site itself may know which research team I worked with, but are unlikely to work out which people I am referring to in particular instances. Ultimately, those people who participated in my research are likely to recognise details about them, and their words and conversations (although, as many people say similar things, some people may attribute quotes to themselves that were actually recorded from others). Accepting that different levels of deidentification are possible depending on the prior knowledge of the reader, I am confident that the privacy of research participants has been respectfully guarded, and that no research participants (including the institutions involved) have suffered or will suffer any negative consequences from their involvement in this research.

The main argument of this thesis

To aid the reader, I summarise the argument I will make in this thesis here with the help of Figure 10 and Figure 11. All the terms in italics are explained in detail in the body of this thesis, in the chapters indicated in parentheses. Postcolonial spaces are places (in both the material and discursive sense) where there is an attempt to invert colonial power relations: to acknowledge the effects of colonisation on Indigenous people and remedy them (see Figure 10 and Chapter 2). In these spaces, Indigenous people are recognised by white antiracist people who I call postcolonisers (to my knowledge, a term not currently in use). In turn, postcolonisers are recognised as such by Indigenous people. Their mutual recognition allows these identities (I will call them subjectivities) to exist (Chapter 3). This recognition is based on a shared belief in postcolonial logic (Chapter 6). This is the knowledge system that acknowledges the special rights due to Indigenous people by virtue of their prior occupancy of Australia, the suffering inflicted on them by colonisation, and their continuing experience of marginalisation and racism. Postcolonial logic contends that Indigenous self-determination is the only means by which the disadvantage born by Indigenous people will be redressed. I argue that that the two forces that underlie postcolonial logic are remedialism, a form of liberalism, and orientalism, the lens through
which Western people encounter those they perceive as different to them. These two forces are reflected in the two contradictory aspects of Indigenous subjectivity recognised by postcolonisers. Remedialism is reflected in the self-determined Indigene, the Indigenous person who is committed to the improvement of themselves and their people. Orientalism is reflected in the authentic Indigenous voice, the Indigenous person who embodies their cultural distinctiveness and thus makes it accessible to postcolonisers (Chapter 4). The recognition of Indigenous people ultimately relies on the concept of remediable difference which is the melding of remedialism and orientalism. Remediable difference is difference that can be brought back to the (white) norm. Thus, the recognition of Indigenous people by postcolonisers depends on Indigenous people being different from white people, but not so different that they (their health, their education, their living standards, and so on) cannot be made to more closely resemble white people through appropriate intervention.

**Figure 10**: Mutual recognition in postcolonial spaces

This is how I conceptualise the power relations and identities that make up the progressive politics of postcolonial spaces. The story I want to tell in this thesis, however, is the story of how this model falls apart (see Figure 11). The subjects of this ethnography are postcolonisers (educated, middle-class, antiracist and mostly white) who have actively sought out close proximity with Indigenous people. Specifically, these advocates have sought out proximity with the 20% of Indigenous people that are the most different from white people: those that live in remote areas. Having made this commitment, these
postcolonisers inevitably encounter *radical difference*, a concept I alternatively call *alterity* (Chapter 7). This is difference that appears incommensurable to Western lifeworlds. Postcolonial logic contains radical difference by splitting it into *sanitised* and *unsanitised* difference, but this distinction can be difficult for postcolonisers to sustain in the face of their experiences. Radical difference poses a direct threat to postcolonial logic by destabilising the integrity of remediable difference. If Indigenous people are not remediably different, but, in fact, radically different, then the mutual recognition depicted in Figure 10 breaks down, and the viability of a postcoloniser subjectivity is called into question (Chapter 8).

For postcolonisers who are exposed to radical difference (or more specifically, the *possibility* of radical difference), postcolonial logic unravels, and two dilemmas are revealed (Chapter 9). These dilemmas are not necessarily concrete problems, but fears that undermine a postcoloniser subjectivity. If Indigenous people are radically different rather than remediably different, then the attempts of postcolonisers to improve them are recast as an *imposition*. This suggests that white antiracists are no different from their equally well-meaning, but ultimately assimilationist, predecessors who sought to impose their supposedly superior Western values on Indigenous people. The *dilemma of historical continuity* emerges when the discursive techniques that enact historical discontinuity between postcolonisers and their predecessors break down. The *dilemma of social improvement* is related to the dilemma of historical continuity, but more devastating for postcolonial justice. This dilemma is the possibility that the practices of the self-determination era not only resemble assimilation, but are assimilation. It is the possibility that any attempts to extend the benefits of modernity enjoyed by non-Indigenous Australia to Indigenous people will erode their cultural distinctiveness. Once postcolonial logic has unraveled, the subjectivity of the postcoloniser becomes ambivalent and perhaps untenable. Despite this logical disjunction, most proximate advocates continue to work in Indigenous health without the certainty that postcolonial logic once provided.
Figure 11: Postcolonial logic ruptured by radical difference
Chapter 2: Can Australia be postcolonial?

The postcolonial as chronology and as theory

Postcolonialism emerged on the tail of postmodernism and poststructuralism as a radical way of interpreting the contemporary world that takes Europe’s colonial encounter with the rest of the globe as a pivotal motif. The intellectual trajectory of postcolonial theory is most commonly attributed to Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1978), with more distal roots in the work of Franz Fanon and Albert Memmi (Fanon 1963, 1967; Memmi 1967). The concept was initially consolidated in the field of literary studies in the 1980s, with the ‘postcolonial’ mobilised to theorise the national literatures of formerly colonised countries, including settler colonies where white settlers faced the “problem of establishing their ‘indigeneity’ and distinguishing it from their continuing sense of their European inheritance” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1989:134). The term was subsequently applied to Indigenous literatures, migrant literatures in formerly colonised countries, and the contemporary literatures of colonising powers themselves. Among cultural studies scholars, a flurry of debate on the usefulness of the term occurred in the mid-1990s, with its widespread adoption and acceptance in a variety of critical disciplines by the end of that decade.

The term has aroused controversy among Indigenous and ‘third-world’ scholars since its inception, and thus I justify my use of it here. There are three main arguments against it: that it homogenises a vastly different array of histories; that it implies colonialism has ended and thus depoliticises the regimes of former colonisers and settler-colonies as well as the struggles of the (formerly) colonised peoples who still suffer the effects of colonial rule; and that it re-centres (formerly) colonial regimes and white intellectuals by taking colonialism as a historical and theoretical touchstone. I’ll consider these three criticisms and in exploring them, explain how I am using the concept in this thesis.

Postcolonialism has been criticised for homogenising the diversity of experiences between countries and within countries, lumping together first-world nations like the United States whose European settlers established republics in the 18th century, African countries such as Mozambique who gained their independence as recently as the 1970s, nations like East
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Timor who were granted independence and immediately re-colonised by another third-world power, and third-world peoples forced or choosing to reside in first-world countries (Shohat 1992).

At face value, the charge of homogenisation seems a cheap one – all theoretical concepts generalise to some degree – but it does highlight the multivalent nature of postcoloniality. Clearly, different countries, and different groups within countries, are ‘postcolonial’ in different ways and became so at different times (see Mani & Frankenberg 1993). Catherine Hall argues that ‘postcolonial’ even applies to a former colonial country like Britain “in a very particular sense of the term”: the loss of an empire and the loss of the associated sense of racial superiority (Hall 1996a:67).

The question of when Australia became ‘postcolonial’, if it ever did, is a vexed one. If we understand postcolonialism as concomitant with nationalism, then Federation in 1901 would signify the end of colonialism. From the point of view of colonial relations with Indigenous peoples (my focus, and that of many other Australian postcolonial scholars), Federation made no positive impact. In fact, it removed the somewhat benevolent influence of English attitudes towards the Indigenous peoples it conquered and heralded the era of White Australia policies.69

If we understand postcoloniality as a shift in colonial power relations between whites and Indigenous people in particular, but also other ethnic minorities, there are other dates that emerge as candidates to mark a paradigmatic shift. Various junctures in Australian history have provided opportunities for historical discontinuity with the colonial past, such as the 1967 referendum that is remembered as granting citizenship to Indigenous people, the national debate surrounding the bicentenary of white occupation in 1988, and most recently the 1997 Royal Commission into the state’s removal of Indigenous children from their families from 1910 to 1970, commonly known as the ‘Stolen Generations’ report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Thus for settler-colonies like Australia, 69

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69 Famously, the first piece of legislation passed by the Australian parliament was segregatory, the Immigration Restriction Act (1901) that barred Asian immigration to Australia in order to preserve Australia for the “Anglo-Saxon race” and protect us from “uncivilised habits” of Asian races (Parliamentary Education Office 2004).
postcoloniality is signaled not through spatial retreat and ceded territory, but through discursive retreats that occur cyclically.

The second major critique, made most recently by Ian Anderson in an important collection of Indigenous critical writing, argues that ‘postcolonial’ implies that the ‘colonial’ has ended, while in Australia, “colonial structures have never been dismantled” (Anderson 2003:23). This echoes Ella Shohat’s powerful critique that by encompassing both the white settler and the Indigenous person, the postcolonial “masks the white settlers colonialist-racist policies towards indigenous peoples not only before independence, but also after the official break from the imperial centre, while also de-emphasising neo-colonial global positionings of First World settler-states” (Shohat 1992:102-3). Related to the issue of homogenisation, postcolonialism appears to place white settlers and Indigenous peoples in the same relationship to the former European coloniser, thus concealing the oppressive relationship between them.

In an oft-cited chapter, Stuart Hall addresses this and other critiques of postcolonialism. He refutes the idea that postcolonialism obfuscates complex power relations both within postcolonial states, and transnational, ‘neocolonial’ systems of oppression. Power relations certainly cross-cut postcolonial situations, but in more complex, contradictory and intersecting ways than representations of the colonial era would suggest. Hall goes on to make a counter-argument that critiques of this kind reveal “a certain nostalgia…for a return to a clear-cut politics of binary oppositions, where ‘clear lines can be drawn in the sand’ between goodies and baddies” (Hall 1996b:244). This aspect of postcolonial theory is central to its usefulness in constructing a theory of postcolonial identity, as I will explore below.

However, Hall concedes that much postcolonial theory to date (then 1996) does not engage with the mechanisms of global capitalism in part because of the predominance of literary

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70 In making such statements one must be aware of the tendency to ‘other’ the past practices of one’s discipline through selectively representing past work to show it up as binary and essentialised, or whatever one is aiming to distinguish oneself from (see Brightman 1995). This applies both to assumptions that pre-postcolonial theorists were blind to complexity, and assumptions that the colonial world was less complex than the postcolonial one. While I doubt either proposition would stand up to serious scrutiny, this does not mean that postcolonial theory is any less useful, just that it is not as new and different as it claims to be. I explore this exact technique of ‘othering’ the past as it is employed by white antiracists in Chapter 9.
approaches (although postcolonial work on ‘neoliberalism’ since then has significantly filled this gap, for instance Comaroff & Comaroff 2001). Readers of this thesis looking for critiques of neoliberalism and global capitalism will be similarly be disappointed. While some Indigenous issues are connected with global capital - such as the powerful tourist industry’s appropriation and exploitation of Indigenous culture, and the tussle between Indigenous land rights and global mining interests - it is hard to find such weighty and dangerous links to Indigenous health research.\footnote{Links between Indigenous health and global capital do indeed exist in other parts of the world, for instance, in the realms of ethnobotany/biopiracy (Hayden 2003) and genetic research and the biotechnology industry (Reardon 2004), but these phenomenon are yet to exert much influence in Australia.}

Indigenous health research is, with minor exceptions, a wholly government-funded exercise. What is at stake, apart from the health of the most socially disadvantaged Australians, are the careers of health researchers and the reputation of governments. It is not global capital but postcolonial sentiment (from the individual to the national level) that drives this particular corner of the postcolony, and my focus in this thesis reflects this.\footnote{Another international link that could be made would be to argue that Australian government action is fuelled by the desire to avoid embarrassment on the international stage (thus media reports and advocates commonly use the term “national disgrace” and compare Australia unfavourably to other settler-colonies). However, this would still be an example of global postcolonial sentiment rather than global capital.}

Ultimately, any tendency of the ‘postcolonial’ to homogenise and conceal power relations – charges applicable to almost any conceptual term - must be weighed against the usefulness of a term that suggests connections and comparisons across a vast range of contemporary human experiences. One could argue that the capacity of postcolonialism to withstand vigorous critique and its continued use across a variety of disciplines demonstrates that its usefulness outweighs its shortcomings.\footnote{Despite Shohat’s prediction over a decade ago that “neocolonial” would surpass “postcolonial” in its use (Shohat 1992:106), a Google search reveals over 8 million hits for “postcolonial” and only 300,000 for “neocolonial” (conducted by the author, 28/2/06).}

As well as pointing to a chronological period (that differs across locations), postcolonialism is also a theoretical stance that takes colonialism as a lens through which to analyse the
contemporary world. Postcolonial scholars are those who believe that “new ways of perceiving, organising, representing and acting upon the world which we designate as ‘modern’ owed as much to the colonial encounter as they did to the industrial revolution, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.” (Seth, Gandhi, & Dutton 1998:7) The method of this theory is to ‘provincialise Europe’: to remake Western epistemologies as the object of inquiry, rather than the invisible inquiring subject (see Chakrabarty 2000).

This aspect of postcolonialism has also been criticised for overemphasising the importance of colonialism in the histories of non-Western peoples (McClintock 1992). A related charge made here by Maori theorist Linda Tuhiwai-Smith argues that “post-colonialism has become a strategy for reinscribing or reauthorizing the privilege of non-indigenous academics because the field of ‘post-colonial’ discourse has been defined in ways which can still leave out indigenous peoples” (Smith 1999:24). This fear seems justified when one considers how Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin identified postcolonial Australian literature primarily as the narratives of white settlers, with Indigenous literatures and migrant literatures appearing to be secondary concerns (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1989). However, since this early (1989) formulation, the postcolonial, in Australia at least, has increasingly focused on Indigenous peoples.  

The ‘postcolonial’, then, refers to both a time and a theoretical perspective. Some scholars have attempted to separate these two distinct interpretations of the term, for instance using the hyphenated term (post-colonial) to refer to the chronological sense, and the unhyphenated (postcolonial) to refer to the theoretical sense (King 2002). In this thesis I use only the form ‘postcolonial’ because I think the two senses of the term are inextricably connected, and that the intermingling of the two is potentially productive.

I am interested in the chronological time when Indigenous people are valued, when the crimes against them are widely recognised, and when many white Australians support government assistance programs and Indigenous self-determination. And I am interested in those white people who inhabit spaces where the shadow of colonialism is keenly felt and actively countered: where there is a conscious commitment to counter colonial power.

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74 See for instance the Melbourne-based international journal *Postcolonial Studies* that features an article on Indigenous concerns in nearly every issue.
relations. This second aspect is the ‘lay’ and often bureaucratised equivalent of the theoretical meaning of postcolonialism. Thus my use of the ‘postcolonial’ is an admixture of chronology and theory.

To these two inflections of the postcolonial I add the concept of space.\(^75\) Just as the postcolonial era began at different times in different places and for different groups of people, it infiltrates spaces unevenly. Recalling my interest in postcolonialism as attempts to invert colonial power relations, postcolonial spaces are places where there are genuine attempts to invert colonial power relations (although the success or otherwise of these attempts will always be indeterminate and contested). An Indigenous studies class, a cultural competency course, a white home that subscribes to an Indigenous newspaper, a left-wing online magazine, a conference that includes a ‘Welcome to Country’\(^76\) – these are all postcolonial spaces where the history of colonialism is explicitly acknowledged and Indigenous voices are privileged. One very literal example of a space where power relations are inverted is the permanent Indigenous exhibition of the Melbourne Museum which includes a life-size model of anthropologist Baldwin Spencer in a glass case.\(^77\) Countless other Australian spaces – bars, streets, homes, workplaces, corporations, sporting clubs – are rarely postcolonial, and others are postcolonial for brief periods, for instance, when a march in support of an Indigenous issue passes through a city’s streets.

An emphasis on postcolonial spaces resolves some of the difficulties of postcolonialism. There is no longer a need to designate a particular time when a national ‘became’ postcolonial, a particularly sticky problem for settler-colonies. Instead, one could identify (more or less) postcolonial spaces that have appeared and disappeared over time, from the formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement in 1958 (Taffe 2005), to when Aboriginal actor Ernie Dingo played a doctor on the popular Australian soap opera

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\(^{75}\) Ferguson and Gupta (2002) recently highlighted the importance of spatial mechanisms of power for states and para-state entities, and the rising importance of “transnationalized local actors”. These are local actors who appeal to global forces (such as Indigenism) to challenge the spatialising practices of states. In relation to their argument, it is unclear whether the ‘postcolonial spaces’ I am interested in challenge or extend state power.

\(^{76}\) This now common Australian ritual involves inviting a Traditional Owner of the meeting place to speak for a few minutes at the start of a public event and welcome the people gathering onto their traditional lands.

\(^{77}\) The exhibit opened in 2000. See Morton 2004 for a discussion of the exhibit which includes a film that constructs a dialogue between Spencer and Irrapmwe, an Aboriginal elder who assisted him. This film illustrates the tension (for historians and anthropologists) between historical truths and the practice of inverting power relations in the postcolonial present.
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*Home and Away* in 1988, to the white graziers who formed the group Rural Landholders for Coexistence in 1997 to support Indigenous native title.\(^{78}\) In the urban meeting halls, suburban lounge rooms, email networks and national conferences where events like these take place, colonial power relations are altered.

Parts 2 and 3 of this thesis explore the concepts of *postcolonial logic* and *postcolonisers* in an attempt to pin down (respectively) the *knowledge system* and *identities* associated with postcolonial spaces. This recalls one of the many grounds for Shohat’s comprehensive critique of postcolonialism: “[I]t does not make much sense to speak of post-colonizers and post-colonized…the term “postcolonial” posits no clear domination, and calls for no clear opposition” (Shohat 1992:107). For Shohat, the “structured ambivalence” of the postcolonial means we cannot envisage the identities that may emerge from it (Shohat 1992:107).

While ‘postcoloniser’ is yet to enter the critical vocabulary,\(^{79}\) ‘postcolonised’ has been used by a handful of scholars, the most prominent among them being the African postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe.\(^{80}\) His use of the term also highlights the ambiguity of the postcolony:

> [T]he public affirmation of the “postcolonized subject” is not necessarily found in acts of “opposition” or “resistance” to the *commandement*.\(^{81}\) What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written and precise rules. (Mbembe 2001:129, italics in original)

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\(^{79}\) I can find only five previous instances where either ‘postcoloniser’ or ‘postcolonizer’ has been used, and in all of those instances the word is used once without explanation. Four of these examples use the term to imply that the postcoloniser is really no different from the coloniser (Kaplan 1997:156; Richards 1993; Trivedi 1999:269; Denzin & Lincoln 2005:1119), similar to Moreton-Robinson’s (2003) use of the related term “postcolonizing” to describe Australian society. Fiona Probyn’s passing use of “postcolonizer” is more relevant to this thesis as she opposes ‘colonizer’ to ‘postcolonizer’ in relation to the “unmasking” of white power (while still using the word only once without explanation) (Probyn 2004).

\(^{80}\) As the text cited was translated from the French by two anthropologists with the assistance of the author, I am unsure of the equivalence of the original French wording used.

\(^{81}\) *Commandement* is Mbembe’s term for the power exercised through colonial rule (see Mbembe 2001:Chapter 1).
The moral ambiguity of the postcolonial, while so frustrating to some activist scholars, makes it particularly attractive for my purposes. The story I will tell in this thesis is one of ambiguity and ambivalence, where “clear-cut politics of binary oppositions” have little traction (Hall 1996b:244). In postcolonial spaces, where white antiracists and Indigenous people encounter one another, there is precisely “no clear domination” and “no clear opposition”. Thus the postcolonial is an ideal theoretical frame in which to describe the subjectivities that inhabit this ethnography.

This set of terms – *postcolonial spaces*, *postcolonial logic*, *postcoloniser* – mark out the conceptual terrain of this thesis. Chapter 3 will propose a model of mutual recognition through which knowledge and identities are created in postcolonial spaces, and Chapter 4 will offer a detailed analysis of the identities that are fashioned through this process. But first, I will flesh out the postcolonial spaces where these identity-forming interactions take place – the field of Australian Indigenous health research in general, and the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research in particular.

**Indigenous health research and the Institute as postcolonial spaces**

In what way is the location of this ethnography a postcolonial space?

Let’s zoom in, starting from the national. As I began to outline in the Introduction, there has been a seachange in Australia over the past 40 years in relation to Indigenous health. In terms of government policy, a reasonable barometer of community norms, the first federal funding programs for Indigenous health started in 1969 on the back of the 1967 referendum. The first government funding to the newly-established Aboriginal Medical Services began in 1972 with the election of the Whitlam government who committed to “restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination” (see

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82 It should be noted that the term ‘postcolonial’ is not morally ambiguous to those outside the social sciences, such as most of my research participants. For them, it is eschewed because it contains the word ‘colonial’, and any mention of the colonial is equated with neocolonialism. The noun ‘postcoloniser’ that I develop in this thesis is similarly disquieting for research participants, despite any attempts on my part to separate colonialism, neocolonialism and postcolonialism.

Cut to the present. In 2006, the Federal Government will spend $3.1 billion dollars on Indigenous-specific programs (Commonwealth of Australia 2005:21). In 2001-2, $1.8 billion was spent on Indigenous health, which represents 2.8% of total health spending, slightly higher than the proportional size of the Indigenous population (2.4% at that time) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005:xvii). Although Indigenous advocates argue that spending remains grossly insufficient given the scale of Indigenous ill-health, it cannot be denied that there is significant spending on Indigenous health and Indigenous programs in general. The agenda of Indigenous control has also had some success over the past 30 years: $186 million was spent on 120 Indigenous community-controlled health organisations in 2001-2 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005:xvii). So, while the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy demands further and urgent action (see Chapter 6), there have been considerable improvements over recent decades.

In the Northern Territory, Indigenous health was of little concern to white Australians and governments until after WWII (an event which brought an unprecedented level of resources and attention to the Territory to avert the possibility of a Japanese invasion). A Medical Survey Branch was established in the Administration’s Health Department in 1947 and the first surveys of leprosy and trachoma among Indigenous people were undertaken (Kettle 1991). In the 1950s and 1960s, assimilation policies saw an increase in government support for medical services on missions and government settlements. An Aboriginal Medical Service was set up by the community in Alice Springs in 1975, with other health services following soon after.

The Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health Research was set up largely with funding from a private foundation in 1985 and the institutional support of a large medical school in

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83 See for example [http://www.antar.org.au/budget05-06.html](http://www.antar.org.au/budget05-06.html). In 2001-2 the amount spent on Indigenous health per person was 18 % higher than for non-Indigenous people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005), but advocates argue that the figure should be 200% to 400% if Indigenous health is to be sufficiently improved (Mooney, Wiseman, & Jan 1998).

84 Basic health services would have been provided by missions (settlements run by Christian institutions in remote regions of the Northern Territory) to Indigenous people from the late nineteenth century.
southern Australia. At the time, Aboriginal health was not a particular focus. Arguments for the establishment of the Institute centred on the health needs of a white population in a tropical climate and the opportunity to better utilise data from the numerous health surveys (mostly concerning infectious diseases) carried out by the Health Department. Until a purpose-built building was opened in 1996, the research institute operated out of surplus nurses’ accommodation at the hospital. Although Indigenous health was not a focus in the discussions leading up to the Institute’s establishment, it soon became one. It created the position of Aboriginal Representative on its board in its first year, and by the end of the 1980s was arguing forcefully for federal government support for the Institute on the basis of its potential to improve Aboriginal health.

Over subsequent years, the research focus of the Institute has shifted somewhat from solely laboratory-based research into infectious diseases, to include community-based interventions such as nutrition, exercise, smoking or hygiene programs, and research into the ‘social determinants of health’ that examines the links between education, employment, housing, psychological states and health. This reflects a concomitant shift in general interest within public health and increasing funding opportunities for intervention and social research.

Along with these changes, over the last 15 years Indigenous people have been advocating for a greater role in health research. The first major event in the history of Indigenous activism in this area was instigated by the first director of the Institute, who saw that wide distrust of researchers in the Aboriginal community was a barrier to effective research. At his suggestion, the National Health & Medical Research Council invited, for the first time, significant numbers of Indigenous people to talk with researchers at an Aboriginal health conference held in Alice Springs in 1986. At the conference, Indigenous participants “took over” on the last day and for three hours berated the assembled distinguished researchers for their oppressive research practices (Humphery 2002:29).

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85 Negotiations for the establishment of the Institute coincided with efforts to establish a University in the Northern Territory, with success eluding this second effort until 1989.
86 This information in this and following paragraphs is taken from a history of the Institute, which, in order to maintain institutional anonymity, is not cited here.
Since that time, a comprehensive Indigenous critique of health research has developed. The poor state of Indigenous health is widely attributed to colonisation and its ongoing manifestations (Johnston 1991; Paul 2002; Paul & Atkinson 1999; Royal Australian College of Physicians 2003). The health system has been heavily implicated in the damaging, some would argue genocidal, practices of the state (Bond 1986; Clarke, Andrews, & Austin 2000; Ong 1996). Indigenous people from Australia and elsewhere have spoken of research as ‘a dirty word’ (Smith 1999) and have described their communities as ‘researched to death’ (Atkinson et al. 2002; Chataway 1994). They have demanded recognition of past and ongoing exploitative research practices, and fought to change the balance of power within research (Henry et al. 2002b; Humphery 2001). Some are critical of the health system for not doing enough (Kearns & Dyck 2005; Ring & Brown 2003), whilst others see governmental and non-governmental intervention as neocolonialism (Pearson 2000) and advocate for a minimal role of non-Indigenous people in Indigenous health research (Calhoun 2002). While opinions vary greatly between Indigenous authors, they tend to converge around an unarguable vision of total Indigenous control of all aspects of health, with non-Indigenous people acting only in supportive and technical roles. In recent years, this Indigenous critique of Western research has been called the *Indigenous Research Reform Agenda* (IRRA) (Henry et al. 2002a).  

The rowdy 1986 conference led directly to the release, in 1991, of a draft set of guidelines for research in Indigenous communities. They addressed issues of consultation, community involvement in research, as well as ownership and publication of data (National Health and Medical Research Council 1991). A report of the Medical Research Ethics Committee explains that the purpose of these guidelines were to make up for past indiscretions, and ensure that Indigenous people were not subject to “anything less than the highest standards in the conduct of research concerning them” (National Health and Medical Research Council 1991:5). Numerous guidelines for Indigenous research have since been

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87 These moves have been paralleled in other areas of research, particularly the field of education where theories of ‘Indigenous research methodologies’ are perhaps the most advanced (see Power 2004; Worby & Rigney 2002). This discourse is also related to the international literatures on the concept of ‘Indigenous knowledges’ (see Sillitoe 1998), and on power relationships between researchers and research participants generally (see Wallerstein 1999).

88 It is worth noting that there is no comparison to the ‘Tuskegee’ experiment (where treatment for syphilis was deliberately withheld from African-American subjects) in Australian research history. Injuries to Indigenous people through research include insensitive handling of ‘women’s business’, the use of blood
developed in different domains (AIATSIS 2000; Todd et al. 2000), and a new set of national guidelines were released in 2003 to replace the 1991 draft guidelines. The Institute took the initiative in creating an all-Indigenous subcommittee to advise its Human Research Ethics Committee in 1990, and created an additional Aboriginal ethics committee representing a small region (where much Institute research was conducted) in 1997.\textsuperscript{89} All research projects concerning Indigenous people must be approved by the Indigenous subcommittee before being considered by the main committee (which also includes Indigenous members). As a result of this focus on the \textit{process} of research with Indigenous people, a genre of article has emerged that reports exclusively on the ethics and processes of a research project, usually with Indigenous co-authors or first authors (for example, Couzos et al. 2005; Donovan & Spark 1997; Eades & Read 1999; Henderson et al. 2002; Holmes et al. 2002; Kowal et al. 2005; Thompson 1999).

As well as reforming approaches to the ethics of research in Indigenous communities, parallel reforms have occurred in the funding of research. Led by Indigenous members of senior National Health and Medical Research Council committees, from the late 1990s researchers were required to demonstrate that research projects in Indigenous communities met additional criteria of ‘community engagement’, ‘benefit to Indigenous people’, ‘sustainability and transferability’, ‘building capability of Indigenous people’, and that the project was both a priority and of significance to Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{90} National Health and Medical Research Council grant applications are now considered by an all-Indigenous committee of academics.

The Institute has responded to these changing political circumstances in a number of ways. Darwin-based Indigenous people have been employed on research projects from the earliest days of the Institute as research assistants, but their employment has been more aggressively sought over time, and Indigenous Institute employees have been encouraged and supported to commit to further study and take on roles of greater responsibility. To enhance internal support networks, the Institute created a collective of Indigenous Institute samples and tissues removed in operations for purposes other than those consented to, and sexualised and degrading depictions of Indigenous people with communicable diseases (Thomas 2001).

\textsuperscript{89} This additional, community-based ethics committee was only functional for a few years, with responsibility for ethical clearance then returning to the Darwin committees [Fieldnotes 2/6/05 4:49].

\textsuperscript{90} From the National Health and Medical Research Council website, \url{http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/_files/indighth.pdf} [accessed 6/1/06].
employees and funded a part-time Indigenous co-ordinator. Indigenous employees are also likely to be included as ‘co-investigators’ on grant applications, sometimes on the basis of their cultural or community knowledge and experience more than their formal qualifications.

Indigenous people living in the communities where research is conducted, who are unlikely to have finished high school, are also treated differently as a result of the reform agenda. Instead of being employed as ‘research assistants’, they are increasingly called ‘cultural consultants’ and named as authors on research publications. Funders and ethics committees look more kindly at projects that try to offer training opportunities to cultural consultants, such that their work on the research project can contribute towards a formal qualification (generally certificate level). It is also becoming customary for projects to create an ‘Indigenous reference group’ or ‘Indigenous steering group’, composed wholly of Indigenous people from the communities where the research takes place.

The requirement to employ and involve more Indigenous people in every aspect of research projects is openly discussed in the Institute. At a planning meeting for research staff, a senior researcher addressed the crowded meeting room:

It’s the story more and more in the NHMRC that Indigenous people and communities have to become more involved in Indigenous health research. The NHMRC has altered its structure, there are Indigenous people now on all panels, there is an Indigenous advisory panel, and there are a number of special initiatives. And we have been spoken to informally about this, an institution like ours needs to lift our game... We have made some progress but we need to do better... Too often questions are driven by non-Indigenous people. We need to think as non-Indigenous researchers how we can lift our game. [Fieldnotes 22/11/04 2:61]

Sharing power with Indigenous people is not just a pragmatic strategy to gain funding, but also a personal commitment. Institute researchers typically pride themselves that they are driven by social justice and not just biomedical interests:

Why are people coming to work in Darwin? On social justice grounds, and many people are attracted to the Institute by their social commitment. [Fieldnotes 2/6/05 4:49]
‘Evidence-base’ people are not noisy at the Institute, mostly from what people say it is ‘human rights’ people participating in scientific research – dual citizens you might say. [Fieldnotes 11/2/05 3:18]

This ‘dual citizenship’ is illustrated in the texts that circulate through the Institute. A recent issue of the Northern Territory Health Department Chronic Disease newsletter (that regularly reports on Institute research) distributed in researchers’ pigeonholes includes a plea from a public health professional engaged in community development:

I’m based in Alice Springs, exploring the use of arts methods to bridge cross-cultural understandings in relation to Primary Care governance…My aim is to equalise power relations in Indigenous/non-Indigenous ‘learning’ exchanges rather than impose dominant forms of knowledge…I’d love to connect with others who may be working with similar processes, to share ideas and perhaps negotiate how we can critically reflect on our practices. (Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services 2004:2)

This discourse, which exudes the emancipatory epistemologies it draws from (e.g. Smith 1999), appears to sit happily alongside more conventional public health language concerning the ideal method of ‘ear toilet’, whereby a rolled-up tissue is poked into a child’s ear to soak up the pussy discharge of chronic infection:

Gently pull the outer ear backward and outward to straighten the ear canal. Push the tissue in with a slight twist in the direction that the spear was twisted so that it does not come untwisted. Stop pushing when the child blinks, coughs or cries. (Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services 2004:11)

The relationship between pussy ears and equalising power relations, perhaps obscure to the general reader, is clear to most Institute researchers.91 The discourses of public health/biomedicine and emancipatory social science methodology run seamlessly together,

91 For the record, the relationship would go something like: only when Aboriginal Health Workers are empowered by the system to really take control of health promotion will parents have the culturally-appropriate health information and motivation to properly treat their kids’ ear infections; and these kids are only getting ear infections in the first place because the government refuses to faces up to its multi-billion dollar responsibility to provide adequate housing on remote communities.
making this newsletter meaningful and making the Institute a postcolonial space of the technoscientific variety (see Anderson 2002a). In the next chapter I offer a model for understanding the encounters between postcolonisers and Indigenous people that occur in postcolonial spaces like the Institute.
Chapter 3: Encountering difference

The title of this thesis uses the term postcolonial frontier. The use of this term invokes a lineage of critical scholarship which debates the role and the historiography of the frontier in histories of settler-colonies.\textsuperscript{92} The term was used by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians to refer to the edge of advancing colonisation, a zone of nation-building on one hand, and violence and dispossession on the other.\textsuperscript{93} This view of the frontier has been challenged by scholars who have highlighted alternative accounts of the frontier, and theorised it as a space of continued interracial contact persisting long after territorial conquest has ended (Janiewski 1998; Klein 1995). In an Australian example, Cowlishaw (1999:17) argues that the “racial frontier…is still present in many aspects of Australian imaginary and experience.”

Where the notion of frontier has been revived for contemporary anthropological purposes, it usually signals violence, anger and ongoing oppression in areas of inter-racial contact (see for example Cowlishaw 2004a; Furniss 1999). The postcolonial frontier of Darwin certainly has its share of violence and anger - recall the angry letters to the local newspaper about Tiwi longgrassers in the Introduction. However, as introduced in Chapter 2, this ethnography focuses on another zone of the postcolonial frontier: the postcolonial spaces where colonial power relations are relatively inverted, or where there is at least an attempt to do so. The postcolonial frontier is the backdrop to these more benevolent encounters between white antiracists and Indigenous people.

While postcolonial historians debate the concept of the frontier, all agree that it (both the frontier, and stories about the frontier) is the site where the identities of the (post)colonised and (post)colonisers are forged. For my purposes, then, these postcolonial spaces on the frontier are primordial spaces where settler-self and native-other are defined in a process

\textsuperscript{92} This term was popularised in 1893 by historian Frederick Turner. He argued that American national characteristics were not forged from its British heritage, but from the experience of colonisation, whereby settlers on the frontier ‘became natives’ (at least in the sense of living like Native Americans). As they created ‘civilisation’ in the previously ‘empty space’, they were re-civilised, in the process obtaining all the positive features of the ‘new American’ (see Slotkin 1992; Turner 1920).

\textsuperscript{93} The recent ‘history wars’ conducted between Australian historians have again placed violence at the centre of our ideas of the frontier (see Macintyre & Clark 2003).
that is forever ongoing and unfinished. In this Chapter, I theorise this encounter between white and Indigenous people as a process of mutual recognition, drawing on a variety of critical theories.

**Subjectivity and performativity**

This thesis is about a certain group of white people I call *postcolonisers*: people who acknowledge the effects of colonisation in Indigenous people and wish to remedy them. Primarily influenced by Foucault’s concept of *subjectivity*, I bring to this ethnography a set of ideas about what it is to be a person. Foucault saw subjectivity – the experience of being a particular type of person – as socially co-produced along with knowledge and power (Foucault 1978:38–9, 98). To cite a famous example, the eighteenth-century emergence of knowledge about sexuality, and the prohibition of certain sexualities (between men, and of children and adolescents), lead to the proliferation of subjectivities concerning sex, including heterosexual and paedophile subjectivities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the power-knowledge nexus of British colonisation was co-produced with the categories of ‘settler’ and ‘native’. In the second half of the twentieth century, the creation of knowledge systems regarding ‘racism’, ‘human rights’ and the negative effects of ‘colonisation’ have been co-produced with the subjectivities of ‘Indigenous person’ and ‘white antiracist’. In this thesis, the knowledge system associated with white anti-racism is called *postcolonial logic* (see Chapter 6), and the subjectivity is termed *postcoloniser*.

It should be stated from the outset that the label ‘postcoloniser’ is my own, and does not exist as a term in my field site. In fact, it is generally disliked as a term, as are any possible labels that could approximate it (an issue I take up in Chapter 8). It is also important to stress that the individuals who might correspond to my category of postcoloniser will also identify with a range of other roles – scientist, parent, cyclist, or immigrant. What I refer to as a postcoloniser subjectivity would map roughly onto their political and/or professional identities, whether these readily have alternative self-ascribed labels (left-wing, activist, advocate) or are experienced without being specified.
We can think of subjectivity as something that is performed, following Goffman (1959). He considers a range of subjectivities, from sailor to monarch to woman, to illustrate how people create particular impressions of themselves and how others read those impressions. He does not use the language of subjectivity or identity, but his insights can be applied to understanding how subjectivities are created and maintained, along with the knowledges that are co-produced with them. His subtle analysis of the way we present ourselves to others allows for a complex combination of conscious and unconscious gestures and words, intentional and inadvertent slips in the performance, and the ways that groups (he calls them ‘teams’) maintain their performance of a shared identity. Also useful is his concept of backstage, spaces where the major audience of the performance are not allowed and the members of the team can freely interact without the pressure of staying in character. The backstage has multiple functions which act to support the performance, such as teaching new members of the team how to perform and checking for offensive aspects of the performance (Goffman 1959:112).

As a ‘native ethnographer’, I have conducted this ethnography primarily from the backstage of a postcoloniser subjectivity. Physically, the backstage consists of the corridors of the Institute, the tearoom, closed meetings of researchers, or social gatherings on back verandahs. In the ‘front’ of stage (in public seminars, conferences, and in publications), the knowledge system of postcolonial logic and the subjectivity of the postcoloniser are carefully cultivated and preserved. Backstage, “where suppressed facts make an appearance” (Goffman 1959:112), postcolonisers question their own subjectivities and the accompanying knowledge system, a process I describe in detail in Chapter 8. Thus I have had access to not only the main performance of postcolonial logic (see Figure 10 and Chapters 4 and 6), but the backstage anxiety and confusion over its unraveling (see Figure 11 and Chapters 7, 8 and 9).

94 Note that the ‘backstage’ is still a ‘stage’, and there are other aspects of any subjectivity that are hidden at all times or not consciously known. My combined use of subjectivity and performativity comes close to Haraway’s use of the concept of “figurations” (Haraway 1997:11).
Why a politics of difference?

The subjectivities that are of interest in this ethnography are those marked by *difference* – a difference predominantly marked as Indigeneity or lack of Indigeneity. As I explained in the Introduction, those who walk through the doors of the Institute are not just ‘people’, they are white, Indigenous, non-white non-Indigenous (most commonly south or southeast Asian), or not-yet-specified people. In fact, the use of the word ‘white’ is not common in the Institute and a cause of some discomfort.\(^95\) White people prefer the term ‘non-Indigenous’, a term constituted through its opposition to Indigeneity.

A key to understanding contemporary politics of Indigeneity in liberal democracies like Australia is the historical context of the ‘problem’ of difference in liberal thought. Liberal theorists of the 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century such as Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Hume and Jefferson all believed in democratic government that represented the interests of the people. Their ideas of equality among ‘ordinary’ men were radical at the time, and beget modern liberal democracies. However, many groups of people were excluded from the civil rights associated with these governments, including slaves, minority religious and ethnic groups, women, and colonised peoples.

The exclusion of Indigenous peoples by the Australian government is a case in point. Although Indigenous people were officially considered British subjects by virtue of their birthplace, and were included in the creation of the ‘Australian citizen’ in 1948, they had been excluded from voting by the newly-formed Commonwealth government in 1902 (a right reinstated in 1962). A series of further exclusions of ‘aboriginal natives’ (and, interestingly, ‘natives’ of Asian and Pacific countries) in various pieces of state legislation created second-class citizens who did not enjoy the rights of other citizens (Chesterman & Galligan 1997).\(^96\)

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\(^95\) This phenomenon is well documented in the field of whiteness studies (see for example Dyer 1997; Moreton-Robinson 2000.

\(^96\) An inordinate number of pieces of legislation enacted by the various states in the early decades of last century placed Aboriginal movements, employment and marriages under state control.
To take just one example, in Western Australia in 1944, an act came into effect that allowed Aboriginal people to apply for a ‘Certificate of Citizenship’, exempting them from Aboriginality and entitling them to full citizenship rights. This certificate could be granted provided that a magistrate was satisfied that: they had not had any contact with other Indigenous people and had led a ‘civilised life’ for the preceding two years; full citizenship rights were “desirable for and likely to be conducive to the welfare of the applicant”; the person was fluent in English; had no communicable diseases; and was “of industrious habits...good behaviour and reputation...and reasonably capable of managing his own affairs.” (WA Parliament 1944: section 5 cited in Chesterman & Galligan 1997:132). In this shopping-list of citizenship we see the multiple qualifications on which exclusion can be based.97

Those many groups denied the rights initially granted to white propertied men have fought for equal rights from the nineteenth century to the present. For the majority of the time, these battles have been fought on the grounds of ‘sameness’. That is, Indigenous and other peoples argued that they were equal to white men and thus should be treated the same way. The early phases of the Aboriginal rights movement in the 1920s and 1930s that fought against discriminatory laws and practices provide many examples of this. Fred Maynard, president of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (formed in 1924 in Sydney) wrote in a letter to the then Prime Minister:

Our people have...accepted the modern system of government which has taken the place of our prehistoric methods and have conformed to the same reasonably well when the treatment accorded them is fully considered. We are, therefore, striving to obtain full recognition of our citizen rights on terms of absolute equality with all other people in our own land. (Attwood and Markus 1999:68 cited in Rowse 2005a:53)

As is clear from this letter, acceptance on the grounds of sameness was intimately tied with the obsolescence of Indigenous culture (“our prehistoric methods”), a reference to the discourse of racial hierarchies (see Anderson 2002b). By the 1970s, the language of the Indigenous movement in Australia had changed. As the battles for formal equality were

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97 The requirement that nascent citizens be free of communicable disease echoes the concept of “sanitary citizenship” explored in Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2003.
progressively won, the discourse of self-determination became more prominent. Rather than arguing for equal treatment on the basis of sameness, arguments were made for special treatment on the grounds of difference (Stokes 1997). Lois (now Lowitja) O’Donoghue, for example, distinguishes the struggle for ‘civil rights’ (argued for as “the right to treated the same as all Australians”) and ‘Indigenous rights’ (derived from the recognition of a status as “distinct peoples and the original occupiers of this land”) (O’Donoghue 1996 cited in Chesterman & Galligan 1997:193).98

The shift is also reflected in migration policy among Western nations. Around the late 1950s, the consensus of social scientists toward the assimilation of migrants into host countries began to change. Ethnic organisations and residential segregation that had been seen as the enemy of assimilation began to be recognised as essential to successful ‘integration’ over the long term. While migrants stuck with their own as a way of facing the challenges of migration, their grandchildren would benefit from the social stability of their ethnic heritage and embrace mainstream Australia. These changes in thinking around intra-national ethnic difference resulted in the concept of ‘multiculturalism’, a term which emerged in the language of Australian policy in the 1970s (Goldberg 1994; Lopez 2000; Rowse 2005c).99

Today, ‘difference’ is clearly the dominant discourse of the Indigenous movement. In the previous chapter, some of the evidence I presented to argue that parts of Australia are ‘postcolonial’ included the amount of money spent on Indigenous-specific programs. As I will show in Chapter 6, Indigeneity as unique and inalienable difference is intrinsic to the belief system associated with postcolonisers.

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98 Note that there is contestation over this periodisation of Indigenous political thought, with some saying the distinction is over-emphasised (see for example Rowse 2005a).
99 Although the establishment of the Australian Multicultural Foundation and the first national policy on multiculturalism came later, in 1988 and 1989 respectively. Multiculturalism reflects a general shift in emphasis from the national to the global/local that has been theorised by many scholars (see for instance Friedman 1997; Hannerz 1996; Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000).
Why have a politics of difference prevailed over a politics of sameness? An instrumental line of reasoning is that formal equality has not delivered. While there has been no explicitly discriminatory legislation against Indigenous people for decades, their social position has barely improved. Thus Indigenous advocates in the 1960s and 70s, along with (and perhaps following) their international counterparts such as African-Americans, may have realised that special programs were required to deliver substantive equality and shifted their politics accordingly.

Another, related explanation looks to the history of liberalism. Some political theorists have argued that modern liberalism, while officially espousing equality for all, is inherently unable to fulfill this aim, owing to its historical roots in exclusivity. Rather than exclusions and inequality being unfortunate and temporary obstacles to the project of modernity, some scholars argue that liberalism is constitutively exclusive. Uday Mehta analyses Locke’s Second Treatise of Government to explore the possibility that exclusion is “an aspect of [liberalism’s] theoretical underpinning and not merely an episodic compromise with the practical constraints of implementation” (Mehta 1999: 48).

Central to liberalism is the granting of rights by virtue of birth. But these rights, though inherent, were never meant to be unconditional. Locke qualifies his expression of the natural right of men (beyond the obvious qualification of gender) to “order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature..”, and also that “[c]reatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal..” (Locke cited in Mehta 1999:52-23). This statement of universal rights leaves plenty of room for differentiation of those ‘less equal’ by virtue of inferior species (assuming a polygenous view), rank, advantages of Nature, and the use of those advantages; and allows for distinction between the ‘natural’ exercise of inherent rights and activities that lie outside

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100 One possible answer to this question is that Indigenous people are naturally culturally distinct. From my point of view, explanations which ‘naturalise’ Indigeneity as difference are not really explanations, but an expression of the dominant discourse of Indigenous difference. I am interested in why this explanation, rather than any other explanation, is considered ‘common-sense’.

101 Note that more recently, the Native Title Amendment Act (1998) has been considered by many including the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to be racially discriminatory (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 2001).

102 For related arguments see Brown 2001 and Rose 1999.
natural laws. Thus Mehta suggests that the limitation of desires is the central tenet of liberalism, rather than inherent freedom.

Mehta’s analysis would suggest that discourses which yearn for a future when the promises of liberalism are realised in a ‘truly’ equal society are likely to remain unfulfilled. Because the referent of ‘equality’ is in an ideal (male, European, educated) subject of modernity, the very perception of Indigenous differences (both deficiencies and positive attributes) is a function of an exclusive modernity. Although the stated project of liberal multiculturalism is to eliminate inequalities based on difference, it is this same project that has discursively created these differences. This does not bode well for ideas such as ‘unity in diversity’, post-apartheid South Africa’s national motto (see Henrard 2002). Whatever the reasons for the politics of difference, it is clear this is the dominant mode in which Indigenous people address the state and the non-Indigenous population.

**Recognition and the state**

The term ‘recognition’ is used in anthropological and philosophical literature to describe this process through which minorities identified as ‘different’ interact with the state. Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor’s 1994 essay on ‘the politics of recognition’ is an important exploration of this concept. With the birth of democratic society came the ideas of the universal dignity of humans, and of authentic identity. In the political sphere, these two ideas have contradictory consequences. Universal dignity leads to equal citizenship, “an identical basket of rights and immunities” (Taylor 1994:39). In contrast, the politics of authentic identity require that one’s distinctiveness be recognised. The two demands appear to be reconciled in the recognition of a distinct identity as a universal right: “the universal demand powers an acknowledgement of specificity” (Taylor 1994:39).  

However, Taylor identifies an impasse in two competing rationales for affirmative action policies. Those privileging universal dignity would justify positive discrimination as a

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103 Note that Indigenous intellectual Noel Pearson has independently used the language of recognition to refer to native title: “Native title is therefore the space between the two systems, where there is recognition. Native title is [for] want of a better formulation the recognition space [between] the common law and the Aboriginal law which forded recognition in particular circumstances.” (Pearson 1997)
measure designed to level the temporarily-uneven playing field: a recognition of inequality with an anticipation of future sameness. This logic is thwarted by measures that intend not just to *account* for differences in existing people, but also to *maintain* difference for future generations. This second position is an affront to universal human values that work towards erasing difference (Taylor 1994:37-44).

On the surface, it may seem relatively simple to allow people to maintain differences through generations without threatening basic ‘universal’ values upheld by dominant society. But in the moment that the merits of difference from the norm are acknowledged, relativist tensions slip in. If, in order to preserve a Quebecois identity (to use Taylor’s example), Quebec forbids children from non-Anglophone families from attending English schools and hence learning English, won’t they suffer unnecessary difficulties in a life if they are denied a chance to learn the ‘universal’ language?

In addressing this tension, Will Kymlicka argues for a distinction between “external protections” and “internal restrictions”. External protections grant cultural and linguistic minorities special rights not available to others (such as university quotas), exemption from universal obligations (such as military service), and a degree of autonomy. This is necessary for the equal enjoyment of life for cultural minorities. Internal restrictions that limit the right of minority group members to exercise their own freedoms, however, should not be tolerated in a liberal society. These basic freedoms include a measure of autonomy, choices between worthwhile options, and the right to dissent or opt out of the minority group. Thus, from a liberal point of view, cultural distinctiveness is at once a prerequisite for individual freedoms, and a potential threat. The difficult (if not impossible) task of a liberal majority is to judge which cultural norms are necessary for the survival of a minority culture and the freedom of its members, and which impinge upon freedom and choice (Kymlicka 1995: Chapter 3).

This process has been termed ‘conditional recognition’ by some theorists. Some differences of minority groups are recognised and valued, while some are ignored or suppressed. A recent local example concerns ‘traditional cultural practices’ of arranged marriages between older men and young girls. Until recently, some Aboriginal men accused of having sex with minors have used the defence that they had a traditional marriage relationship with the girl
in question. A recent controversial decision by the Northern Territory government disallowed this defence. Thus the recognition of Indigenous cultural practice is conditional on the rights of young girls being upheld.

Li, an anthropologist of development, similarly contends that recognition of Indigenous groups by international conservation NGOs in Indonesia depends upon their traditional cultural practices being compatible with conservation principles (Li 2003:388). Cowlishaw (1999:246-7) describes how a government-funded cattle station project came undone because Indigenous people did not sufficiently distinguish public from private: ‘inappropriate’ use of station vehicles resulting in their destruction was a turning point in government support of the cattle station. Povinelli argues that indigenous “customary law” is recognised by Australian common law on the proviso that Indigenous practices are not “repugnant” to Australian law. She concludes that the “cunning of recognition” is in the state requirement that Aborigines be different enough to deserve special consideration (such as Indigenous land rights), but not different enough to lie outside of Australian law. If customary law was truly alterior to common law, it would “shatter the skeletal structure” of the common law. Indigenous people have to be different enough to be recognised as such, but not so different that they are too alien to be recognised (Povinelli 2002).

This foreshadows the argument I will make later in this thesis: that the recognition of Indigenous people allows one type of difference (remediable difference) and not other types (radical difference or alterity), and that this discrepancy is the undoing of white antiracist subjectivities and their associated knowledges. For now, it is enough to appreciate that Indigenous people are recognised in ways that are more limited than the range of their diverse lifeworlds.

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104 See http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/s1003675.htm
105 A recent change of language from ‘difference’ to ‘distinctiveness’ (see for instance National Health and Medical Research Council 2003a) could reflect this need to better tread the line between the indistinguishable and the alien. By claiming cultural distinctiveness rather than difference, Indigenous people are perhaps discursively positioning themselves as less different, less alterior, without giving up claims to special rights.
A model of mutual recognition

I want to further explore the way in which minorities and dominant groups recognise each other through a model of subjectivity-formation. The idea that minorities can be recognised, but only up to a point, suggests that there is a particular frame for ‘an Indigenous person’ that resides in the minds of those recognising them. To be recognised as ‘an Indigenous person’, the person being recognised must fit the frame, more or less. Anthropologists of the postcolony have examined this process whereby Indigenous people and other subalterns are in a sense ‘created’ at the moment of recognition.

In a chapter entitled “Becoming a Tribal Elder, and Other Green Development Fantasies” (1999), Anna Tsing explores how the role of the tribal elder is ‘constructed’ in southern Kalimantan, Indonesia, through the interaction of international environment NGOs and local people. She introduces us to Yuni, Musa and Sumiati, a family of ‘tribal elders’ in Mankiling village who she argues are largely responsible for the success of the village in attracting numerous development projects. She describes a photograph of Yuni published in the proceedings of a development conference that took place in the village. In the photograph he appears “serious and neatly dressed but awkward, innocently out of place, standing as if on display between the audience rows” (Tsing 1999:171).

Tsing claims that in this image, we see Yuni inhabiting the ‘space of recognition’ shaped by development discourses, a space that constructs him as “the open, desiring subject of an imagined modernity yet with the untutored simplicity of tradition in his background and breeding. He is a tribesman longing for change” (Tsing 1999:171). In the moment that Yuni inhabits this space, the subjectivity of the ‘tribal elder’ is enacted, as is the knowledge system that makes the tribal elder intelligible.

Anthropological accounts such as these\(^\text{106}\) see the politics of recognition as the creation of spaces, both metaphorical and actual, where subalterns can be recognised and receive the resources associated with this recognition. These processes of creating and inhabiting a space of recognition, for instance as a tribal elder, are contested and constantly re-

negotiated, featuring both complicity and resistance. Tsing calls this theatre of recognition “the field of attraction”, and sees her anthropological project as one of fleshing out “the longings, the broken promises, the erotic draw, and the magic… that makes the tribal elder emerge as a politically active and creative figure” (Tsing 1999:167).

The work of another anthropologist, Vincanne Adams, illustrates that this process of recognition has two sides. She looked at Nepalese Sherpas and their relationships with tourists, mountain climbers and development workers. Western tourists create the spaces in which Sherpas can be recognised as skillful mountain-climbers of unlimited endurance with an unquenchable desire to please, and Sherpas form themselves, more or less, to fit such spaces (Adams 1996:13). In a simultaneous process that has received less attention, Sherpas create spaces in which Westerners can be recognised as what she calls ‘patrons’ with Westerners shaping themselves accordingly. She tells stories of Westerners hosting visiting Sherpa friends for extended visits to the West, and complex relationships of sponsorship that begin with a tourist visit and continue for decades. She explores how aspects of Sherpa culture, particularly Tibetan Buddhism and Shamanism, have shaped the processes of “seduction” through which Sherpas keep Westerners in their orbits.

We saw a form of this process in the Introduction. White residents of Tiwi have the opportunity to shape themselves as antiracist by displaying cultural sensitivity and tolerance toward the ‘anti-social’ behaviour around them, and intolerance toward their neighbours who write racist letters to the NT News. The drunk Maningrida man, who ‘confessed’ that alcoholism was the cause of his homelessness during a brief encounter on an urban street corner, provided me with the opportunity to shape myself as a particular kind of understanding Westerner: one who is not shocked by difference, who declines to give money that will contribute to further self-harm, and who suspects that a more radical difference (exile due to sorcery) lies underneath the deviant surface.

Another useful way of understanding this ‘field of attraction’ is as a site of multiple interpellations. As the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser described it, interpellation is the mechanism by which dominant ideas, or ideology, constitutes concrete individuals as subjects. In simple terms, this is the process through which stereotypes end up being acted out by the people they describe. The classic example of interpellation is the
policeman calling out ‘Hey, you!’ in the street. The person that turns to see if they have been called (or perhaps starts running) is in that moment interpellated as a subject, in this case as a potential criminal. A friend similarly interpellates you as a subject by calling your name, reaching out to shake your hand; or if they don’t yet know you, assuming you have a name and asking what it is (Althusser 1971[1969]: 160-165). Tsing’s field of recognition can also be understood as a site of multiple interpellations, where subalterns are interpellated as oppressed and powerless people who need and are worthy of assistance; and the donors, often white Westerners, are interpellated as compassionate, generous and antiracist.

So, my model of contemporary race relations comprises four interconnected, constantly negotiated processes: spaces of recognition are created for subalterns (villagers, Sherpas, Traditional Owners), who then inhabit them, and spaces of recognition are created for postcolonisers (environmentalists, development workers, anthropologists), who then inhabit them (see Figure 10). This multi-directional field of attraction is located on the postcolonial frontier, and specifically in postcolonial spaces. This approach can help make sense of the complex spaces seen in the kind of postcolonial situations that produce Sherpa-owned touring companies, and development workers who specialise in recognising ‘tribal elders’ and turning them into entrepreneurs. Perhaps these are the kind of examples that Stuart Hall was thinking of when arguing that the postcolonial encompasses more complex, cross-cutting power relations than the colonial (Hall 1996b:244).

The approach I am taking here inevitably invokes theoretical work on mimesis. This concept has provided significant traction for scholars in explaining the complex power relations of the postcolony. Mimesis in its most common postcolonial usage refers to the subaltern mimicking the desires of the Westerner. This is colonisation as “a chamber of mirrors reflecting each stream’s perception of the other” (Taussig 1987:218). It can be a subconscious process where the subaltern internalises Western images of themselves which they then reproduce, so that (for example) the African enacts sexual bravado and the Asian enacts spiritual wisdom. Mimesis can also be a conscious and instrumental imitation of Western desires in order to gain advantage, such as attracting tourist income or the support

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of the international environmental movement. More often than not, it is somewhere in between passive internalisation and deliberate acting.

In the changed political circumstances of postcolonial spaces, it is difficult to get a firm hold on the identities that circulate there. The unraveling of the objective gaze, and the subsequent entanglement of the various forms of ‘Westerner’ (scientist, tourist, ethnographer) with each other, and with their Others, has led to somewhat of a crisis of authenticity in anthropology (see Clifford 1988; Huggan 2001; MacCannell 1992; Mascia-Lees 1994; Taussig 1993).\footnote{This ‘crisis’ in anthropology had taken hold by the 1980s (Clifford & Marcus 1986). In Australian anthropology, a parallel shift has occurred from ‘salvage anthropology’ and an attempt to find ‘remnants’ of tradition, to a “continuity and change” approach from the mid-1980s (see for example Collman 1988; Keen 1988a; Morris 1989; Trigger 1992), and more recently an approach influenced by US cultural anthropology (Merlan 1998).} No longer are there innocent observers, or innocent natives to be observed. The “vertiginous cultural interspace” that has replaced the neat subjectivities of ‘native’ and ‘Westerner’ “makes many of us desperate to fill it with meaning, thereby defusing disconcertion” (Taussig 1993:237). But this imperative to find firm ground is liable to further disconcert. Once we recognise that there are no unspoiled ‘primitives’ left, how can the ethnographer distinguish untainted ‘culture’ from that sullied by disempowering colonial mimicry? And even more alarmingly, how can we ensure that our own effects on the natives do not further the erosion of culture initiated by colonialism? Mimesis creates another related set of conundrums regarding agency. Are subalterns merely duped into acting like ‘Sherpas’, ‘tribal elders’ and ‘Aborigines’? Or are they really mocking the West, maintaining the performance only when watched by Western eyes? And are they surreptitiously fighting back when they seem to resemble the negative aspects of these representations, such as the public drunken disorder at the Tiwi shops? (see also Cowlishaw 2003a)

These concerns are central to the story I will tell in this thesis. White antiracists at the Institute experience a version of this crisis in their proximate encounters with Indigenous people: these questions haunt the subjects of this ethnography just as they haunt the anthropologist. In the story I will tell here, white antiracist subjectivities are ultimately undone by the \textit{ambiguity} of the subaltern, the impossibility of definitively distinguishing collaboration from injury, and resistance from complicity. Thus this ethnography does not
try to answer any of these questions of authenticity and agency. Instead, I investigate why these questions seem to elicit such “desperation” in the anthropologist and white Institute researcher alike. My contention is that doubt about Indigenous authenticity and agency matters because it destabilises the subjectivities of postcolonisers. Such uncertainty troubles postcolonisers not just because they want to defend Indigenous people against charges of inauthenticity, but because the viability of their antiracist subjectivity is threatened.

**Power and agency**

While the spaces of recognition that are created for Indigenous people to inhabit are certainly limited, it is a mistake to overlook the agency of those who inhabit those spaces. Of relevance here is Li’s work on the recent emergence of ‘Indigeneity’ in Indonesia, a category known as maskarayat adat or ‘people of the land’. Essentialised notions of Indigeneity, such as remoteness, spiritual attachment to uncultivated land, handicrafts and dances, provide both a limit and an opportunity for Indonesians willing to take up the “tribal slot”. For example, those tribal groups that can present themselves in a way congruent with Western imaginings of Indigeneity can access international media (Ramos 2003).

Li theorises recognition as “a terrain of struggle”, and, drawing on Stuart Hall, she sees self-essentialism as a positioning “which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle” (Hall 1994:394–7; Li 2000:151). Positioning is achieved through articulation, a process by which disparate autonomous elements are articulated – in the sense both of ‘joined’ and of ‘articulated’ – to form a provisional unity (Hall 2002[1980]). Racial identities are articulations that “can function both as the vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies, and as the elementary forms for the cultures of resistance.” These positionings always contain the potential for “struggle and contradiction” that can be exploited by those who might be oppressed by them (Hall 2002[1980]).

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109 Spivak similarly describes how the “subject-effect” manages to achieve homogenous and continuous meaning from its heterogeneous and discontinuous constituents by “positing a metalapsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause.” (Spivak 1987:204)
2002[1980]:64). For instance, the first national representative Indigenous organisation recognised all Indonesians as potential members, thus refusing to discriminate between jungle-dwellers and those who were potentially less ‘Indigenous’, such as cosmopolitan and wealthy Javanese (Li 2000). As I will explore, postcolonisers also ‘position’ themselves as Indigenous advocates, and both exploit and resist the boundaries of this slot (for instance, by pushing the limits of what is considered ‘racist’ and ‘antiracist’).

An example of positioning can be seen in the pages of the first national Indigenous fortnightly paper, the Koori Mail. The large color photograph that adorns the front page of each edition nearly always features a dark-skinned person. An example of positioning can be seen in the pages of the first national Indigenous fortnightly paper, the Koori Mail. The large color photograph that adorns the front page of each edition nearly always features a dark-skinned person. Within the paper, stories that cover the breadth of the country feature photographs of Indigenous people of all skin tones and phenotypes, reflecting the Commonwealth working definition of Aboriginality as self-identification, any amount of ancestry, and community acceptance. While creating the appearance necessary to occupy the “Indigenous slot” (say, to the Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australian who glances at the front of the paper), inside its pages the ‘room to maneuver’ made available through a relatively open definition of Indigeneity is apparent.

This model of mutual recognition may be jarring for some who cannot conceive of Indigenous people acting on white people, only the reverse. It is easy to accept that Indigenous people are unfairly expected to perform to white standards, but how can we think of white people performing to (perhaps fair, perhaps unfair) Indigenous standards? An important theoretical aspect of this model is a Foucauldian approach to power, which rejects the idea of power as something that is ‘bad’ or ‘repressive’, while allowing other types of power, such as that held by ‘oppressed’ peoples, as inherently good. One of the major insights of Foucault was to question the distinction between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ power. In The History of Sexuality Volume I, he sought to debunk the idea of power as only coercive and constraining by showing that the ‘repression’ of sex from the seventeenth century actually resulted in a proliferation of discourses of sexuality. Building on this insight, he argued that power is always productive. Rather than the rulers and the ruled being in an oppositional relationship where power is directed downwards, “the manifold
relationships of force that shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions… bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force relations” (Foucault 1978:94). Muecke discusses an example from the Indigenous realm: claims from the 1960s on that Indigenous writing was ignored by mainstream publishers and audiences occurred at the very time that the publishing industry was eager for the work of Indigenous writers (Muecke 2005:113).

Sites of ‘repression’ are, for Foucault, sites where power is in play, and importantly where the possibilities for subject formation proliferate. For Foucault, power, knowledge and subjectivities are intertwined. As I discussed above, the result of the so-called ‘repression’ of sexuality was the proliferation of sexual discourse and sexual identities, and many new categories of sexual perversion emerged (Foucault 1978). So wherever there is power exerted, a Foucauldian perspective will attend to the new knowledge and identities being created.

Thus the process through which Indigenous and white people are mutually recognised is a creative process. Through a process of articulation, Indigenous and white people position themselves in ways that fit spaces of recognition, but that also exploit these spaces, always pushing the boundaries of recognition.

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111 Another way to understand the idea of power as productive is to recognise that to wield power is to act on others’ actions, as Foucault explained in an interview. He explained that in all kinds of human interactions, “power is always present: I mean a relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other…these power relations are thus mobile, reversible, unstable. It should be noted that power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides” (Foucault 1998b:292).
In the postcolony, members of the self-proclaimed Lia Pootah community successfully argued they were Aboriginal (a claim contested by other sections of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community) by claiming descent from an Aboriginal woman who did not appear in any records, and from their ability to smell snakes in the bush, their participation in berry-collecting and their ability to research and resurrect a ceremony conferring ‘Elder’ status on a member of their community. In his analysis of this issue, Moore attributes the success of the Lia Pootah community to “mobilising liberal rights and romantic elements of Aboriginalist discourse and assuming [white] peoples' desire to avoid the potential for social disruption or embarrassment which might be involved in disputing them” (Moore 2005:184). I have added the qualifier ‘white’ to Moore’s more general ‘peoples’: as he vividly describes, (other) Indigenous people have no qualms about challenging the claims of the Lia Pootah (Moore 2005:178). This is an excellent example of positioning that incorporates the role of mutual recognition. The Lia Pootah are successfully in inhabiting the Indigenous slot because white people are reluctant to question them, a move which

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would push them beyond the bounds of recognition of ‘antiracist white’ and into the territory of ‘racist’.

I must stress here that acknowledging a mutual process of recognition does not imply an absence of coercion or other signs of power inequality. While there are certain symmetries to the dual processes of recognition involving Indigenous and white people, they are by no means neutral or balanced. In most cases, white people ultimately retain the upper hand, as the employer, donor or patron. While the white person can usually walk away from their engagement with Indigenous people if they are frustrated by the politics of recognition, an Indigenous person is likely to have fewer options.

Like the white Aboriginal faces that must be confined to the innermost pages of the Koori Mail, the Lia Pootah stretch the boundaries of recognition because they lack sufficient difference from white people. In the following chapters, I articulate the two poles that shape the space of recognition of Indigenous people - remedialism and orientalism (Chapter 6) – and the two corresponding aspects of Indigenous subjectivity – the self-determined Indigene and the authentic Indigenous voice (Chapter 4). The Lia Pootah may well satisfy remedialism, if they are committed to economic and social advancement of their community, but their physical appearance, their voices and their dress are barely worthy of the orientalist gaze. The Indigenous people who indirectly inhabit this ethnography (through the eyes of white researchers at the Institute) experience the converse problem: an excess of difference. For residents of remote communities in the Northern Territory, the ‘authentic Indigenous voice’ is potentially theirs for the taking (but their excess of difference can impede remedialism). While the Lia Pootah easily appear self-determined (in the specific sense of the term I explore below), they struggle to credibly harness the ‘authentic Indigenous voice’. In the next two chapters, I will explain this set of terms in detail, fleshing out the conceptual model of recognition represented in Figure 10.
Part 2 – Postcolonial logic

In Part 1 I set out a model for understanding the mutual recognition of Indigenous people and postcolonisers on the postcolonial frontier. The Indigenous and white identities that are created through such encounters at the Institute are explored in Chapter 4. The chapter finishes with two illustrations of the complex processes through which ‘spaces of recognition’ are inhabited and identities negotiated. In Chapter 5, the abstract is made concrete through four portraits of Institute researchers. Chapter 6 considers the knowledge system that underpins the performance of white antiracism and the creation of recognisable Indigenous subjectivities. *Postcolonial logic*, formed from a meld of orientalism and remedialism, is the script that gives performances of Indigeneity and white antiracism their meaning.
Chapter 4: Identities shaped through mutual recognition

In Chapter 3, I explored how a process of mutual recognition, of double interpellation, creates subjectivities that real people inhabit with more or less comfort, more or less resistance. Of the diverse subjectivities that inhabit the postcolonial frontier (illustrated in the introduction), it is postcoloniser subjectivities that are of interest here. This chapter considers the recognition processes that give the subjectivity of ‘white antiracist person’ meaning: that make it possible to be a white antiracist. The terminology of postcoloniser is interchangeable in my usage, as it is a white antiracist person that seeks to create postcolonial spaces – spaces where there is an attempt to invert colonial power relations (see Chapter 2).

A parallel interpellative process also produces the subjectivity of ‘racist white person’, but at the Institute, this is an uncommon event. One instance I can recall was in a seminar on marijuana use in remote Indigenous communities. During question time, a male hospital doctor recently arrived to the Territory from ‘down south’ asked whether Indigenous people might be genetically susceptible to marijuana addiction, just like they are susceptible to alcohol. The discomfort among Institute staff at this show of racist ignorance was palpable, and a senior Institute researcher immediately stepped in and explained to the rest of the audience, kindly but firmly, that Indigenous people were not genetically susceptible to alcohol or any other substance, and that genetic explanations were commonly asserted but rarely, if ever, confirmed scientifically. I don’t know how the hospital doctor felt, but to the audience it appeared he was shown up for being, at best, ignorant, and at worst, racist. The staff at the Institute (as well as many hospital staff) would never be caught out publicly as this man was. They may well think things that are counter to dominant antiracist discourse, but they would only say them in specific contexts where they are unlikely to be interpellated as racist.\footnote{\footnotetext{See the portrait of ‘Deb’ in Chapter 5, page 142. Note though that although it is uncommon for any person in the Institute to be interpellated as racist, it is reasonably common for ‘racist white people’ to be spoken of in an abstract way, as people ‘out there’, for instance, commenting on letter writers to the Northern Territory News like those mentioned in the Introduction, but rarely as people in the Institute itself.}} The Institute, from the point of view of white researchers, is largely a place of like-minded people, although a postcoloniser is always vigilant for hints of racism in oneself or one’s colleagues (see Chapters 6 and 8).
In this Chapter, I describe how researchers at the Institute take up postcoloniser subjectivities using examples of public forums. It is in the public arena, where there is an audience literally present, that the techniques required to fill the space of recognition as a ‘white antiracist’ are most obvious.

First though, I address the Indigenous identities that are created through these recognition processes. I do this with caution, as Indigenous people are not the subject of my ethnography. Unlike my discussions of white identities, I will not be tempering these generalised representations with portraits of real, complex, contradictory people (see Chapter 5). My discussion of Indigenous identities, therefore, can remain at the level of representations only, and cannot be extrapolated to refer to actual Indigenous people. This is methodologically appropriate, as my interest in these Indigenous identities is purely in terms of how antiracist whites interact with them. As you will see, much of what I have to say about these identities concerns white people more than Indigenous people. This again illustrates my hazardous political position I explored in Chapter 1. For those who believe that the approach taken in this thesis draws on Indigenous identities as a tool for self-indulgent ‘white therapy’, re-inscribing white power without attending to ‘Indigenous voices’, I have little defense. I can only counter that anthropological analysis of the powerful is useful (as discussed in chapter 1) and let the analysis below speak for itself.

**Indigenous subjectivities**

**The self-determined Indigene and the Authentic Indigenous Voice**

The Institute’s website has a section on the support provided to Indigenous staff:

The Institute established the Indigenous Support Unit to provide a framework for enhanced representation, support and participation of its Indigenous staff and students. The Unit meets regularly to promote the involvement of Indigenous staff in all Institute activities and provides targeted professional development opportunities for its members.

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114 A charge leveled against me at a conference where I presented some of this work.
The group provides an understanding of local Indigenous history and culture to ensure our research outcomes will be readily accepted by Indigenous communities, and ultimately, to improve the health of Aboriginal people. This is particularly important, as despite numerous initiatives and programs to improve the health of Indigenous people living in remote communities, there are still major ongoing health problems and disadvantages in health care. This failure to improve Aboriginal health often stems from a lack of awareness or knowledge of distinct cultural, language, environmental and economic differences between remote Aboriginal communities and urban Australia...

The Institute actively fosters participation and collaboration with Indigenous people throughout the research process. Our aim is to have optimal Indigenous involvement in the design, conduct and participation of research projects that focus on Aboriginal health. Indigenous employees, particularly in research roles, and strong linkages with Indigenous communities are key components of what makes the Institute a unique research organisation.

Let us recognise three parts in the narrative of this passage: Indigenous staff are committed both to enhancing their “professional development opportunities” and to “improv[ing] the health of Aboriginal people”; that unlike white researchers, they possess “knowledge of distinct cultural, language, environmental and economic differences between remote communities and urban Australia”; and that their role is to have “optimal…involvement in the design, conduct and participation of research projects.” These elements of the narrative show us how the space of recognition that creates the subjectivity of ‘Indigenous person’ is shaped. I’ll discuss these aspects, as well as giving examples of how Indigenous people resist the established boundaries of recognition and attempt to reposition them.

Broadly speaking, the Indigenous person who fits the space of recognition described in this passage is literate and numerate, and aspires to better themselves further through Western education. They are motivated by a desire to improve the health of their communities, and Indigenous people in general. They believe in the ability of public health measures to improve Indigenous health, provided that the Institute’s “lack of awareness” of Indigenous culture is remedied with their own cultural and community knowledge. It is expected that the benefits they accrue through their recognition – employment, social status, respect from white researchers – will be used to further help their communities by acting as role models to other Indigenous people, and by encouraging their children and families to further their
own education. They are also integrated with their community and have a ‘natural’ understanding of Indigenous protocols and concerns which are opaque to white people. They are able to represent an ‘Indigenous’ point of view and communicate this to Institute researchers.

The first aspect of this space is an aspiration for self-improvement, and the minimisation of Indigenous disadvantage in general. I call this aspect of the space of recognition the self-determined Indigene. Individual Indigenous people who are recognised are those who ‘naturally’ apply any benefits they receive, including knowledge about being healthy, to the betterment of themselves and their families. What is demanded of Indigenous people is a version of the “entrepreneur of the self” emblematic of late liberalism (Rose 1999:164). Deviant behaviour, such as not attending work, gambling, drinking and even simply smoking, push the boundaries of recognition, and may render them unrecognisable. However, actions perceived as deviant will be tolerated if balanced by, for instance, public demonstrations of self-improvement such as active participation in Institute seminars.

The second important aspect of the space where an ‘Indigenous person’ is recognised is the possession of unique cultural knowledge. Indigenous people may have to display aspirations for Western forms of betterment to be recognised, but it is their distinctly non-Western identity that makes them ‘Indigenous people’ in the first place. I call the authority derived from this aspect of the space of recognition the authentic Indigenous voice. Indigenous people hold exclusive rights over this voice, which is presumed to be unified and collective. In meetings, seminars, and workshops, white people will commonly suffix their statements with “but it would be good to hear what an Indigenous person thinks about this”. They might utter the accusatory “how many Indigenous people are here?”, suggesting that a discussion of Indigenous health is unlikely to be constructive, or even ethical, without Indigenous people present and contributing. In a particularly stark example, an entry on a Darwin-based opinion website about Indigenous policy proclaims: “Some people say the answer is blowing in the wind, but it's not. Just ask any Aboriginal person what should be done, and they will tell you! There's the answer!” (Troppo Armadillo 2004).

Related work on power and subjectivities in late liberalism elaborates on Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Barry, Osborne, & Rose 1996; Burchell, Gordon, & Miller 1991) and explores the trope of risk minimisation (Beck 1992; Luhmann 1993).
When an Indigenous person does speak, they are rarely questioned or challenged, their comments are generally followed by a respectful silence.

It is ‘non-cosmetically apparent’ – usually meaning white-skinned – Indigenous people at the Institute that push the boundaries of this aspect of the space of recognition. Those who know that the speaker is Indigenous will treat their comments as utterances of the authentic Indigenous voice, and listen respectfully. Those who do not know them may not display a similar reverence. White Indigenous people may choose to explicitly state their Indigeneity, especially when they are in an unfamiliar context where there are few people who know of their Indigeneity. Where they are in a known setting, such as an Institute seminar, they are unlikely to explicitly state their Indigeneity, perhaps knowing that a failure on the part of some white people to recognise the authentic Indigenous voice can only reflect back on them, making them appear ignorant or even racist (in assuming that pale-skinned people are not Indigenous).

The third element of the passage above promises that Indigenous people at the Institute will be ‘optimally involved’ in every aspect of the research process. In the final paragraph, the overall logic of the narrative is laid bare: if Indigenous people are themselves the researchers, their links to remote communities and their unique Indigenous knowledge will remedy the faults of previous research and lead to health improvement. The Indigenous person recognised in this space is a melding of the authentic Indigenous voice and the self-determined Indigene. Recognisable Indigenous people engage in self-improvement, an aim achievable only via their access to a unique Indigeneity.

The white antiracist who seeks to improve Indigenous health must therefore foster self-determined Indigenes and authentic Indigenous voices. There are numerous techniques for achieving this. Research projects seek the “optimal Indigenous involvement” of Aboriginal people in all aspects of their projects, ideally having Indigenous chief investigators or co-investigators, and organise training and support for the Indigenous employees they attract.

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116 On the limited space of the contemporary recognition of Indigenous people, see Conklin 1997; and on the history of the “savage slot”, see Trouillot 1991.
117 Although they may do it subtly, for instance referring to Indigenous people as ‘we’ rather than ‘they’.
118 The logic of Indigenous public health combines these two into what I call postcolonial logic. We will see in Chapter 6 that discourses of self-improvement map onto the concept of remedialism, while the authentic Indigenous voice can be understood in terms of orientalism.
The authentic Indigenous voice is captured through the processes of consultation and participation. An early and widespread manifestation of this is ‘community consultation’, an assemblage of techniques aimed at extracting the wishes of the community. It has involved the creation of racialised para-professional positions such as ‘Community Liaison Officer’ or ‘Cultural Consultant’ and rituals such as the community BBQ. In recent years, techniques to foster the ‘participation’ of Indigenous people in health research have proliferated (see Kowal, Anderson, & Bailie 2005). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one method that has received much attention, with PAR experts flown in to Darwin from southern capitals to conduct workshops at the Institute.

Such techniques of inclusion have been critiqued by Australian authors and internationally by development studies scholars (see for example Cooke & Kothari 2001; Peters Little 1999; Cowlishaw 1999:230-244). A common element of these critiques is to question the implicit assumption that the individual and collective wishes of Indigenous people effortlessly map onto the priorities of either international development or liberal multiculturalism. This assumption (that is the focus of later chapters) reflects the precarious fusion of the authentic and the improving that forms the space where Indigenous people are recognised.

Other anthropologists of the postcolonial have described subaltern subjectivities as a similar double-act of ancient and corrigible. Langford explores how contemporary constructions of Ayurvedic medicine are at once modern, serving powerful discourses of Indian nationalism, and non-modern, as ‘traditional’ and ‘cultural’ knowledge. She describes how the trick of “tak[ing] on forms of the modern while simultaneously retaining the promise of redemption from the modern” generates tremendous discursive power (Langford 2002:17). Tsing describes how environmentalists construct villagers as both living in complete harmony with their environment and requiring assistance to learn how to live sustainably. This discursive move appealed to an international NGO eager to fund Community-Based Natural Resource Management, a method that “fulfilled dreams of improvement as well as preservation” (Tsing 2005:263). In an Australian example, Batty looks at Indigenous people who are in charge of Aboriginal organisations in Central

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119 For an ethnography of parallel processes in a development context in India, see Mosse 2005.
Australia. In their professional roles, this group of Aboriginal people exemplifies the self-determined Indigene. He describes, however, how these senior managers are required to exhibit the authentic Indigenous voice, demonstrating their connections to ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’ (Batty 2005).

The contradictions at the heart of this space of recognition are illustrated in Adams’ description of Western representations of Nepalese Sherpas:

To be a Sherpa in the eyes of a Westerner meant to be in need and, equally important, to be amply deserving of aid… to be different in all the ways the Western desired – exotically spiritual and unfailingly hospitable, yet endlessly needy – different enough to warrant a tourist visit and warrant being “saved” by the West. It also meant being similar to the West in all the ways the West desired – to want to become educated in schools where English was the medium of instruction, and to develop a consumer need for things the West could provide, including medicines, Western Ph.D.s and Mercedes-Benzes (“proof” of successful development for both many Sherpas and Westerners).

(Adams 1996:16-7)

I will argue in Chapter 6 that this combination of exotic difference and Western aspirations produces remediable difference, a concept that ensures both the ‘deserving neediness’ of subalterns and the benevolence of white development workers.

Marcia Langton says there is no Authentic Indigenous Voice

I want to consider in a little more detail the appeal of the authentic Indigenous voice for white antiracists. Scholars have recognised that ‘Indigenous’ productions, both discursive and material, are wholeheartedly and uncritically embraced by many white people. Muecke describes how white antiracists embraced the autobiographical novels Wandering Girl (Ward 1987) and My Place (Morgan 1987) as ‘the truth’, and how the books appeared to be immune from literary criticism: “While we readers scrutinize our moral consciousness for traces of racism and heave abstract sighs of relief, the books can walk past the border guards of the literary institutions with Aboriginal passports” (Muecke 2005:117). Michaels
terms this effect “the dangerous fantasy of authenticity” (Michaels 1988 cited in Muecke 2005:117).

As Muecke suggests, the uncritical recognition of all things authentically ‘Indigenous’ relates to the needs of white people to demonstrate they are not racist perpetrators of epistemic violence. White antiracist people who are constantly monitoring the detrimental effects of their subject position on Indigenous people can at least relax when they are listening to Indigenous people. The act of listening and respecting Indigenous voices is a relative reversal of colonial power relations: unambiguously a postcolonial space. Thus the position of Indigenous people as holders of the authoritative truth provides white people with a (temporary) way out of coloniality, immunity against the inherent dangers of a white subjectivity (see the portraits of Deb and Robyn in Chapter 5).

This passage is from a discussion with a colleague about my project. When I describe my research to people, many white antiracists assume that I will be asking Indigenous people what they think of white researchers (thus accessing the authentic Indigenous voice), and are alarmed when I explain that I am not planning to work closely with Indigenous people. Similarly, this white woman around my age who had read Indigenous authors widely thought that I could not discover anything useful about white researchers by working with them, but only by asking Indigenous people.

Researcher: You really need to ask the community. Like, if you asked me what I thought about the way I do research I wouldn’t be able to tell you myself.

EK: Is it like, you need to have an Indigenous person there all the time to check that what you are doing is okay.

Researcher: Yeah.

I start explaining to her the concept of the ‘Authentic Indigenous Voice’, the tendency of white antiracists to distrust anything they do and they totally trust anything an Indigenous person says as the truth, as I am keen to see whether she agrees that white antiracists commonly do this. She interprets that I am criticising the practice of uncritically taking what any Indigenous person says as the truth...

Researcher: Yeah, Marcia Langton talks about how there isn’t an authentic Indigenous voice… people have different opinions, you can’t just ask one person, you have to talk to the whole
community… It’s an ongoing negotiation process with the whole of the community, it takes a lot of time and effort. [Fieldnotes 23/9/04 1:62]

This is a brilliant example of the contradictory logic of the postcolony, and the problem of anthropologising liberalism. I am trying to discuss a tendency of thinking shared by white antiracist people that I consider to be neither bad nor good, but the researcher construes that I am criticising an instance of colonial power relations. She takes up what she thinks I have said and elaborates: *I know the authentic Indigenous voice is not real, merely another colonial mechanism of homogenising oppression, because the authentic Indigenous voice of Marcia Langton told me so.* The unconsciousness of this irony, that this intelligent person cannot see the internal contradiction, is testament to the attachment of researchers to the idea that Indigenous people have the authoritative answers that can solve any postcolonial conundrum, including the conundrum of relying on the authoritative Indigenous voice.

**Most powerful at its most symbolic**

In her book *The Cunning of Recognition*, Elizabeth Povinelli cites an article about a prominent Indigenous arts bureaucrat. The article describes her as a “city power broker” in charge of many staff and a large budget. As it is describing an *Indigenous* bureaucrat, the article cannot but draw on the authentic Indigenous voice. It says she has “a particularly Aboriginal view of the political geography of this nation” and that in her work directing festivals and funding programs “she has meticulously followed the diplomatic protocol of ancient Australia” (Jopson 1997 cited in Povinelli 2002:58).

Povinelli notes that the article pointedly does not explain what these ancient protocols might be, or how they might be applied in the corporatised modern art world:

> This referential nonspecificity is not the result of a lack of knowledge or the failure to report it. Rather, “ancient protocol” is experienced as maximally symbolic at exactly the moment when it seems

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120 Because why else would I bring it up if not to criticise it? This is another illustration of *my political problem* (see Chapter 1): the lack of discursive space for analysis in a field saturated with morality and identity politics.
minimally determinate. This semiotic hinge allows readers to fantasize a maximal variety of images of the deserving indigenous subject at the very moment the description of the content of the social geography reaches zero. (Povinelli 2002:58)

Thus it is not the content of Indigenous knowledge per se that commands authority, it is the possibility of power and mystery contained in highly symbolic references to it. At the level of public discourse, Indigenous health abounds with similar examples of nonspecificity. Lutschini’s review of the term ‘holism’ in Aboriginal health literature found that it was represented as immutably Aboriginal and embodied by Aboriginal people, as opposite to a Western/biomedical approach, and as essential to improving Aboriginal health (and that non-holistic services were to blame for the lack of health improvement), but that there was intense confusion between authors as to the content of the term (Lutschini 2005).121 Lutschini argues that this nonspecificity is detrimental to the cause of improving Indigenous health, but others would see it as instrumental on the part of Indigenous people. Muecke suggests that a refusal to specify the authentic Indigenous voice is a deliberate strategy in the face of white demands to speak, a “judicious silence” that preserves Indigenous power through gesturing toward the “great wealth of culture [that] lies below the surface” (Muecke 2005:111).122

At the Institute, the indeterminacy of Indigenous knowledge takes different forms and serves different purposes. First of all, the content of the authentic Indigenous voice is more often specified. The “cultural, language, environmental and economic differences” that the Institute’s Indigenous staff promise to overcome (see website quote above) are indeed spelt out in formal and informal ways, although informal channels are far more informative. Formal ethical guidelines advise the translation of consent forms into Indigenous languages. Warnings are passed between researchers to make sure community meetings are generously catered, to record each of the multiple names of research participants if you want to find them again, and to ensure people aren’t asked personal questions when their

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121 Lutschini (2005) argues that this confusion was compounded by a refusal to engage with the mainstream literature on holism because of the desire to need to present an opposition to non-indigenous concepts. For an example of the highly symbolic in North American Indigenous health discourse see Minde & Minde 1995, and for an examination of how the indeterminacy of definitions of ‘health’ and of ‘the right to health’ operate in a general context see Greco 2004.

122 Langford (2002:Chapter 2) describes a similar efficacy of indeterminate Indian knowledge about Ayurveda.
classificatory siblings are present. A semi-official document photocopied for new staff called “How to Stay Out of Trouble when Visiting Remote Aboriginal Communities” recommends that researchers wear neat and modest clothes, ring the community multiple times to check that they will be met at the landing strip, and head to the council office immediately to announce their arrival.

While the authentic Indigenous voice is usually specified to some degree in postcolonial spaces like the Institute, indeterminacy still has an important role in providing opportunities for white antiracists to demonstrate their antiracism in public forums. The white antiracist establishes themselves as one who defends the right of Indigenous people to enjoy their semiotic hinge (to use Povinelli’s term). It is this function that is most prominent at the Institute, where most whites know a bit about Indigenous culture and lifeworlds: making a statement defending the right to be nonspecific is more important than the fantastical effect of the nonspecificity itself.

At a seminar on Natural Resource Management, in the midst of a passionate plea for Indigenous knowledge systems and processes to be recognised by the “Western system”, a researcher stressed that this Indigenous knowledge would not be specified:

We need to have equity in different knowledge systems. And this doesn’t mean that we write down the cultural knowledge they have – knowledge in the public domain is often misused... It’s more than just responsibility, or identity, but I won’t talk about it. We are not interested in mapping the structures of traditional knowledge…their decision-making structures are intact. [Fieldnotes 22/10/04 2:27]

Within the context of the seminar, this appeal was not aimed specifically at anyone (it was unclear who had ordained that Indigenous knowledge should be written down), but rather at the ‘public domain’, which remained, ironically, unspecified. This unspecified plea for nonspecificity should be read as a display of white anti-racism (see the next section).  

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123 Another example of this occurred at a Whiteness Studies conference I attended, when a white antiracist was asked to talk about the ‘power’ that inspired her interest in studying the Indigenous realm. She replied, ‘I can’t speak about Indigenous power… I am silenced, but in a positive way. I can’t say what it is… but it’s the source of what is provoked in me by the Indigenous people I work with.” Again, there is the insistence that antiracist white people can only contribute to a discourse of Indigenous symbolism and non-specificity.
This is a moral appeal. If you are for Indigenous people, you will not flinch at respecting ‘Indigenous community processes’, full stop. Only if you are against them, will you demand to know more, or argue that some aspects of Indigenous processes should be supported, but others should not. An antiracist white is someone who embraces Indigenous knowledges, particularly when they are at their most symbolic.

Another researcher described in a seminar how an Indigenous man he worked with tried to teach him about Indigenous knowledge using a metaphor of a tree:

While we can look at a tree outside, we know there are roots underneath and we cannot always see that. A person with deep knowledge knows everything about what is under the ground, and their understanding about that tree—or their understanding about that dog or crocodile or turtle or whatever—is very deep, way deeper than you and I could ever imagine. So how I could interact with that level of knowledge and sensitivity became an issue.

[Fieldnotes 9/2/05 3:23, emphasis added]

This researcher is clearly committed to creating postcolonial spaces where white antiracists actively attempt to recognise and respect Indigenous perspectives. Note the phrase “way deeper than you and I could ever imagine.” Indigenous knowledge is defined as that which white people are incapable of imagining, let alone understanding. Rather than making an implicitly moral appeal to desist from interrogating Indigenous knowledge (like the researcher quoted above) this researcher considers it a fruitless exercise for white people to even try to understand it. Thus while at the Institute a great deal of Indigenous knowledge is circulated, its symbolic nature is still mobilised for the purposes of maintaining white antiracist identities.

**Performing white antiracism**

While Indigenous people working in public health must counter any suggestion that they lack a desire for self-improvement, or that they are inauthentic, white antiracists have their own set of tasks to fulfill if they are to fit their space of recognition. White people who seek to inhabit the space of recognition as an ‘antiracist white’ must maintain a vigilant
awareness of their identity as non-Indigenous people. With that awareness comes an acknowledgement that they are inherently dangerous to Indigenous people, always possessing the potential to oppress, take over the agenda, fail to really listen, or unduly influence. They are also in perpetual danger of covertly placing their own interests over those of Indigenous people, even in the act of promoting Indigenous voices, if they are merely seeking to ‘look good’ or otherwise benefit from the appearance of Indigenous autonomy (see Bonnett 1997; Paradies 2006:67). Clearly, being an antiracist white person takes work.

There are many techniques with which whites can exhibit their anti-racism and thus be recognised as postcolonisers. These techniques are most common and obvious at public occasions: at workshops, meetings, seminars, or conferences concerning Indigenous issues. The organisation and management of such public events is thick with political obstacles (as I know from organising a few). A catalogue of some of these concerns illustrates the micropolitics of white antiracism. The event I am describing could be a conference on kidney disease in Indigenous communities, or an educational package on Indigenous maternal and child health, or a seminar on research ethics.

First, the number of Indigenous presenters should be at least equal to the number of non-Indigenous presenters – a stage full of white people discussing Indigenous issues is a bad look. Though, if some of the people on stage that appear white are in fact Indigenous, any overt, whispered or unspoken criticism from the audience is not a concern to organisers. As noted above, any such criticism simply portrays the critic as ignorant at best, and racist at worst, for assuming that a pale-skinned person is not Indigenous. Non-indigenous dark skinned people are intermediate in their visual impact – better than a white person, but not as good as an Indigenous person. Gender balance is important too – ideally, Indigenous men and Indigenous women should be equally represented. White women are generally slightly better than white men. If there are questions taken from the audience, the facilitator will be keen to call on any Indigenous people that raise their hand to speak, to show they are creating a space where Indigenous voices are heard.

Listing these concerns as I have just done might create the impression that I am trivialising or mocking these efforts. Let me make it clear that I respect the intentions of those who
make these efforts, and I recognise that the outcomes of those efforts, for example greater Indigenous participation, are both tangible and important. It must also be stressed that white antiracists are not constructing these complex algorithms of representation in a vacuum. They are responding directly to the concerns expressed by Indigenous people. This fact can easily be overlooked because the gaze of this ethnography does not extend to the Indigenous people who have (rightly) demanded that they not be objectified and controlled.

Keeping these points in mind, my interest in these performances is that they are constitutive of white antiracist subjectivities. Postcolonisers will readily expound upon the importance of ‘listening to Indigenous voices’, but we don’t like to be explicit about how we accomplish this. Making explicit this knowledge of how to be an antiracist seems somewhat distasteful on the page, although it is acceptable to talk of these things, if somewhat obliquely, in conference planning meetings. The techniques required to privilege Indigenous voices are employed tacitly on the backstage and are not for consumption by the public audience (Goffman 1959:112).

So to return to the example of organising an event: there are a limited number of Indigenous people who would feel comfortable speaking from a stage to a large audience, and most of those are inundated with requests to speak or be on a committee or contribute to a publication. Consequently, they are liable to refuse requests to speak publicly (particularly as most are unpaid) if it comes from someone they don’t know well. If an event manages to produce an appropriate list of presenters on the program, a traditional owner to do the Welcome to Country, the right balance of Indigeneity, gender, professional background or whatever else is relevant to the event, this is itself an indication of the merits of the organisers: their ability to recognise what was required, and their personal ties to the Indigenous speakers sufficient for these busy people to agree to participate. This is, however, far from the end of the story.

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124 For instance, depending on whether the white antiracist feels they are ‘off stage’ or ‘on stage’, the need to have ‘more Indigenous speakers’ may be openly discussed, or may be discussed obliquely such as asking whether a suggested speaker is Indigenous. (‘He’s not Indigenous, but he is Indian’ is one reply to this question that I’ve heard at such a meeting, illustrating the intermediate status of non-Indigenous non-white people).

125 On the importance and ambivalence of personal ties to Indigenous people, see Chapter 6 (“The anti-orientalist orientalist”) and Chapter 8 (“Intimacy and suffering”).
In my experience it is not uncommon for Indigenous speakers to fail to turn up, or to leave unexpectedly. These absences are most often explained to the audience as ‘family issues’, or sometimes ‘cultural issues’ [Fieldnotes 9/11/05 2:50]. With the high rates of illness, death, incarceration, violence and other stressful life events suffered by Indigenous families, this is not surprising. I’m interested though in how the failure of an invited Indigenous presenter to turn up is an opportunity for white people to further display their antiracism. This example below was from a workshop on Indigenous research I attended. The main facilitator was an older white man who had a senior position:

He introduces the other facilitators, noting that Kylie had to leave soon after arriving this morning:
“she’s had some urgent family matters she needs to attend to, they were unexpected. She will hopefully join us later in the day and we wish her well with her family.”
[Fieldnotes 16/9/04 1:48]

Through Kylie’s absence, the facilitator is able to demonstrate his ability to be culturally sensitive and to be flexible enough to accommodate Indigenous cultural needs whenever they arise. He is also able to counter racist generalisations about the unreliability of Indigenous people with his unselfconscious gesture of sympathy, wishing her well on behalf of all of us. The mainly white audience had an opportunity to not react, to not blame or judge. Through our neutral listening, we all perform the white ally. And through his explicit comments he silences (but also paradoxically highlights through demonstrating the need to silence) the ideas that are certainly not voiced, and perhaps barely thought: musings whether Kylie really had a family emergency, but perhaps was disorganised enough to be double-booked, or behind in her paid work, or offended at being asked to be a ‘token black’ by the organisers, or maybe she has a gambling habit and went off to the casino. Some of these imaginings raise the possibility that her absence is a snub to the organisers, undermining their implicit claims to have meaningful relationships with Indigenous people. *Because if they did, Kylie would care enough to stick around.* It is this smoulder of inchoate musings that necessitates the facilitator’s careful words.

A similar set of performances was evident at another workshop where a scheduled Indigenous presenter was not able to attend. The main facilitator, again a white man, apologised to the audience as he began the section on Indigenous research methodologies:
‘Today I’m the default presenter, it was just not possible for it to be otherwise this morning’.
[Fieldnotes 19/7/04 1:20]

Effectively, he is apologising for being white. Another Indigenous co-facilitator sits beside him as he clicks through the power point slides. I am sure he is aware of the negative visual impact of a white man speaking authoritatively about Indigenous knowledge systems while the Indigenous woman next to him remains silent. One can only imagine that he implored her, she whose identity was better suited to the task, to read out the notes accompanying the slides instead of him when the scheduled presented failed to turn up. But for whatever reason (lack of confidence? lack of familiarity with the material? resentment she was being asked just because she was Indigenous?), she has declined. The effort of organising, of trying, but of calmly accepting when it all goes wrong, is also the performance of antiracism, of creating postcolonial spaces. Unsuccessful postcoloniality is perhaps the most common form of postcoloniality, maybe its highest form. It is accepting responsibility and not getting angry, of avoiding blame, of prostrating oneself before the inevitability of one’s oppressiveness. The hidden transcript\(^{126}\) goes something like: *although I am a non-Indigenous person presenting on Indigenous research methodologies it is not as it seems, I have not sought this role, I know I shouldn’t be here, I’m only here because the Aboriginal people that could present, that in fact co-authored the document I am reading, are not here, for reasons it is not my business to question*. On the postcolonial frontier, where identity-maintenance is a perennial occupation, even the smallest event is imbued with a range of racialised meanings.

As demonstrated in these examples, white antiracist people working in Indigenous health are often preoccupied with the way they appear to others, specifically, whether they appear to be dominating or ‘speaking for’ Indigenous people. White people working in Indigenous arenas inhabit an inherently problematic discursive space. Muecke describes how his right to speak at a “Black Literature” conference in 1986 was questioned:

\(^{126}\) Scott uses Orwell’s short story “Shooting an Elephant” to argue that the “hidden transcript” of domination is that the powerful are as imprisoned by oppression as the oppressed. They differ from the oppressed in that when they defy their transcript they risk “only ridicule” rather than violence. In this context, my work explores the hidden transcripts of the liberatory discourses of the powerful (Scott 1990:10-11).
It seems to me that I already knew as I wrote the paper for that conference that the only Aboriginal response would be one that challenged my right to speak, which is also my right to listen, to move around, to speak at conferences, and so on. Even though I was talking only on my own terrain [about the experience of publishing Indigenous people’s stories], the political and performance aspects of my own speech had led me into dangerous territory. (Muecke 2005:48)

In navigating this “dangerous territory”, monitoring one’s language is crucial. This quote is from a seminar where a non-Indigenous speaker was explaining how Indigenous organisations created the *Indigenous Research Reform Agenda* from the 1980s onwards (see Chapter 2):

Aboriginal organisations had grown up- that’s a patronising thing to say- had emerged as organisations, were taking control of research. [Fieldnotes 20/9/04 1:52]

She recognised that she had slipped up in using the phrase ‘grown up’, a phrase that subtly suggests she is in a position of ‘parent’ to Aboriginal ‘children’. Readers may think she was being over-vigilant – that ‘grown up’ is a neutral phrase – but in the context of a white person talking about Indigenous people in public, she was right to expect that at least some of the audience might have taken offence, either Indigenous people, or non-Indigenous people on their behalf.

In any case, whether or not some people in the audience would have been offended is beside the point. Through the opportunity to show her sensitivity to the *possibility* of offence, publicly admitting her tendency to oppression (in this case through being patronising) and substituting an unquestionably neutral term (“emerged”), she manages to exhibit her anti-racism. Her slip-up and consummate recovery demonstrate antiracist attributes that might otherwise be difficult to exhibit.

The tension between the two aspects of recognisably Indigenous identities – the authentic Indigenous voice and the self-determined Indigene – also requires considerable language management on the part of white researchers. Indigenous employees on research projects, particularly those who live on the remote communities where the projects take place, are
likely to be poorly Western-educated, to be unaccustomed to regular or full-time work, and have many competing family responsibilities. It is thus common for the expectations of their bosses to be unmet, particularly as it is difficult to provide sufficient on-going support to such employees from the Institute in Darwin. At the same time, research projects are increasingly unlikely to receive funding unless they plan to employ significant numbers of Indigenous people in roles that make a meaningful contribution to the project. The older practice of employing local people casually to assist white researchers to collect data during visits the community is now likely to be considered inadequate and token by funding bodies.

The ability to talk about this issue without suggesting that Indigenous people are uneducated, stupid, lazy, primitive – all racist assumptions that may be implied when discussing the plain fact that remote Indigenous people often perform poorly in the research jobs they are employed in – requires constant vigilance. In a discussion of this issue during an Institute seminar, one less careful researcher commented:

[Indigenous] collaborators on my projects are not qualified to manage more sophisticated levels of research. It’s difficult to convey that to the NHMRC [the funding body]. We need a realistic assessment of what people can do. [Fieldnotes 22/11/04 2:63]

There was a palpable reaction in the room to the whiff of patronisation and even racism in her implication that Indigenous people are not “sophisticated”. Another researcher responded with more careful language:

There are so many different, I don’t want to say ‘levels’, but types of skill sets that we require in research projects. [Fieldnotes 22/11/04 2:64]

For this practiced antiracist, even the work “levels” is sufficiently hierarchical to require qualification.

Another instance where white antiracists struggle to find neutral terms is when they wish to refer to Indigenous-people-that-live-in-remote-communities-and-speak-Indigenous-languages-at-home. As I discussed in the Introduction, these two characteristics identify a
group of about 19% of Indigenous people in Australia who are likely to be very poorly educated, have the worst health of the Indigenous population, to be unemployed, to be dependent on government payments, and to have few non-Indigenous relatives (and thus dark skin) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b). This group is still often called “traditional Aborigines” in written texts, although this term is considered racist as it undermines both the authenticity of urban Indigenous people and the modernity of the ‘traditional’ people. “Remote people” is a term commonly used at the Institute, but also somewhat suspect as it can imply a hierarchy of remote and urban. A safer term often heard from white antiracists is “community people”, as in people-that-live-in-remote-communities, but with the “remote” implied rather than voiced. At the Institute, ‘community people’ is probably the term most commonly heard in seminar discussions and other public and semi-public events, as in more community people need to be involved or but what do community people think about this issue.

Performing antiracism can be a competitive exercise. This researcher is commenting on how remote community residents should be paid on a clan basis to organise screenings of community members on behalf of Institute researchers:

The best thing is to get clan groups to tender for it. Like for a screening, to get 50 people screened you pay them $10,000 if they get the job done in 3 months. And you need to pay people for their participation too. [Fieldnotes 29/11/04 2:72]

This comment, made in a research meeting, was met with vague murmurs of assent. It is a fairly radical suggestion that remote community members (where the average level of Western education is very poor) can be trained to conduct something as specialised as a health screening with a level of independence that warrants the remuneration he suggests. The issue of paying research participants is another sticky issue – ethics committees frown on it for fear of inducing people to participate for the ‘wrong’ reasons. In the semi-public context in which the comment was made, however, any questioning of the comment would put the speaker in danger of being interpellated as a racist, for why else would you argue

Note that the last feature listed, having few non-Indigenous relatives, is not derived from the ABS survey (which does not ask this) but from my personal knowledge.
that remote Indigenous people are not capable of running a health screening? The statement has the effect of raising the stakes of anti-racism.

Speaking about difference is hazardous for white antiracists. It is made more hazardous by the fact that the boundaries between what is racist/colonial and what is antiracist/postcolonial are contested and always shifting. Most of the negotiation is internal: white antiracists are exposed to discourse, and decide whether it is antiracist (acceptable) or racist (unacceptable), and respond accordingly. Luckily for the ethnographer, this negotiation is occasionally played out in a conversation. This example is from a conversation about an Indigenous research proposal from outside the Institute that named the ‘Tribal Council’ as the Indigenous organisation that would oversee the project. These researchers are discussing the term ‘tribal council’, which sounds antiquated to their ears. The first researcher suggests that the white authors of the proposal are ignorant of the Indigenous organisations they should be collaborating with:

Researcher 1: Is there really a ‘Tribal Council’? It doesn't really have that ring of authenticity does it? It doesn’t sound real, it sounds like a hypothetical guess.
Researcher 2: Down south though they have been going back to calling them ‘tribal councils.’
Researcher 3: They are still calling them that?
Researcher 2: They have gone back to doing it, and the proposal might be from down south.
[Fieldnotes 16/9/04 1:57]

The use of a suspiciously archaic (read ‘colonial’) term rings alarm bells for these researchers, and threatens to push the proposal’s author beyond the boundaries of recognition as a fellow antiracist. Note that the techniques of establishing authentic anti-racism are aural – the ring of it, the sound of it. For these researchers, ‘tribal council’ has the timbre of colonialism.

But there is a point of negotiation, an entry point for the proposal’s author back into recognisable anti-racism. It is possible that we are merely out of date, perhaps after all the phrase is okay, not colonial at all, in fact freely chosen by those Indigenous people down south who choose to reclaim the colonial title for their own purposes. *Oh that’s okay then*
we are always ready to say, to adjust our ears so that ‘tribal council’ does not grate, as it is culturally-appropriate for that mob.\textsuperscript{128}

**Inhabiting mutual spaces of recognition at the Institute**

Below, I draw on examples from the Institute to illustrate the complex, intersecting performances through which Indigenous and white people recognise each other on the postcolonial frontier. This first example is from a discussion about the process of informed consent that a colleague used in his research project. The project was based in one remote community. While the standard practice is to obtain written informed consent from each research participant, ‘Researcher 1’ became concerned when he observed that some community members wanted to participate in the project, but did not want to sign the consent form.

Researcher 1: People were not wanting to sign consent forms, they were really happy to be in the study, [they’d say] ‘I’ll talk to you, no worries, but I won’t sign the form’. And I approached the advisor to our project [a community member], who basically had a lot of experience dealing with white people, and said ‘well why don’t we go to the ethics committee in town and talk about this.’ And she was adamant that we didn’t, ‘Don’t tell Darwin that there’s blackfellas in [community] who won’t sign the piece of paper – they will sign it, they can understand it.’ So we recorded something on audiotape [in the local language] to play to people.

EK: It probably said, you will sign the form...[general laughter]

Researcher 1: I think it might have.

Researcher 2: It’s the welfare experiences from the past, people are worried that the forms might get put up on a wall at conferences.

Researcher 3: I don’t sign anything I don’t have to.

Researcher 1: Also at the council, the council chairman was offended when I asked him to sign [a consent form]– ‘we’ve already said yes’ was his perspective.  [Fieldnotes 26/8/04 1:32-3]

\textsuperscript{128} In recent years the term ‘Indigenous’ has come to been seen by some as racist because it homogenises Indigenous people around the world, with the preferred term being the more specific (and wordy) ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ (see Tatz 2001). So, for instance, government reports would not use the term ‘Indigenous Australian’. However, this move seems to have been unsuccessful with the term ‘Indigenous’ retaining its acceptability in many forums.
There are at least two readings of the observed reluctance of Indigenous people to sign forms that appear in this narrative. A reading privileging the authentic Indigenous voice would interpret it as cultural difference, and press the ethics committee to allow more culturally-appropriate forms of indicating consent, such as verbal responses. If we read the situation through the prism of self-improvement, we would conclude that Indigenous people are reluctant to sign forms because of ignorance of their rights and distrust of bureaucratic processes. In that case, the appropriate course of action would be to inform them of their rights and the available methods of redress if they perceive their rights have been overlooked, with the goal of instilling them with enough confidence in human rights and democratic freedom for them to sign the form without fear. Thus the reluctance to sign forms can be read as culture to be respected, or as a deficit to be remedied.

‘Researcher 1’ first offers a diagnosis of cultural-inappropriateness, but is ultimately open to both readings of the situation. He is concerned that written informed consent might not be culturally-appropriate in the research site and is willing to discuss this openly with the ethics committee, thus exposing his project to criticism and possible revocation of ethical approval. He is also willing to implement any solution that his project advisor suggests.

The figure of the project advisor, a remote community woman with some Western education, offers a third reading of the situation. Rather than a desire to educate whitefellas about Indigenous cultural values, or a liberal concern to promote awareness of human rights, the ‘project advisor’ appears to be primarily interested in deflecting notions of her countrymen as primitive. The hidden transcript of her narrative might go like this: don’t tell those cosmopolitan people in Darwin that blackfellas out here are too ignorant and afraid to sign a form – they will sign it, alright. This is another version of the self-improvement narrative, but without the aura of understanding and gentle tutelage. The project advisor appears to be performing modernity, though in a way that white antiracists are uncomfortable with (as seen in our nervous laughter when I parody the authoritative tone I imagined in the taped message). The project advisor’s authoritarian methods raise the possibility that this project, and all such projects, may be colonial, and specifically assimilationist, in nature. As I explore in Chapters 8 and 9, postcolonisers take great care to distinguish their methods of improvement from assimilation. As Indigenous people like the
project advisor do not, recounting the tale mildly disturbs the performance of white antiracism.

The conversation suggests that the researcher (who did not speak the local language, and thus did not know what the tape said) suspected that the advisor might be bullying the research participants into signing the form. However, any concerns about the autonomy of research participants would be eclipsed by delight that the project advisor took an active interest in the researcher’s project, and a desire to implement an ‘Indigenous’ solution to the problem. In this case, the performance of antiracism is not tied to any particular outcome – his main concern is that an Indigenous person found the solution. His commitment to the authentic Indigenous voice trumps all other concerns.

Note also how other researchers participating in the conversation are able to perform difference shades of antiracism. ‘Researcher 2’ displays their understanding of the historical roots of Indigenous distrust of forms. ‘Researcher 3’ identifies with this distrust. In doing this she refuses to recognise it as ‘cultural difference’ at all, but a rational concern shared by moderns such as herself. Within that comment there is perhaps also a subtle accusation of racism aimed at those who might think it is silly to be afraid of forms.

Multiple performances also commonly occur around the writing of community research reports. This technique has emerged in the last decade in response to criticisms that researchers took research data from communities without giving them any meaningful benefits. A ‘community report’ is now a standard research output, and savvy research projects will use videos and CD-ROMS as more ‘culturally-appropriate’ means of communicating with their audience. One research project that I worked with produced multiple reports for 15 different communities, based on templates that the project team developed. The Indigenous researcher on the team had significant input into the language used in these reports. In my fieldnotes I noted a series of discussions between members of the research team about whether the language in the report was culturally-appropriate or patronising. Note that this excerpt is in the first person, as Danielle and I worry together about the report:
I’m looking over the community reports again with Danielle. Our boss Janice has made comments on the draft. She has asked that we find another simpler word for “infrastructure” (we puzzle, perhaps ‘services’? and then decide to leave out the word altogether as the report does not include data on infrastructure anyway). On the margin of a subsequent page that says ‘14 taps were good, 27 were no good’, she had written: “Simple English does not mean baby English or incorrect grammar. Change this and the rest of it.”

Danielle changes “no good” to “not functioning”. She explains why she initially left in the phrase “no good” and other similar language: “When I looked at the report I thought, ‘who is going to be reading that?’ It seemed really patronising. But then I realised that Malcolm [Indigenous researcher] had written it that way and I thought, ‘well who am I to tell him how he should write it?’ “

At a meeting later in the week where Malcolm is absent Janice says “I don’t see why there should not be plain correct grammatical English. Part of the feedback documents is an educative process. I don’t think it helps if our feedback process teaches people to speak incorrectly. They are more likely to listen to it if it is clear and correct.” I felt a bit ashamed that I did not pick this up, that I allowed this patronising, incorrect, bad-example language to go through without commenting on it. ‘Did I think that people really want to be patronised?’ I think guiltily.

[Fieldnotes 12/10/04 2:11-2]

Who is performing for whom here? For Danielle and for me, this situation creates confusion about the kind of performance that is expected. In the act of performing respect for Malcolm’s cultural knowledge, have we been taken in by Malcolm’s performance for us – did we unknowingly force him to make the document look stereotypically ‘Aboriginal’? Have we been taken in by our own racist fantasies of what Indigenous people want to hear?

Or are Janice, Danielle and I performing for each other when we change the language so we appear not to be patronising Aboriginal people? Perhaps Malcolm is just trying to do his job, and the ‘patronising’ language is actually culturally appropriate? Do we just need to get over our discomfort (initially overridden by Danielle but rekindled by our boss) and stop being prudish about the low levels of literacy and community preferences for Aboriginal English? Or in a third scenario, perhaps Malcolm is unworried about the report sounding patronising because he knows that no Indigenous person in the community will
really be interested in it anyway? Perhaps the communities’ participation in the project is the greatest performance of all? Or yet another possibility, maybe his dumbing-down of the language reflects internalised racism on his part and in the target communities: maybe he expects that Indigenous people will expect the language to be simple because they are used to being patronised by white people? If that’s the case, is Janice right in insisting that the truly antiracist course of action is an educative process?

My questions multiply into more and more questions. What Indigenous people really think and what postcolonisers should really do are equally unclear. On the postcolonial frontier, there are no answers, only performances.

In this chapter I have illustrated the encounter between whites and Indigenous people who recognise each other in postcolonial spaces, and described the various techniques by which white antiracists make themselves recognisable. In the final chapter of this section, I turn to the knowledge system that is both produced by and that produces white antiracism, what I call postcolonial logic. First, though, I present portraits of four Institute researchers to demonstrate how real people inhabit the complex space of recognition that constitutes a white antiracist subjectivity.
Chapter 5: Meet four postcolonisers

This chapter is an interlude to the theoretical narrative of this thesis. In earlier chapters, I have introduced the idea of postcolonial spaces where Indigenous people and antiracist white people recognise each other (Chapters 2 and 3). I have described the forms of Indigeneity that are salient in those spaces and the ways that postcolonisers perform white antiracism (Chapter 4). I will then go on to explain the knowledge system that is the axiological basis for this mutual recognition: postcolonial logic. Later I will show how this knowledge system is based on the idea of remediable difference, and how it begins to unravel when postcolonisers encounter radical difference.

The empirical data I use to illustrate my argument is necessarily decontextualised to retain the anonymity of my research participants. While this is sound ethical practice, disembodied quotes and displaced vignettes are no substitute for the rich complexity of individuals. Any list of attributes typical in a group runs the risk of homogenising and dehumanising those in the group. The various features of postcoloniser subjectivities described in this thesis are not constitutive of every antiracist white person working at the Institute. Naturally, these features are only displayed by some white people at certain times and in specific contexts.

In order to animate the theory, I present here portraits of four researchers that participated in my research. These portraits represent the diversity of white Institute researchers and include individuals from a range of backgrounds. Two are from urban areas, one from a rural area and one from a mix of both; three from Australia and one from overseas. Two trained as nurses before working in Indigenous health research, one as a doctor, and one is from a health promotion and policy background. Three are women, reflecting the predominance of women at the Institute and in public health generally (Productivity Commission 2005:342). One is in her early thirties, the others are in their forties, and are thus influenced by the self-determination era that has dominated Indigenous politics since the 1970s (as I explored in the Introduction, I too am a product of this era). All would self-identify broadly as left-wing, but vary in their political approach to a variety of issues. Note that, although pseudonyms are used below, these are somewhat public narratives. Each has
been approved by the individual it was based on, probably with the expectation that they could be identified by some Institute researchers who read this chapter.

As you will see, each researcher performs white antiracism in a different way. Louise performs it explicitly when she refuses to complete a presentation without her Indigenous colleague present. Robyn’s narrative of learning antiracism is a journey from Aboriginal sameness to Aboriginal difference (a theme I will take up in the next chapter). Hamish’s antiracism is measured and prudent, lacking the fervour of a native-born Australian. Deb shares with us a “backstage” performance as she wrestles with the uncertainty associated with a postcoloniser subjectivity.

Louise

Louise came to the Institute after many years spent working in remote communities. Like other white researchers at the Institute, this remote experience acted as a touchstone in forming her identity as a particular kind of white antiracist who identifies more with remote Indigenous people than with other white people. A story she tells about her first days at the Institute demonstrates this allegiance:

When Louise first came to the Institute her desk was next to a young woman who knew all about computers, and Louise felt bad because she didn’t know how to use computers. “She thought I was a bit stupid because I didn’t know about computer but I thought well I know how to get mudcrab from mangroves, can you do that?” [Fieldnotes 7/3/05 3:51]

At this point, Louise had come a long way from her own cultural background. She grew up in an Anglo-Celtic family in the suburbs of Adelaide in the 1960s and 70s. Her dad supported the family as a company manager. After school, she left Adelaide for Melbourne and did her nursing training, with additional training in paediatrics and infectious diseases. She was interested in community development, and did some courses with a view to working in the developing world. She participated in some low-key Indigenous activism in
the late 1980s, ‘paying the rent’ and joining a reconciliation group. Then, at 28, she accepted a job working as a remote area nurse at Bathurst Island, a large ex-mission north of Darwin. She can’t recall exactly why she was drawn to work in Indigenous health:

I think through my nursing career I had always I think subconsciously always prepared myself to work there….I’d always wanted to work in Indigenous health. I don’t really know why. I don’t think I fitted any of those particular [stereotypes of white people who work in Indigenous health], I didn’t think that I was going to save these people, I think that I just really wanted to work there. [Transcript:1]

During her childhood, she had some contact with Indigenous children at her primary school whose families lived in housing commission houses in her suburb. She recalls how these families “dug up the floor of the kitchen so they could cook in the ground”, and how her father countered the negative attitudes her and her peers had of them:

We were all saying, ‘they’ve really wrecked the house’. And my Dad really reframed it for me and said ‘no, they didn’t, they don’t know how to live in a house’. So even back then I sort of knew that there was a big gap [between] knowledge and understanding. [Transcript:1-2]

Her mother also modeled tolerant behaviour to Louise. She went to the extraordinary length of learning Italian so she could help a neighbour with a chronically sick child negotiate the health system:

I think that she genuinely thought it was really bad that [her neighbour] couldn’t communicate, but instead of just saying, ‘oh, well you know, that’s their problem and they should speak English’, she went and learnt Italian. And you know a lot of our life was spent with them in the Italian community. [Transcript:3]

These childhood experiences of other cultures may have sparked her interest in Indigenous health, but they did not prepare her for her first job at the community of Nguiu on Bathurst Island:

129 A program run in most capital cities where non-Indigenous people regularly pay a small amount of money to an Indigenous organisation as a symbolic recognition of Indigenous sovereignty.
I just remember being really overwhelmed. Nguiu is a really big community and it’s Catholic and I’m not Catholic so I was like really overwhelmed by the nuns’ presence and the fact that I was going to be in charge of this clinic that had essentially been run by a nun for 13 years and it was wet season. It was really, really, really wet and there was that, the smell of the country was something I’d never smelt before so that was really strong, you know, [the] sense of difference for me was the smell of the soil. [Transcript:5]

She was lonely and overwhelmed, but recalls that from the start, she saw the quality of the Aboriginal Health Workers at the clinic:

If I was going to have any success there I’d just have to take their lead, and that for me was probably the best experience because they really did know what to do, and I was merely just facilitating what they had been doing for a long time. [Transcript:6]

This principle of facilitating the work that Indigenous people have already been doing has remained a key principle in her work. She sees a lack of real Indigenous control as the cause of continuing ill-health:

I still don't see any real evidence that Indigenous health is in Indigenous hands, and I think that for Indigenous health to really have improvement there needs to be a greater representation of Indigenous people within the program development [and] the program delivery at all levels. [Transcript:9]

She concedes that there are few Indigenous people with the skills and education to take up program development positions, but argues that the requirement of the health department that its employees have formal qualifications is itself institutional racism:

Where’s the evidence to say that you have to be educated to have any actual involvement in your, the program development for Indigenous health. There’s not many runs on the board, so whatever system is in place now clearly needs to be reviewed and is not working. [Transcript:9]

Like many researchers at the Institute, Louise is often critical of research and researchers:
People don’t do enough self-reflection around here, they don’t really think about their motives enough... because what’s driving it is getting degrees, getting publications, getting grants, that’s what’s motivating people. [Fieldnotes 7/10/04 2:2]

Louise is not afraid to look at problems in the Indigenous community as well. She uses the concept of *internalised racism* to explain those “really good quality and skilled Indigenous people who will sell their own people down the river” such as Noel Pearson, whose radical social policies “don’t take into account the disempowerment of people” and are inappropriately suggested for Indigenous people outside his home region of Cape York. [Transcript:10]

While Louise broadly sees colonisation and the resulting disempowerment of Indigenous people as the ultimate cause of their ill-health, she also has a strong belief in the explanatory power of Indigenous culture:

Trying to get people to do things like give up grog through incentives is just ridiculous, people don’t drink because they just feel like it, it was probably something that happened between clan groups six generations ago. [Fieldnotes 31/1/05 3:5]

Her perspective places the cause of Indigenous malaise within Indigenous culture, and importantly positions Indigenous people as the only ones capable of effecting positive change. Non-Indigenous people can only try and support Indigenous people to resolve long-standing cultural causes of ill-health.

From Louise’s point of view, Indigenous people have all the capacity required to solve their health problems. She believes that most of the problems of Indigenous health would be fixed if white people allowed Indigenous people to work in a culturally-appropriate way. In the case of a health clinic, this would mean employing people in clan groups, and allowing them to work with families at their houses rather than at the clinic. “If only health services were built upon connectedness and relationships, you’d have a high-functioning health service” [Fieldnotes 26/2/05 3:36].
The main task of non-Indigenous people is to stop hindering this effect. This is a difficult task, though, as the mere presence of non-Indigenous people will affect the ability of Indigenous people to work in an ‘Indigenous’ way:

They don’t interact as they would traditionally straight away [when there are non-Indigenous people around]. So they might come to a meeting where there’s non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people and they’ll straight away go into reacting and being within that room through a non-Indigenous way… there won’t be the respect. [Transcript: 12]

So even when large numbers of Indigenous people are involved, if they make decisions in a non-Indigenous “forced environment”, these decisions are of little value, and will not result in a successful project.

Louise is keenly committed to Indigenous employment on research projects. When a vacancy comes up in her project, she immediately thinks of Dorothy, a young woman from a remote community who she knows may be suitable. She helped her get her CV together, encouraged her to apply for the job, and organised accommodation for her with another young woman from the same remote community who was also starting a job in Darwin.

I nearly cried in the interview, I was so proud of her, the way she spoke…. It would be good for them to live in Tiwi but they need to go private then [to rent from a private landlord rather than access public housing] and save money for bond. It’s going to be the budgeting that is the difficult part. Or they could live with family in Karama or Palmerston [areas with high numbers of Indigenous people from their community] and get a minibus into work.130 I think she should leave Robert (her child) at the community at first at least, she has to get used to the job and everything. [Fieldnotes 10/2/05 3:32]

This concern for, and involvement in, the lives of Indigenous researchers (especially those from remote communities) is quite common among white Institute staff. Some white researchers invest considerable time and effort in organising appropriate transport and accommodation, preparing power point slides for community collaborators to present at

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130 Minibuses operate like taxis but can fit more people in. They are preferred over taxis by Darwin Indigenous people visiting or originating from remote areas who tend to travel in large family groups.
Louise is explicit in her preference for working closely with Indigenous people, partly in order to ensure that she always works in a way that respects Indigenous cultural processes. On every project she works on, she is conscientious about her Indigenous colleagues being present for all public lectures she gives about the project. These notes were taken at one seminar where her colleague had called her earlier that morning and told her she could not make it to the presentation:

Louise starts by saying *I normally present with Jo, it’s very unusual for me to present without her here. And I am getting on a plane at 12 and so I was thinking of calling her and saying I couldn’t get here, but Jo got in first, so here I am.* She speaks for 10 minutes of a presentation planned to be 20 minutes, and then says *usually at this point Jo comes in, but as she isn’t here I might as well stop.* [Fieldnotes 30/6/05 4:84]

Although many white researchers at the Institute would prefer to present alongside their Indigenous colleagues, Louise is somewhat unusual in that she is prepared to stop the presentation halfway, rather than continue alone.

**Robyn**

I first met Robyn when I was helping out on a research project as a part of my fieldwork. This project was focused on kidney disease, and involved a screening program for Indigenous people at a community close to Darwin.

I was orientated to the [project] by Robyn who’s running the screening like clockwork. She agreed to be interviewed and said *but I’ll say what I think so you might be shocked,* interpreting me as a white

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131 I, for instance, have hosted visitors at my home for weeks at a time, bought airline tickets for people, lent and given money, negotiated the release of people from the ‘spin dry’ (sobering-up shelter) on behalf of relatives, accompanied people to medical appointments, organised the delivery of various domestic goods to remote communities, ferried people around to shop and visit relatives in town, and so on. And there are many more things I have declined to do when requested.
urban liberal, as I look to be. Talking us through the forms, she tells how the other day during screening at the land council she asked a woman if she needed help filling out the form, and the woman said, I can read you know. I asked Robyn why the woman said that: I suppose she thought I was a racist white bitch, but I’m not, I was just asking her if she needed help. [Fieldnotes 12/8/04 1:19]

In that brief encounter, she demonstrated her awareness of the various identities that circulate in postcolonial spaces – the young white woman from a southern city who may be shocked by frank discussion, the white researcher who is taken to be racist when offering help, the Indigenous research participant who takes offense when help is offered. I knew Robyn would be interesting to talk to.

Robyn was brought up in a small town in western New South Wales: “redneck country”. Her parents were “strict missionary types” [Fieldnotes 11/3/05 3:52] who countered the views of their neighbours by teaching her that Indigenous people were no different from white people.132

Oh, I’m from redneck country so I was brought up on, that everybody was the same and I would be too embarrassed to even mention that maybe Aboriginal people would have a corroboree because that was very rude to say that. [Transcript:4]

There were few Indigenous people in her town, but she did make friends with Indigenous girls at school and later at boarding school. And while the teaching in her household was strictly a crude equality (‘we’re all the same’), while growing up she participated in the racist comments of her peers, a fact she freely admits and regrets. She talks about her awareness of deep fears in her town of emerging Indigenous political power, and most of all, of Aboriginal land rights:

And what is all this thing about, you know, ‘Indigenous’, and ‘are they going to take our country’? Because that was the secret fear back in the country town, [she whispers] ‘they are going to come

132 This view is a feature of the assimilationist era that countered racist views of Indigenous inferiority with antiracist arguments that Indigenous people were no different (i.e. just as good) as white people (see Rowse 2005a).
and take your property off you.’ And that’s still alive and well, I might add, like I go back to my birth
town and there’s still those whispers. ‘Don’t tell them about that sacred site out there, they’ll bloody
come and take your property. Get the bulldozers in there, and bulldoze that down mate!’
[Transcript:7]

After finishing boarding school she trained as a nurse at a general hospital closer to the
NSW coast.

I never looked after an Indigenous person at all, ever, during my whole training. That was three years
– that was at [a rural] general hospital. I never once looked after an Indigenous person. And I would
never have believed that Aboriginal people spoke Aboriginal language. ‘Cause [according to her
upbringing] we all were with the same and you may have spoken a foreign language if you came from
some weird overseas place, like, um, Vietnam. [laughs] [Transcript:6]

Robyn is an unusual white antiracist in that her contact with alterity – with Indigenous
radical difference - preceded a liberal political understanding of Indigenous people. Her
first exposure to ‘traditional’ Indigenous people came in the mid-1980s when she spent a
year nursing in the Alice Springs Hospital:

And I remember I showered this old Aboriginal man from Kintore who was very traditional and he had
the cuts across the chest and he was just really dark and I remember treating him just the same and
saying, ‘Now Mr so and so, come in to have your shower’. And I remember he looked at me and he
said, [in a low voice] You shower me sister'. And of course I did it because I was so frightened and I
didn’t make any mention of this ‘cause that would be impolite. [Transcript:7]

At this stage of her life Robyn didn’t have a conceptual basis for understanding this
experience of alterity, of showering the naked, black, ritually scarred man. She experienced
only the fear – fear of the radically different other, fear that the shield of her profession was
failing her, fear of her own reaction, fear that the moral principles of her upbringing were
crumbling.

After that year, she went to live in Sydney for the first time, and there confronted another
previously unknown social group, “pretty fast and weird sort of people” – the urban liberal.
Their fascination with Indigenous people prompted her to learn about Indigenous history and culture:

I spent 12 months in the Territory then I went down to Sydney and people said, ‘Where have you been nursing?’ and I said, ‘Oh, in Alice.’ And they went ‘Oh! With all the Indigenous people, with the Aboriginals, what was it like?’ And I was like, ‘Oh, you know, it was hard work’, thinking, these [white Sydney] people are really weird. What do they think it’s like? What do they think about these [Aboriginal] people? And then I started to read, a bit…And then I started to think, Oh my God. There’s something out there that I wasn’t even aware of. [Transcript:7]

She returned to the Territory in the 1990s, this time to Darwin, and studied at the local University to convert her nursing training to a degree before beginning her research work at the Institute. She relished the cross-cultural aspects of the courses she did which emphasised the difference of Indigenous people, as she found her formative beliefs of Aboriginal sameness were flawed:

And I remember even doing bad work, I was working in community health and this lady came in and I had been doing the pain unit [at University] and they told us that Aboriginal people might describe pain as a snake in their chest or something like that so this Aboriginal lady came in and said she had a sore arm. And I said, ‘Oh what’s wrong with your arm?’ And she said ‘I think it’s got a piece of wood in it’ so I was thinking, ‘oh, what would wood mean?’ And I go on being really culturally appropriate and all this sort of stuff. Anyway so we put this bandage on it. And I got her to come back in two days time and I took the bandage off and it had sort of festered up a bit, so I was cleaning it out, and I went ‘God! There’s a piece of wood in there!’ And she went, ‘I told you it was stuck’ and I thought ‘oh, god, I am so sorry’. And so you can just miss the point, because you are trying too hard. [Transcript:8]

Robyn displays the comfortable self-ridicule typical of postcolonisers. Stories of cultural blunders are freely exchanged, as they are evidence of cultural learning, of effort spent on the long road of transformation from racist to antiracist.

She tells another moving story about the limitations of cultural-appropriateness in bridging social inequalities:
Another time, I was working in community health at Christmas and I remember on Christmas Eve working and I said to this Indigenous man, and I had been looking after him, he’d had a burn or something, I remember saying, ‘Oh, see you later, we are closed over Christmas, have a nice Christmas’, whatever his name was. And he said, ‘Yeah, have a nice Christmas in the longgrass sister.’ And I thought that just says it all doesn’t it? … Well his Christmas is obviously going to be so different to my Christmas. What a stupid thing to say, ‘Have a nice Christmas’… He was just saying, ‘sometimes you forget yourself sister. Why are you telling me have a nice Christmas, are you rubbing it in or are you forgetting that we don’t all live like you do?’ Yeah, that sort of stops you in your tracks a bit. [Transcript:9]

The words of this homeless Indigenous man reminded Robyn of her social privilege like a slap in the face. In her analysis of his comment, she gives two possibilities – either she was racist (“are you rubbing it in”) or ignorant (“are you forgetting that we don’t all live like you do”). These are the two labels that the postcoloniser must constantly steer away from to in order to stay within the boundaries of recognition as an antiracist. The best way to do this is to declare one’s ignorance, performing antiracism as a state of never-ending tutelage combined with a boundless benevolence:

Like I just, I think I’m a baby, you know, really, I think that I got a bit of compassion. And I think that that’s probably the main thing that I’ve got: a bit of compassion and I understand that I don’t know everything. [Transcript:9]

Her diagnosis of Indigenous ill-health rests plainly with the state and white people. She believes that the health system frequently fails Indigenous people because of its inappropriateness and inflexibility:

When you know often the traditional way that they have done things is so much better and more equal, but they are forced into our way. [Transcript:9]

She talks about the racist attitudes of some of her former colleagues in the hospital system, distinguishing herself from them by emphasising the underlying structural causes of ill-health:
Look I don’t, I never think it’s their own fault ever, you know, ‘cause people have said to me, ‘Oh, it’s his fault because no one poured the drink down his neck’ or something, and I think, ‘Yeah but what happened before he did that?’ [Transcript :4]

Similarly, she sees the inability of the state to improve Indigenous health as a problem of cultural difference:

And I think that there’s poverty and that there’s poor education and we’ve gone in and tried to fix it up with how we know how to fix our own problems up. So we’ve gone in and done some good but our way of doing good. Like, what’s their way of doing good? [Transcript :1]

Robyn’s musing on the relativity of “doing good” prefigures the discussion in Chapter 9 of a ‘fundamental’ critique of white antiracism.

**Hamish**

Hamish is a white South African of English origin, born in Johannesburg in the late 1950s. From a young age, he was well aware of the politics of the apartheid era. He looked up to his mother’s brother, a political activist who was threatened and kept under surveillance by the security police. At the age of ten, his family moved to a farm in the Natal Midlands south-east of Johannesburg. There he came face to face with the harshness of rural life for black South Africans. His parents set up a school on their farm to save their employees’ children walking tens of kilometres to a crowded, grossly under-resourced school. They sent him to a small liberal school that dared to admit black students.

As a young doctor, he was appalled by the social inequities he saw in the health system. He worked in segregated hospitals where the ‘black wing’ would be overflowing with tuberculosis patients and victims of political violence and crime, some of them lying on mattresses on the floor, while the well-resourced ‘white wing’ would be sparsely populated with those suffering from chronic diseases - diseases of affluence. After completing his residency, he was obliged to complete two years of national service as an army doctor.
Rather than being implicated in the work of the security forces he despised, and to escape the seven years jail term he would otherwise face, he left the country and worked in general practice in New Zealand. He returned to Cape Town just before Mandela was released and began training in public health, the field where he decided his professional future lay. He was excited about contributing to the public health of a post-apartheid South Africa. But with bombings and grenade attacks close to where he lived, the violence of Cape Town in the early 1990s was too much, particularly for Hamish’s Australian wife who worried for their small children. Reluctantly, he left South Africa for a second time to settle in Australia and work in public health research. He first worked in a large university in southern Australia, but jumped at the opportunity to move to the Institute nine years ago.

His interest in Indigenous health was related to issues of social justice and racial equality, rather than a fascination with Australian Indigenous people in particular: “it was more about a commitment to public health and equity and addressing disadvantage and, you know, I guess I could have just as easily ended up in refugee health” [Transcript:9]. The extreme poor health of Indigenous people was also a draw card of sorts. Because the mainstream Australian population is generally so healthy, public health can only marginally improve things. But in Indigenous health, incidences, prevalences and relative risks are so high that with public health interventions “you can actually make a difference” [Transcript:9].

While many Institute researchers enjoy close relationships with Indigenous people (such as Louise), Hamish does not. He claims he doesn’t count any Aboriginal people as his close friends, and that he has learnt about Indigenous culture from Indigenous colleagues and a white friend who is married into an Indigenous family. Rather than drawing on his personal ties to Indigenous people and culture, in his work in Indigenous health he “sees things on an international scale”. He is somewhat amused by, but does not contradict my suggestion that because he grew up in a country with a white minority that has since lost power, his commitment to Indigenous health is less influenced by the guilt of belonging to a colonising white majority than it is for many white antiracist Australians. [Fieldnotes 26/2/05 3:44]
He does criticise a common view in Indigenous research, that “our situation is unique and there’s not much we can learn from elsewhere.” He strongly feels that experiences of developing countries can inform Indigenous public health, and he cautiously endorses the controversial views of Noel Pearson, the Indigenous lawyer and social entrepreneur:

And I mean maybe, you know, maybe Noel Pearson’s got a point that resources actually are just a distraction from dealing with the sort of real problems, they’re a barrier to some extent. [Transcript 12:16]

At the Institute, most of his work has been in sexual health research. Indigenous people have much higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003), contributing to complications in pregnancy and premature births, infertility, and higher rates of cervical cancer, in addition to the morbidity of the actual infections. This is a very sensitive area of research. It intrudes into the most private aspects of Indigenous people’s lives, and it taps into racist stereotypes of subaltern peoples as promiscuous and diseased. And with the incidence of non-consensual sex on remote communities and STIs sometimes reported in young children, the extremely sensitive issues of rape and child sexual abuse are also raised.

Hamish’s research has been criticised as being too intrusive into people’s lives, but he defends the importance of the research:

Most people don’t want to touch this stuff because it’s too difficult, but it’s far too important for that. [Fieldnotes 1/8/04 1:4]

Perhaps owing to the sensitive nature of Hamish’s research, he has developed a way of speaking about Indigenous health that is eminently reasonable. In contrast to Louise’s and Deb’s strongly-worded statements, Hamish speaks softly and tends to consider more than one side of an argument. During an interview at his home, he takes out a set of maps he
ordered from the New Internationalist magazine for his children, the Peters projection, one with the size of the country proportional to the population, and others:

There are maps spread all over the desk and he is happily telling me that *you can’t ever look at things from one particular point of view, you need to look at different projections to get a proper understanding.* [Fieldnotes 26/2/05 3:43]

He believes that the reasons for Indigenous ill-health are “complex and multifactorial”, a formulation typical of white antiracists. These reasons include:

..the rapid transition that has occurred for Indigenous people in the physical, social and economic environment, the disruption of social systems and relative disadvantage that has occurred as part of this transition, the poor living conditions, relatively poor access (broadly defined) to health services, relatively poor opportunities to gain the sort of formal education that is required to get ahead in modern Australian society, and access to the economy. [Fieldnotes 24/2/06 4:93]

He sees the role of public health as attempting to shape people’s behaviour to maximise their health, while implementing structural changes that allow them to better take up public health messages:

*We need to put limits on people’s actions for the good of society. It’s not about telling people what to do, it’s about encouraging people to behave in certain ways through good information, and incentives and penalties I suppose… We can encourage people to make healthy choices but their ability to make healthy choices is determined by society.* [Fieldnotes 26/2/05 3:43]

Always the interventionist ethnographer, I cannot resist testing his reasonableness. During our interview, being deliberately provocative, I suggest a contrast between the eagerness of rural black South African children of the apartheid area to walk tens of kilometres to a shabby school with no desks, while the state and remote communities struggle today to get Indigenous children to attend their community schools which are luxurious in comparison,

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133 A map with the lines of latitude equally spaced which corrects the distortion of conventional projections that make developing countries and the southern hemisphere in general look much smaller than they are.
with many of them also being community-run and offering cultural content in the curriculum. As I expected, Hamish gently resists this comparison:

There’s some really interesting contrasts and I generally try and avoid making those contrasts…It often ends up in something that looks like victim blaming because you, [it] looks like it’s to do with the behaviour of Indigenous people but you know, you dig deeper and there are structural explanations for the situation that they're in. [Transcript:10]

His considered approach extends to ethics committees, even though they make his working life difficult at times. Ethics committees have generally reacted to the sensitive nature of his research by raising a multitude of questions that require months of negotiation to resolve before the research can begin. Most recently, a committee questioned the ethics of evaluating sexual health programs that involved an extensive questionnaire of a sample of remote Indigenous people. If the program was found to be ineffective, they argued, the funding for the programs could be cut, and thus it would be unethical to do the research. Even though he thought they were making a misguided argument, he patiently wrote long letters of explanation.

It adds a lot of time and effort, you know, and work for the committee and for researchers, but in a way it’s part of a researcher transfer process and it’s part of the learning process both for researchers and the ethics committees. And to some extent for me that’s time well spent. I mean, it doesn’t result in research publications but it enhances the value and the potential for research. You know, in the bigger scheme of things. [Transcript:4]

Hamish’s careful style of speaking is related to his keen awareness of the political hazards of work in Indigenous health. As a white male, he is particularly susceptible to criticism. Here he sympathises with another research team who have a reputation in some circles for cultural insensitivity and a ‘herding’ mentality to recruiting remote Indigenous research participants:

I really respect the team, they have produced a lot of work that has made a difference. And they work exceptionally well as a team, [the white senior researchers] do a great job there. But that [negative]
perception does make things more difficult, in terms of funding and also ethics. [Fieldnotes 23/9/04 1:64]

Like every other researcher, he makes sure that there is visible involvement of remote Indigenous community collaborators in his projects. This can take the form of flying remote people in for project workshops in Darwin (with the research team covering the travel, accommodation and incidental costs). He is happy to admit to me that this serves instrumental purposes for his projects, alongside his moral commitment to Indigenous involvement:

It looks better for me to the people pulling the purse strings, and I also believe they should be involved as much as possible. [Fieldnotes 26/2/05 3:43]

**Deb**

Deb is a young researcher, who started work at the Institute the year before my ethnography began. She grew up in a middle-class family in Brisbane. After a science undergraduate degree, she began working in public health for the government, and went on to obtain a Master of Public Health. After finishing her Masters degree, she spent a year doing community development work on an aid project in rural Thailand:

It was great. It was quite a marked time in my life I think because it was the first time that I ever realised that there are other ways of knowing, like I knew there are other ways of knowing, but just what it was like, at a practical level, to not be understood. [Transcript A:2]

She describes how she embraced village life to the point of ‘forgetting’ her culture, an experience that ultimately reinforced her own identity:

I went through this experience of where you are really trying to be open to everything and, you almost forget your own culture. And then you sort of come back a bit and you realise you’re not happy and you think, that’s okay, I’m me, I’m an Australian, I am just living in a developing country. And that
sounds all quite simple but for me it was quite marked, because I had never experienced it before.

[Transcript A:2]

After returning from overseas, she worked for health departments in urban and rural areas, but was not satisfied:

So I’ve moved around a bit since Thailand and I realised I didn’t want to settle back in Brisbane, so, I heard about this job in Darwin, which sounded far away and adventurous, so that’s how I got into Indigenous health research... I think the appeal was difference, I like difference, because it's new and there’s things to understand that you don’t take for granted or accept. [Transcript A:2-3]

She describes her approach as “realistic”, contrasting it with her former naïve optimism and inflated sense of purpose:

I didn’t come [to Indigenous health research] wanting to save the world or make a great difference. That’s how I used to think when I first finished uni and maybe in the last 5 years, but now I just know that it doesn’t actually help when you try and change everything. I knew that it would be complex but I also knew that it would be interesting so I just came, committed to doing my best but not with any grand expectations of, you know, saving the world. [Transcript A:3]

Rather than exerting her agency, she sees her modest role primarily as supporting Indigenous people to pursue their public health goals:

I think supporting individuals gives them the capacity to do what they see fit. So I guess it’s about providing opportunities for self-determination. [Transcript A:3]

While Deb is clear on how she wants to work, she is also aware that the reality is quite different. She laments that currently, there is not the capacity within the Indigenous community to lead most research projects:

That’s what I find difficult, it’s just the wrestle between what I believe…and what it’s like to actually run a project in that environment. And what makes it even more difficult is the difference between the rhetoric and the reality, and the fact that it’s still operating in a white culture where we’re constrained
by the people who provide us with the money, like the timeframe. The fact that you need technical expertise to do the sort of study that I'm working on and that's not readily available within the Indigenous community yet because it is an evolving area. We are trying to support Indigenous-led research but at the moment there isn't the capacity to have all the technical expertise as well... it just wouldn't work if you just handed it over. [Transcript A:5]

Deb recognises that there is a specific culture among white people working in Indigenous research, and she feels pressure to conform to certain beliefs and ideas:

There's like a definite culture in public health as well as Indigenous research and research in itself about what's correct at the time. Like there's you know, a particular popular culture if you like, so you know what you're meant to think and say, and then there's what you actually do think and say. And if it's something outside what you're supposed to think, you really need to understand why you don't want to say it. Maybe it's a racist thing to say, or maybe it is not a well-formed thought and you should talk to your friends about it privately first. [Transcript A:3-4]

She is aware that as a white person, her agency is suspect. Her interests are racialised as white, and are assumed to be naturally discordant with the interests of ‘the project’, and of Indigenous people in general. Here she discusses her uncertainly about whether the project she is working on should be evaluated, and how that evaluation should take place:

You can no longer assume that what you believe isn't culturally based...So, you know, if I was doing a research that wasn't Indigenous research, I might say, we should do an evaluation. I wouldn't even question it, but you know you have to question yourself every step of the way, where does that come from? Why do I want to do it? Is it in the best interests of this research or is this just my way of working? And maybe I need to get over it and just do it and stop worrying all the time. And at some point you do have to get a resolution but it's just you're not so confident any more. [Transcript A:13]

She also thinks that in some circumstances, non-Indigenous people are more concerned about Indigenous control than Indigenous people. She discusses here how she was surprised when an Indigenous leader of the project questioned the need for all the project staff to be Indigenous:
When I first was doing the recruitment process it was like, I want to employ everyone who’s Indigenous… and this lady on the committee was sort of saying, do they all have to be Indigenous? She’s an Indigenous person herself, a representative of the Indigenous leadership, so – I just thought it was interesting, do we have a stricter set of rules?… They’re Indigenous themselves and they live in a context [Darwin] where there’s many cultures, whereas I’m non-Indigenous trying to do Indigenous research so I’m really – I think that’s why, that I’m really strict about what I should be thinking and what I should be doing. [Transcript A:16-7]

Ultimately, Deb thinks “it’s a struggle of egos and competing expertise” to try and ensure Indigenous voices are given priority amongst the many competing demands involved in running a large research project [Transcript A:8]. She looks ahead to a time when enough Indigenous people have the technical expertise (in epidemiology, biostatistics, medicine and nursing) to run their own research projects entirely:

D: If Indigenous people could do the research then a lot of the struggle you know, will be hopefully lessened because they will be able to synthesise the biomedical, social, cultural perspectives within themselves, that we all wrestle with on a daily basis.
E: So what will mean – what will help them to do what we can’t do?
D: I guess the authority, that they are Indigenous. [Transcript A:11]

Accordingly, she sees that the challenge for non-Indigenous people who want to have a positive impact in Indigenous health is to develop “a fundamental commitment to an understanding of an Indigenous perspective” [Transcript B:15]. She attributes the failure of some projects she had been involved with to the lack of this understanding and commitment on the part of non-Indigenous researchers.

We are all making money and careers out of the poor situation in Aboriginal communities and that’s terrible. I used to think that good intentions were enough but they are not because you can still do harm with good intentions. I think there’s lots of people who are trying to make a difference but we are not succeeding, but unless we begin to reflect critically on our own practice then it’s going to continue. I just think [sighs] we’ve got a lot to learn. [Transcript B:1]
Deb is as critical of others as she is of herself. She is particularly critical of the motivations of researchers who seek to work in Indigenous health. Those who claim altruistic motivations are suspect:

What benefits you from saving other people? Like is it that you’re escaping something of your own or is it that you need to fulfill your own ego? [Transcript A:14]

In a paper written during my fieldwork, I tried to identify the different rationales non-Indigenous people might draw on in seeking the participation of Indigenous people in their research (Kowal, Anderson, & Bailie 2005). Here I am discussing this paper with Deb, specifically, the “moral” rationale for the inclusion of Indigenous people:

E: The moral rationale is where you think that Indigenous people should be in control because in the past they haven’t been in control and have been marginalised.
D: If we say that ‘Aboriginal people should be in charge because they have been excluded before’ there is a danger of being condescending and patronising. Aboriginal people are experts in communication. They have a set of expertise that we can’t access. …It’s not just about including them, I mean, they didn’t ask to be researched on. It’s still non-Indigenous people who are driving research. I’m not at all proud of the research industry. [Fieldnotes 8/10/04 2:3]

Explicitly stating a moral imperative is distasteful, as it centres the white person as the one who holds the power and decides when and how it should be distributed. For Deb, a more acceptable definition focuses on how white people need Indigenous people for their unique skills (although those formulations can also be considered ‘condescending’ for assuming that Indigenous people’s skills do not overlap with formal research skills, see Chapter 7). Ultimately, no expression of motivation can be satisfactory because the agency of white researchers is inherently problematic (see Chapter 8).
Chapter 6: Postcolonial logic = Remedialism + Orientalism

[T]he concerned citizens of contemporary Australia are imbued with desire in relation to chronically unequal and needy others...The unremitting and solicitous national discourse about Aborigines is imbued with urgency and instrumentalism and replete with competing theories of cause and remedy. This discursive field is an unstable mix of the romantic and the statistical, a surface imagery that mirrors the nation's desires and fantasies. (Cowlishaw 2003a:104, my emphasis)

In this chapter I turn to the knowledge system associated with the “concerned citizen of contemporary Australia”, who for my purposes is a white antiracist. I have termed this knowledge system postcolonial logic. In Chapter 4, I discussed both the ways that white people make themselves recognisable as antiracists in public settings, and the complex negotiations and positionings that occur among colleagues, “backstage” in the more private postcolonial spaces. In this section, I flesh out the epistemological assemblage that white antiracism creates and is created by. As I set it out in Chapter 3, the recognition of people identified as ‘different’ is a mutually creative process consisting of four elements: spaces of recognition are created for, and inhabited by, white antiracists while, simultaneously, spaces of recognition are created for, and inhabited by, Indigenous people (as self-determined and/or authentic Aborigines). Within this schema, postcolonial logic acts as a blueprint for shaping these spaces of recognition. As white antiracists are the focus of this ethnography, my account of postcolonial logic is most informative for understanding how white antiracists create spaces of recognition for Indigenous people to inhabit, rather than the converse.

Postcolonial logic is thus constituted by the set of knowledges shared by white antiracists about Indigenous people, their problems and the mechanisms by which their situations may be improved. As this is a contemporary ethnography, this knowledge is congruent with the ‘self-determination’ discourse that began its political ascendancy in the late 1960s (as discussed in the Introduction). The content of this knowledge is probably familiar to most readers. It includes beliefs that Indigenous people are the first peoples of this country; that their culture has been maintained for thousands of years, perhaps the ‘oldest’ culture in the world; that they have a special relationship to country and a complex social system; that
their culture is in some ways superior to Western culture (for example in the way they lived ‘in harmony’ with the land); that their culture has been severely decimated by colonisation; that their current problems stem from dispossession, displacement, racism and intergenerational trauma; that the Australian people and Australian governments must accept responsibility for the injury inflicted to people and culture, and should invest more resources in Indigenous programs. Postcolonial logic also incorporates a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination: a belief that Indigenous people must be in control of efforts to improve their lives, but non-Indigenous people must be available to provide adequate support.

The portraits of Louise and Deb in Chapter 5 contained many elements of postcolonial logic. Louise is unambiguous in her support for self-determination:

I still don’t see any real evidence that Indigenous health is in Indigenous hands, and I think that for Indigenous health to really have improvement there needs to be a greater representation of Indigenous people within the program development [and] the program delivery at all levels. [Transcript:9]

Deb expressed a similar sentiment, summing up her professional goal as “providing opportunities for self-determination”. According to postcolonial logic, Indigenous people must be in control of health research if it is to be more effective in improving health:

If Indigenous people could do the research then a lot of the struggle you know, will be hopefully lessened because they will be able to synthesise the biomedical, social, cultural perspectives within themselves, that we all wrestle with on a daily basis. [Transcript A:11]

Most Institute researchers perceive that their efforts to empower Indigenous people to solve their own problems are hampered by the ‘system.’ This researcher describes ‘system’ barriers to conducting community consultation in a way she considers appropriate:

We have to get it done quickly, we have ethics committees approvals and so on coming up…the best way to consult would me to go down and live in the communities for six months, get to know the people, do a lot of sitting around and listening, rather than me going and waffling. But because
scholarships and budgets and all of that it doesn’t work like that... We tried very hard to do it as well as we could but it is still a white man’s consultation process. [Transcript 2:4]

As well as blaming the ‘system’ for thwarting attempts to invert power relations, postcolonisers are quick to blame each other. Louise provided a typical example:

People don’t do enough self-reflection around here, they don’t really think about their motives enough... because what’s driving it is getting degrees, getting publications, getting grants. That’s what’s motivating people. [Fieldnotes 7/10/04 2:2]

Postcolonial logic, then, includes a historically-informed belief in the importance of Indigenous emancipation, and a view that white people and institutions of the (post)colonial state are often obstacles to realising this liberatory vision. At the institutional level, this logic underpins the research reforms I described in Chapter 2 as ‘postcolonial’. Efforts to increase the number of Indigenous employees, recognising those who once would have been ‘research assistants’ as ‘co-investigators’ and authors on research papers, and conducting lengthy consultation processes are all efforts that derive from a belief in Indigenous self-determination and making up for past injustices.

As a white Indigenous solidarity activist, public health researcher, and in various other white antiracist roles I have inhabited, I have participated in producing and reproducing postcolonial logic. Now, as an anthropologist of antiracist white people, I examine this set of knowledges as an object of study.

In a recent article, Cowlishaw foreshadows (but does not explore) the two forces that drive postcolonial logic, a knowledge system fashioned from “an unstable mix of the romantic and the statistical” (Cowlishaw 2003a:104). The ‘romantic’ I gloss as orientalism; the ‘statistical’, as remedialism. Let’s consider remedialism first. This is the term I use to describe the desire of the Australian liberal multicultural state to equalise Indigenous statistics with those of everyone else.\textsuperscript{134} This is a form of liberalism, the philosophy of

\textsuperscript{134} Von Sturmer (1995) has used the term ‘remedialism’ in a similar context to my usage (as I discuss below), but does not elaborate there on the term. Otherwise, ‘remedialism’ has an unrelated legal meaning in the context of “discretionary remedialism”, which refers to the right of the court to determine an appropriate
human liberty and happiness that has spread from Europe to every region of the world along with the democratic nation-state. John Grey’s concise treatment of the many instances and forms of liberalism identifies four core principles:

[I]t is **individualist**, in that it asserts the primacy of the person against any collectivity; **egalitarian**, in that it confers on all human beings the same moral status; **universalist**, affirming the moral unity of the species; and **meliorist**, in that it asserts the open-ended improvability, by the use of critical reason, of human life. (Gray 1995:86, my emphasis)

Of these four principles, egalitarianism and meliorism sit most comfortably with the particular liberal inheritors who are the subject of this ethnography. Their adoption of liberalism emphasises the rights of Indigenous people to standards of living equal to that of non-Indigenous people, and the responsibilities of the state to effect this improvement. In this second aspect, postcolonisers have been influenced by their experience of the welfare state. The twentieth century nation-state combines the liberalist function of preserving individual rights with a (increasingly) limited form of welfare, ensuring that minimum standards of income, housing, education and healthcare are met. In last century’s fight to extend the liberal rights of the citizen to Indigenous people, the right to access welfare benefits was a key struggle (Altman & Sanders 1991). And although contemporary Indigenous advocacy draws on the language of cultural difference (as I have discussed in Chapter 3), egalitarian appeals to increase funding to the various functions of the welfare state (education, health and housing) remain central. This liberalism, acting through the welfare state, incorporates the somewhat illiberal method of intervention. It is through state intervention, enacted largely by white antiracists on the public payroll, that Indigenous melioration is to be effected.

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remedy in each case, rather than following historical or legal precedent (Evans 2001). My sense of “liberal multiculturalism” follows Povinelli (2002), and the political theorists cited in Chapter 3.

135 The parallel success of liberalism and democracy reflects their common modern origin in Enlightenment thought. However, they have many incompatible aspects (see Gray 1995:70-77).

136 Theoretically speaking, liberalism sits somewhat uncomfortably with the welfare state, with the principles of welfare deriving more from a Judeo-Christian ethic than from the (largely) secular doctrines of liberalism. While various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laws provided some welfare benefits (e.g. for the poor and for injured workers), it was in interwar and post-WWII years that welfare states of the US and the UK (respectively) took shape (Fraser 2003; Trattner 1999).
This thesis develops the concept of ‘remedialism’, rather than adapting the term ‘liberalism’, for two reasons. First, a remedy is a cure for “an outward evil of any kind”, and also a reparation or redress (OED 1989). The word draws attention to the specificity of this liberalist urge: not just to spread freedom and prosperity, but to reverse the unfreedom and poverty of colonisation. Second, it underlines the principle of meliorism, a belief that humans can be improved. As a verb, to remedy can be to “reform” and “make good” (OED 1989). It thus points to an important quality of the objects of remedialism: remediableness. For liberalism to be successfully taken up, its targets must be receptive to the good(s) on offer.\(^{137}\)

The second driver of postcolonial logic is a form of orientalism. This term originally meant ‘the study of the east’ (though often referring to practically everything outside Europe), but in the last decades it has taken on a different meaning through the work of Palestinian theorist Edward Said and other postcolonial scholars. Said argued that the Western scholarly work on the ‘Orient’ was actually more about constructing the idea of Europe by finding in the ‘Orient’ everything that Europe was not. The ‘orient’ was always essentialised, that is, reduced to a number of characteristics that purportedly contained the ‘essence’ of the orient (Said 1978). In the case of Indigenous people, past essentialist accounts have represented them, for example, as primitive and barbaric ‘stone age’ people of low intelligence, an anachronistic remnant of European man’s own past. This depiction functioned to reinforce notions of the European as the pinnacle of human progress and rationality. These images of the West that always accompany orientalism (usually implicitly) have been called occidentalism (Carrier 1995). Orientalism and occidentalism are discursive strategies that have underpinned Western colonisation. The meanings they create and reflect facilitated European occupation and declaration of ownership of the Australian land mass, as most assumed that such a ‘primitive’ people who did not make permanent settlements could not have a sense of ownership at all, let alone a complex system of land ownership. This kind of orientalism is marginalised today and unequivocally labeled as racist in the public sphere, although it no doubt survives in some pockets of Australia.

\(^{137}\) A related body of work examines how management and improvement of colonised populations was central to the imperial project (see for example Mitchell 1991; Stoler 1995).
Another thread of essentialist depictions of Indigenous people sees them in a more positive light. These are the images we so often see associated with ‘feel-good’ stories in the media: dark-skinned Indigenous people who enjoy a deep spiritual connection with the natural world. Following their cultural traditions, they live in harmony with the land and each other. Indigenous cultural tourism draws heavily on this type of discourse. Here is a recent media account of the “Didge Dreaming” tour offered by the Indigenous-owned Monkey Mia Dolphin Resort in northern Western Australia:

Capes’s [the tour guide’s] links to this land are strong. His mother was born beneath the vivid green leaves of a life-sustaining kurrajong tree. I join him on the Dusk Dreaming tour for a bush tucker wander through red-sand country. We look up towards the ridge and see large expanses of rich red dunes interrupted by the intermittent green of low-lying bushes. Capes tells us we will see and hear many animals and birds; will learn to recognise the tracks of the kangaroo, emu, snake and lizard. "Keep your eyes and ears open and you will understand how this country can talk to you," he says. However, I'm not prepared for a close encounter with the dugite snake that slithers close. At the bird hide adjacent to the waterhole, we see emus darting through the bush and prod the fresh kangaroo spoor. The kangaroo's track and spoor reveal much: where it is heading, what it has eaten, whether it is old or young, fast or slow, sick or injured. The Malgana people's creed of education, understanding and respect informs our meander. "We share this country and take only what we need," Capes says. "We respect this country and it will look after us. Tread softly and do no damage." This advice could be used in our everyday lives. (Harper & Laurie 2006)

The softly-spoken tour guide is at one with the country. His mother was born on it, he can communicate with it. With him as their guide, the inscrutable and dangerous landscape comes alive for the ignorant Westerners who cannot read tracks and are afraid of snakes. They have much to learn from the Malgana people about the country, and about how to live. This is another form of orientalism glossed by Said (1986:216) as “nativism”, by

138 Muecke (2005:17-30) similarly identifies multiple discourses about Indigenous people: the orientalist romantic discourse, the racist discourse that essentialises and dehumanises Indigenous people, and the objectifying anthropological discourse. This third element is different but perhaps parallel to the remedialist discourse of my account. On romantic discourses of Indigeneity, see also Lattas 1997 and Marcus 1997. On this point as well as others, work on Indigeneity has taken the lead from feminist scholarship; see for example Fuss 1989.

139 Perhaps the most infamous and blatant example of this form of orientalism is Marlo Morgan’s account of being abducted by desert Aborigines who revealed their sacred culture to her (Morgan 1994). For a recent analysis of the entire affair see Ellis 2004.
Alastair Bonnett (2000b) as “primitivism” and by Zaheed Baber (Baber 2002) as the “indigenization project”. For clarity, I refer to this form of orientalism as ‘positive orientalism’ and denigrating discourses as ‘negative orientalism’. Just as negative orientalism has a (usually implicit) counterpart in positive depictions of the West, positive orientalism has a double in negative depictions of the West. For example, the spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous people is invoked to suggest the spiritual poverty of Western lifestyles.

Note that the prefix ‘positive’ does not imply that I think ‘positive orientalism’ is a good thing. This simple inversion of negative orientalism, valourising all things Indigenous and expunging all things Western, is as inaccurate and instrumental as its opposite. Baber cites one example where a scholar argues that the eradication of smallpox from India by the colonial regime was an act of violence towards Indian knowledge of smallpox (Baber 2002:752-4). Here, the desire to venerate Indigenous knowledge and remedies leads to the extreme argument that smallpox should not have been eradicated, a view that would not be shared by the vast majority of Indians.

The international indigenous movement has been accused of this form of orientalism. Groups of people that are recognised as “Indigenous” can access a global network of support (see for instance www.cs.org). However, accessing this support requires the adoption of essentialist notions of culture and ethnicity, obscuring more complex socioeconomic and historical relations (see also Hale 2002; Niezen 2003; Sylvain 2004; Warren 1998).

140 This is related to the “noble savage” myth that venerates the “uncivilised” human. For Australian critiques see Peters-Little 2006 and Rowland 2004. For an excellent treatment of both the myth, and the myth of the myth see Ellingson 2001. Moore, Pandian & Kosek 2003:10-14 review the critical literature on the conflation of pristine natives and nature.
141 In her study of white women, Frankenberg found some of her “race-cognizant” participants displayed this same tendency to “asymmetric dualism”: the pathologisation of whiteness and elevation of non-white cultures (Frankenberg 1993:198-205). Frankenberg criticises this inversion as reinscribing essentialism, and romanticising aspects of culture that are the result of marginalisation and oppression (such as envying “more street life, less alienation” when these are actually the result of poverty) (Frankenberg 1993:200).
142 An example of the inaccuracy of nativist stereotypes can be found in typical representations of Indigenous people as ancestrally connected to place and language. This representation does not reflect the experience of the majority of Indigenous people given that only 54% of Indigenous Australians identify with a clan, language or tribal group and only 12% speak an Indigenous language at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b:31).
At base, orientalism is about difference. Whenever a person who thinks of themselves as ‘white’ makes a representation of a person they think of as ‘not white’, the object of the gaze is necessarily ‘othered’ and the result is orientalism. Taking remedialism and orientalism together as the two pillars of postcolonial logic, the particular type of difference that is created when white antiracists turn their liberalist gaze on Indigenous Australians is remediable difference. Remediable difference is difference that can potentially be brought back to the norm. Seen through this lens, Indigenous people are different from white people in the way they look, their beliefs, in their priorities, in the way they choose to live, but not so different that their disadvantage cannot be reduced by carefully planned and executed programs driven by Indigenous people themselves. In the next chapter I will address another form of difference that I oppose to remediable difference – radical difference or alterity. As we will see, one of the key aspects of this ethnography is an examination of what occurs when white antiracists, whose knowledge system is based on remediable difference, encounter alterity.

Note that remedialism and orientalism can be mapped onto the two aspects of recognisable Indigeneity discussed in Chapter 4 (and see Figure 10). Remedialism is the basis on which the self-determined Indigene is recognised: only the Indigenous person who embraces the liberal project of self-improvement can be a successful target of remedialism. Orientalism demands that the Indigenous recipient of benevolent assistance is recognisably different from white people, a demand met by the authentic Indigenous voice.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the possibility that liberalism is constitutively exclusive, with some segments of the population always excluded from its ‘egalitarianism’ (be it the unpropertied, women, children, slaves or non-white races) (see Mehta 1999). This grim possibility is the backdrop to the problem of ‘difference’ or ‘minorities’ in the contemporary nation-state, as explored by political theorists who seek to create models of liberalism that can accommodate difference (see for example Fraser 2000; Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994; Young 1990). While this body of work is large and complex, at its heart is the difficulty of maintaining universalism in the face of difference. Once universalism is successfully challenged, individualism, egalitarianism and meliorism are revealed as

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143 Another formulation of this idea is Spivak’s (1988) “epistemic violence”. I will return to the politics of discerning difference in Chapter 7 and the conclusion.
partial, in the sense that they represent a view held by only some in the population and are therefore imposed on those holding are divergent view. Liberalism’s principles are exposed as partial also in the sense that they are no longer the whole truth: egalitarianism does not apply to all people, and meliorism does not necessary make people ‘better’. Theories of multiculturalism and pluralism can be read as attempts to overcome this aporia (see Wieviorka 1997).

The tension inherent to liberal multiculturalism is also at the heart of postcolonial logic, as orientalism collides with remedialism. The section on ‘Sameness and Difference’ below is where this productive tension plays out ethnographically, as researchers at the Institute waver between a liberalism that demands universalism and a cultural respect that demands particularism.

**Remedialism**

I argued in Chapter 2 that the Institute can be thought of as a ‘postcolonial’ space because its white researchers are committed to inverting power relations in an effort to address Indigenous disadvantage. For some, the commitment to Indigenous health is integral to their sense of national identity. One researcher was about to leave to work in Papua New Guinea as a young woman, but changed her plan when told by a mentor that “the first responsibility of the Australian people is to the Australian Aboriginal” [Transcript 3:1]. For other researchers, particularly those born overseas (like Hamish in Chapter 5), a career in Indigenous health is just one of many possible ways to help disadvantaged populations. The common element for researchers who both accidentally and deliberately find work in Indigenous health is a sense of outrage about inequality; a deep feeling of unease that the fruits of society are unevenly and unfairly distributed. These sentiments stem from a version of liberalism I call remedialism, as discussed above. In this section, I explore the logic of remedialism at the Institute.
Statistical equality

At the end of nearly every media report that chronicles the disadvantage and suffering of Indigenous Australians, there is the incantation of Australia’s most famous and unchanging statistic: Indigenous people live 20 years less than non-Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{144} These potential years not lived are the bottom line of Australia’s postcolonial reckoning, evidence of its failure when compared to other so-called ‘fourth world’ indigenous populations in Canada, New Zealand and the US where the life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous is smaller. The release of every new report feeds bad-news headlines in the national media: “Report slams Indigenous health standards”, “Aboriginal health a disgrace”, “Lot of Indigenous people worsens”.\textsuperscript{145} Indigenous activists have highlighted the poor health of Indigenous Australians to national and international bodies including the United Nations (Australian Associated Press 2004). The Australian state is frequently shamed by its apparent failure to improve Indigenous health, and many postcolonisers take on a sense of personal responsibility for addressing this.\textsuperscript{146}

The impact of bad statistics on white antiracists needs to be seen in the context of the history of statistics.\textsuperscript{147} Although the idea of statistics stretches back to seventeenth-century Germany (see Hacking 1990; 1991), it was in the nineteenth century that statistics and statehood mutually flourished in Europe and the colonised world (see Appadurai 1996b; Dirks 2001; Hannah 2000). Trade, taxation, the economy, public opinion, crime, literacy and, of course, public health are all constituted through statistical collections. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, the word “constituted” in the previous sentence should be taken literally: the evocation of a particular statistic creates a discourse in which that phenomenon

\textsuperscript{144} A recent article in the BMJ cited the gap as “19-21 years” (Ring & Brown 2003).
\textsuperscript{146} An important technology by which ordinary citizens assume responsibility for the cruelties of the colonial state is the “Sorry Book”, a community initiative where messages of sympathy for the Stolen Generations are recorded. One message published on a website illustrates how this sentiment is engendered in very young white antiracists: “I’ve very sorry for taking your rights and liberties. Keiren Callahan, 9 years” http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/lbry/dig_prgm/sorrybooks/sorrybooks_selection.htm (Accessed 05/04/2004)
\textsuperscript{147} This section implicitly relies on a large body of work in science studies that deals with the abstraction of quantification and the production of objectivity, including Daston 1992, Latour 1987 and Porter 1996. My entire account of postcolonisers could be told through the lens of science studies, and in fact this was my original intention. However, as the ethnography progressed, it was the production of subjectivities rather than knowledge that came to the fore, rendering necessary my reliance on a different archive.
can exist. Thus the invention of IQ tests created the modern idea of ‘intelligence’ (Rose 1985), as well as the possibility of differing levels of intelligence among races (see Montagu 1975). Along with knowledge and power, statistics create subjectivities. Rose uses the general term “calculable individual” for the many and varied subjectivities that statistics generate: the intelligent person, the poor, the criminal, the child and the madman (Rose 1999:213; see Foucault 1991). To be a calculable individual is a state both of oppression and emancipation; at once amenable to state control and possessing the tools of autonomy.

Thus Indigenous statistics do not only describe something called Indigenous ill-health, they create it. Even more than that, they create the subjectivity of an ‘Indigenous person’ in the moment they are recognised as unwell by the state, in a fashion similar to that described in Chapter 3. The material reality of ill-health - the chest pain, the infected sores, the displacement from home for dialysis treatment in town, the grief of premature death - are all abstracted and given new form through statistical representation (see Brough 1999). This translation, however, remains unstable. As we will see below, radical difference raises the possibility that poor Indigenous statistics do not neatly correspond to the subjective experience of Indigenous suffering, a possibility that is the undoing of remedialism.

The statecraft of statistics has been charged with depoliticisation, “displacing political disputes into technical disputes about methods” (Rose 1999:205). The statistics of minorities, though, are often exceptions to this rule. Indigenous statistics are very much a tool of politicisation (see Rowse 2005d). Over the last 30 years, the political spin on Indigenous statistics has been all about equality.

The goal of the latest national Indigenous health policy – “To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy a healthy life equal to that of the general population” (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council 2003:7) – makes the name

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148 Thus in Indigenous health, methodological considerations are often subservient to political exigencies. Take the fact that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy varies depending on what method are utilised. The argument was made in my field site that an alternative to the official method used to calculate life expectancy should not be publicised as it would “confuse the public” and play into the hands of right-wing people who would exploit such debate as evidence that Indigenous ill-health was exaggerated.

149 This discourse of inequality relates to an international discourse since the 1990s that argues that inequality is bad for the health of the whole population, see Wilkinson 1996.
of the game clear: only when the Indigenous and non-Indigenous lines on the graph converge can we lay down our interventions and declare that justice has been done. The gravity of these contours is only growing more patent. The latest “Indigenous health rights campaign” run by the major national Indigenous advocacy organisation aims “to close the life expectancy gap within a generation”.  

Frustratingly, in the last few decades the lines remain parallel, decreasing at roughly the same rate (see Figure 13). And as the gap remains the same, the proportionate difference increases. By a quirk of simple arithmetic, as both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates of disease or death improve by the same rate, leaving the same difference between them, the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous is amplified. Unless Indigenous health can be improved faster than the health of the general population, Indigenous health researchers are destined to be the bearers of bad news. Although things are getting better, they are also getting worse, and it is bad tidings that grace the press releases of advocacy groups.

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151 For example, recent research showing Indigenous infant mortality rates had improved but at a lesser rate than non-Indigenous rates (although greater in absolute terms) (Freemantle et al. 2006) was reported in the media as “Aboriginal babies in appalling death rate” and “Infant mortality gulf widens” (Banks 2006; Jenkins 2006). Although it is frequently stated that Indigenous health is not improving, this is actually an incorrect representation of Indigenous statistics. It is more accurate to say that Indigenous health is not improving any faster than the health of the general population, see Condon et al. 2004; Wakeman & Raymond 2005.
The task of those working in Indigenous health is thus clearly set out: reduce all ratios to 1 – make the Indigenous population statistically indistinguishable from the general population (but without eroding its cultural distinctiveness, a sticking point I explore fully in Chapter 9). The means by which this is to be done is also clear: carefully thought-out, well-directed interventions at every level of existence that influences health, from the provision of housing, to physical education in schools, to empowerment workshops in communities, to cultural awareness training for hospital staff, to free health checks for Indigenous people. The problems are never-ending, but so are the solutions.

Tess Lea (2002) consummately theorises remedialism in her ethnography of public health bureaucrats in the Northern Territory. She uses the term “the magic of intervention” to refer to remedialist epistemology:

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152 Source: Condon et al. 2004:447. This graph is taken from Northern Territory data, the only relatively reliable set of Indigenous mortality statistics in Australia that goes back to the 1960s. The pronounced improvement in mortality up to the 1980s is only seen in infant and child mortality. The Indigenous adult mortality ‘line’ has remained roughly parallel to the non-Indigenous one since the 1960s (Condon et al. 2004).
By ‘magic of intervention,’ I mean to refer to the faith, and all that sustains it, in the power of institutionally-produced logic to fix pre-defined problems of the other through further acts of institutional expansion, in the moment of denying the existence of any such expansionary desire. (Lea 2002:9-10)\textsuperscript{153}

For Lea, the key feature of remedialism is its self-perpetuating nature. Echoing Ferguson (1990), she argues that the main effect of remedialist logic is the survival and indeed flourishing of the institutions that deliver interventions, along with the state that supports them and that they ultimately represent. She is quick to point out, as am I, that this does not imply a conspiracy of misanthropic bureaucrats intent on expanding their networks of control (Lea 2002:37). People at the receiving end of interventions certainly benefit much of the time, though often in ways that differ from those intended (see for example Mosse 2005). However, the ethnographic observation she and others make is that the epistemology of intervention is circular. It is unthinkable that the solution to the defined problems may lie outside the realm of intervention, or indeed that the ‘problems’ as they are framed may not necessarily be problems to those who experience them. Instead, the material suffering of Indigenous people is seamlessly translated into a bureaucratic problem amenable to change via the actions of the state and its well-meaning actors. And for most people drawn into remedialist logic, the refraction is even more complex and abstract: poor statistics, those every-increasing ratios, are projected onto ‘suffering Indigenous people’ often known only through media representations and brief, orchestrated encounters, whose now established ‘problems’ are carefully matched with interventionist solutions.

**The inauthenticity critique**

The remedialist trick of self-perpetuation is accomplished through what I call the *inauthenticity critique*. This is the tendency to attribute intervention failure to the poor

\textsuperscript{153} It is worth quoting her further for a sense of the power of remedialist epistemology: When bureau-professionals conceptualise strategies for action, sometimes the obstacles are too confounding for simple goal-directed calculations to easily rectify. But the need for a sense of forward direction is too overwhelming to resist: passivity cannot be entertained. ‘They’ need our greater commitment. So the effort to change the world is reinvested into the production of ‘new’ forms of breakthrough analysis. Pathways are repeatedly re-imagined: if this is not the answer, then maybe that is. Such forms of analysis become part of everyday consciousness; they are interiorised. The irresistibility and credibility of interventionist thinking depends on our complete and utterly sensual absorption of its myriad forms, to the point where we are fully magnetised within the forcefield of the humanist question: *what is to be done?*. (Lea 2002:280)
quality of the intervention, whatever the situation. If an intervention did not work, it was because the intervention was not what it appeared to be – it was an inauthentic version of the real thing.

This discursive tendency is required in the first place because the story of public health interventions, particularly in Indigenous health, is largely a story of failure. Examples of success are widely and repeatedly disseminated and endless reviews of every type of intervention list familiar ‘enabling factors’ that must underlie successful interventions (“community control”, “sustainability”, “partnerships”, “skilled personnel”), but a great many interventions that aim to improve health outcomes fail to demonstrate significant outcomes (Shannon et al. 2003:7-8).

Failed interventions are attributed to an inauthentic rendering of whichever ‘success factors’ are deemed the most important. Perhaps the Indigenous participants were not adequately engaged and empowered, even if they may have appeared to be; perhaps the program did not really correlate with the community priorities, even if people might have said so at the time; perhaps there was inadequate capacity building integrated with the program; perhaps the people involved were not the appropriate people from the community’s perspective, even if some community people said they were. While these diagnoses may well be ‘true’ in some cases, they are applied all the time, no matter what the circumstances. This indicates that the criteria for attributing inauthenticity are internal to remedialist logic, rather than simply reflecting the external reality. In a non-falsifiable loop, the definition of an authentic intervention is one that works, and correspondingly, a failed intervention must have been inauthentic. Von Sturmer refers to this as the “great circularity” of remedialism (von Sturmer 1995:113).

The inauthenticity critique works to maintain remedialist logic, as Lea explains:

Statistical decline is not evidence of a need to reverse dominant assumptions about the need for intervention per se but are used to preface every new case made for continuing, ‘strengthening’ or expanding existing approaches. The repeat identification of failure is thus conscripted to the task of institutional reinvention and extension. (Lea 2002:14)
The genius of this discursive device is that the possibility of success is perpetually there, even if never reached in reality. If we fail, it’s because it wasn’t the real thing – maybe next time it will be. The temporal dimension is important here. The inauthenticity critique assumes that authentic, and thus effective, interventions are only a matter of time. Failures are seen as temporary setbacks, unfortunate but inevitable as liberal modernity expands its remedialist embrace.

Cowlishaw noted this tendency in her ethnography of the formation of an Indigenous pastoral company in the 1970s, the dawn of the self-determination era. Although only one of the company directors was sufficiently literate to sign his name on official documents (the rest using their thumbprint), government officials overseeing the Indigenous board of the company confidently wrote: “[the community] will need to participate in the operation and be supported by it if our ultimate goal is to be reached. [They] are capable of providing a good quality and stable work force…eventually providing managerial talent” (cited in Cowlishaw 1999:227, my emphasis). Although the materiality of thumbprints indicated that systematic and sustained improvements in Western education were required before local people could be capable of independently running an incorporated organisation, the logic of remedialism sees Indigenous managers as an inevitable eventuality.

The point I am making here is not one of adult literacy: whether or not the company directors can or cannot learn to write their names is beside the point. My focus here is on the postcolonial logic employed by the government officials that considers the achievement of a fully inclusive society where everyone is equal as simply a matter of time: time enough to increase community capacity, operationalise policies and implement recommendations.154

One sure sign of an inauthenticity critique is the liberal use of the qualifiers “really” and “true”. Here a researcher employs an inauthenticity critique to explain the perceived failure of Indigenous control in a research project despite the fact that it had been designed to take direction from an Indigenous Reference Group:

154 The temporal dimension of the inauthenticity critique is clear in the portrait of Deb in Chapter 5: …you need technical expertise to do the sort of study that I’m working on and that’s not readily available within the Indigenous community yet because it is an evolving area. We are trying to support Indigenous-led research but at the moment there isn’t the capacity to have all the technical expertise as well...[Transcript A:5, my emphasis]
I wasn't involved in the development of the project, I think that's a shame because I only got on board once the funding was established and the plan was in place. But I think that it must have been rushed because the Indigenous Reference Group, I don’t think really had the power and there wasn't really the commitment to it... or the understanding of what it was really about if you want to be honest. [Transcript 8:10-1, my emphasis]

The researcher skillfully distances themselves from the formation of the Indigenous Reference Group (“I wasn’t involved”), allowing them to criticise the authenticity of the process. The Indigenous people involved must not have been given sufficient power, must not have had sufficient commitment (perhaps they were coerced into being on the committee by eager whites), were not give sufficient explanation, because if they had been, it would have worked. Again, I must stress that where the ‘truth’ of the situation lies, in this case or any other, is beside the point. The issue here is a *style of argument*, a discursive technique that postcolonisers frequently draw on.

Here another researcher talks about how Indigenous people abandon their cultural processes when non-Indigenous people are around, precluding them taking *real* control of a project, even when they are involved in large numbers:

It just goes back to that stuff about Indigenous health being in Indigenous hands and we pay lip service to it and we put [it] in all of the documents. But then it just becomes really rhetorical and if you really want to get *true* representation and *true* involvement of Indigenous people in the issues then it needs to be total engagement. [Transcript 15:12, my emphasis]

What “total engagement” or similar expressions of authenticity mean are always unclear. It is simple for antiracist whites to indicate where participatory processes have gone wrong, but much more difficult to think of an example where they have gone right.155 This is an illustration of the power of the nonspecific, discussed above in Chapter 4. In that chapter

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155 In this case, when I asked the researcher to nominate a case where there has been “total engagement”, he suggested a Western Desert project where the ‘community’ staged an international art auction to raise money for dialysis machines in their remote communities, so patients on dialysis could visit their home communities for extended periods. However, he immediately went on to criticise the diversion of attention from prevention of kidney disease, suggesting that if they were given better advice, they would have spent their money on preventative services instead. [Transcript 15:13-4]
we also encountered the notion of ‘authenticity’ in a different context. The authentic Indigenous voice is one aspect of the space of recognition in which ‘Indigenous people’ can be recognised. The double meaning of the term is not coincidental: in Chapter 9 I will explain how the authenticity of postcolonisers and the authenticity of Indigenous people are inextricably bound to each other.

An alternative to the inauthenticity critique is to consider that apparent program failure is not due to things ‘failing’, but due to things working as they should (Mosse 2003). Remedialism is doomed not just because of the frequently bullet-pointed reasons (lack of time, money or effort), but because of the inherent contradictions of its underpinning logic (see Chapter 9). These contradictions stem from the reliance of postcolonial logic on the concept of remediable difference.

As I have explained it, remediable difference is a difference amenable to liberal melioration. In statistical terms, it is a difference that can be moved towards the norm. According to postcolonial logic, the fact that Indigenous people are ‘Indigenous’ is a difference that is not remediable, but their reduced life expectancy is amenable to change. These phrases seem self-evident today. Of course we would not wish nor be able to ‘remedy’ a person’s Indigeneity, of course we can and should help Indigenous people to live longer. But by the logic of previous eras of white governance, Indigeneity was indeed remediable (Rowse 2005b), while a shorter life span was seen as fixed (Thomas 2004). What we consider to be remediable is a product of our own time, and vulnerable to future revision.

What then are the characteristics of remediable difference in the self-determination era? Its major feature is what I and my colleague Yin Paradies have called overstructuration (Kowal & Paradies 2005). Next I will discuss this, and a special case of overstructuration, the information-deficit model.
Remediable difference

Overstructuration

Contributing generally to the poor health status of many Indigenous people are: social factors such as dispossession, dislocation and discrimination; disadvantages in education, housing, income and employment; and physical environmental factors. These social, economic and environmental disadvantages underlie specific health risk factors (such as smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and high blood pressure), and, often contribute to lack of access to good quality health care. Given the importance of these factors, substantial improvements in Indigenous health status are unlikely to be achieved without improvements in the overall circumstances of Indigenous people. (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet 2006)

This treatment of the overall causes of Indigenous ill-health is from the preeminent online Indigenous health resource. The usual elements are all there: history (“dispossession, dislocation”); racism (“discrimination”); the traditional sociological determinants (“education, housing, income, employment”); “environmental factors” which (according to the ‘environment’ section of the same website) includes housing (again), water, sewerage, rubbish and electricity; and, tacked on the end in this instance, health services. The behaviours that more directly contribute to excess death from cardiovascular disease and diabetes are confined to brackets (“smoking, obesity, physical inactivity”), emphasising their derivative place further down the causal chain.

Hamish in Chapter 5 gives a similar précis of the overall “complex and multifactorial” causes of Indigenous ill-health:

…the rapid transition that has occurred for Indigenous people in the physical, social and economic environment, the disruption of social systems and relative disadvantage that has occurred as part of this transition, the poor living conditions, relatively poor access (broadly defined) to health services, relatively poor opportunities to gain the sort of formal education that is required to get ahead in modern Australian society, and access to the economy. [Fieldnotes 24/2/06 4:93]
Here, ‘history’ figures in the language of “transition”, and education, employment, housing and access to health services all get a mention. Health behaviours are not mentioned at all.

Both of these are examples of overstructuration, a major feature of remedialist discourse. Overstructuration is the tendency to downplay agential explanations and highlight structural explanations for any given situation. Although contemporary sociology offers complex accounts of how structure and agency are co-constructed (see for example Hays 1994), I employ these concepts in their simplest terms, where structure is that which constrains and determined choices, and agency is the ability of subjects to freely determine their actions.

My role as an ‘observing participant’ at the Institute (see Chapter 1) involved running a workshop for health professionals that aimed to teach them critical analysis and introduce them to anthropological, sociological and psychological theories relevant to their work in Indigenous health. One of these workshops that formed part of my fieldwork vividly illustrates overstructuration.

In one part of the workshop, participants were divided into four groups, and each of these groups was asked to consider one of four health problems that afflict Indigenous communities: diabetes and coronary heart disease; end-stage renal disease; poor housing and environmental health; and poor obstetric and infant outcomes. We asked these four groups to think of all the reasons that Indigenous Australians suffer these problems at higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians. We specifically asked people to include ‘non-politically–correct’ (non-PC) reasons. ‘Political correctness’ was not formally defined. Participants were left to decide what they thought was politically incorrect within each of these four groups.

After generating many different reasons, the groups were asked to come together and arrange their reasons into categories of their choosing (reproduced in stylised form in

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156 The following few paragraphs are adapted from Kowal 2004 and Kowal & Paradies 2005.
157 Workshop participants gave written consent for de-identified minutes of the workshop to be used in my PhD research.
158 These problems are well-known to practitioners in Indigenous health, see Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003.
Figure 14). Examples of reasons in each category are given in Figure 15. Reasons that were identified as ‘non-PC’ are marked with an asterisk.

**Figure 14:** Schematic representation of explanations for ill-health created by workshop participants. Numbers of non-politically-correct reasons shown in brackets.
Figure 15: Reasons given for excess Indigenous ill-health by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number (non-‘PC’ subset)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual behavior</td>
<td>19 (12)</td>
<td>Having kids too young*, bad diet*, people just throw their rubbish everywhere*, want to share in a non-healthful behavior identity (such as “drinking culture”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
<td>Community dysfunction, different beliefs about health behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health system</td>
<td>20 (0)</td>
<td>Culturally-inappropriate interventions, cycle of disadvantage, lack of interpreters, institutional racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
<td>Past and present discrimination, forced changes in ways of living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/Financial</td>
<td>6 (0)</td>
<td>Poverty, welfare dependency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remoteness</td>
<td>5 (0)</td>
<td>Expensive to provide care, problems with maintenance of health hardware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetics</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>Genetics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of this exercise illustrate the overstructuration inherent to postcolonial logic. There was a clear tendency towards structural attributions for Indigenous ill-health, including reasons grouped under the health system, historical context, money/financial, and remoteness categories (note these categories map precisely onto the categories contained in the opening quote of this section). Complementary to this, there was discomfort with explanations that stressed agency, demonstrated by the fact that nearly all the reasons identified as ‘politically-incorrect’ were within the individual/behavioral category. That is, participants were more likely to blame the system, and were reluctant to nominate Indigenous people’s choices or actions as a cause of their ill-health.¹⁵⁹

Let’s consider how this idea of ‘political correctness’ functioned.¹⁶⁰ We did not define it, yet everyone knew what it was, and what it wasn’t: all four groups came up with similar

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¹⁵⁹ This tension between focusing on ‘upstream/distal’ structural causes or ‘downstream/proximal’ behavioural causes of disease is the subject of much debate in public health, sometimes staged as a contest between social epidemiology and biomedicine (see Lupton 1995).

¹⁶⁰ There is a growing scholarship on ‘political correctness’ (see for example Fairclough 2003; Friedman 1999). I have not drawn on it here, as it seems to be hampered by the multivalence of the concept – its
examples of political incorrectness. ‘Political correctness’ was acting as a placeholder for postcolonial logic, the liberal values that are dominant within Indigenous health discourse. And as this exercise showed, postcolonial logic is disturbed by Indigenous agency.

This disturbance is also illustrated by the reasons within the individual/behavioural category which participants did not consider to be politically-incorrect. Terms like “wanting to share in a non-healthful behavior identity” were necessary in order to speak of Indigenous agency in an acceptable way. This laborious phrase indicates the lengths to which postcolonisers must go in order to feel comfortable with the fact that Indigenous people may freely make morally-unsound decisions such as drinking to excess.

Of course, overstructuration is an antiracist discourse. It is a response to ‘victim-blaming’, a term given to racist expressions of Indigenous agency, where Indigenous ill-health is blamed on the actions of Indigenous people. One victim-blamer disliked by many at the Institute was federal health minister Tony Abbott, who commented in an interview that “Aborigines would be healthier if they chose to “eat better and exercise more”.” (Anonymous 2005) The article that takes this line as a headline was prominently displayed on the doors of some researchers as an indication of the racist ignorance of the federal government.

I am not quibbling with the antiracist intent or the antiracist effect of overstructuration. I, too, have responded and will respond to racism by saying, “it’s not Indigenous people’s fault, it’s their lack of access to education/employment/quality housing/health services”. The ‘over’ in overstructuration does not imply that it is wrong to emphasise structure and downplay agency, but that it has origins and consequences that exceed the intent of the postcolonisers. ‘Over’ refers to the asymmetry of an argument that cannot comfortably

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meaning and function varies dramatically in different contexts. Instead, I argue that in this case ‘political correctness’ corresponded to what I have developed here as postcolonial logic. Postcolonisers may not always agree with postcolonial logic (particularly after they have been exposed to radical difference, as I will explore in the next chapter), but they know they are supposed to agree with it. One workshop participant exhibited mock-contestation when considering whether a reason for Indigenous ill-health needed a star to indicate it was politically-incorrect: Janice discusses the reason ‘poor knowledge of hygiene’ her group has come up with: Is this politically incorrect? I don’t know. I know it’s supposed to be! She chuckles and marks it with a star.[Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:3]
accommodate Indigenous agency, and leads us to question what function this asymmetry performs within postcolonial logic.

Overstructuration produces *remediable difference* by locating ‘the problem’ externally to Indigenous people. Indigenous ill-health becomes an unfortunate effect of circumstances ameliorable through external action. As such, the Indigenous person burdened by these extenuating circumstances is hypothetically healthy, *if only* the state had successfully educated them, helped them find work, and provided them with suitable housing. The behaviours that effect health - smoking, eating, exercising - are constructed as a direct function of external factors, metaphorically bracketed, and in the case of the quote opening this section, literally bracketed.

What is it that requires this punctuative attempt at containment? Why is it unviable for remediable difference to include Indigenous agency? While the desire to avoid victim-blaming is one answer, the answer of interest here turns the mirror back onto white antiracist subjectivities. Indigenous agency is problematic because postcoloniser agency is problematic (a point I address in Chapter 8). If the causes of Indigenous ill-health are structural, then the job of white antiracists is to change these structures – no problem there. But if the causes of Indigenous ill-health are agential, then white antiracists are interfering with Indigenous agency. The very hint of this possibility is enough to produce a defensive response from a postcoloniser. And because the aim of many Institute projects is in fact to change the behaviour of Indigenous people (to make them eat more nutritious food, exercise more, drink less alcohol), these defensive responses are not infrequent. This one is from an Institute researcher discussing their health promotion project at a seminar:

*We don’t do social engineering, we just make structural changes that make healthy choices easier.*

[Fieldnotes 14/4/05 4:15]

We “just” make structural changes. Why the diminutive language, when structural changes are meant to be the most difficult changes to make (Link & Phelan 1995)? The “just” in the sentence above refers not to practical logistics, but to discursive necessities. While structural changes are practically difficult to achieve, they are easy to talk about because they are in harmony with postcolonial logic. The idea of changing people is summarily
dismissed as “social engineering”. Although attempts to impact on the agency of
Indigenous people may be more achievable for public health researchers than structural
change, they are less permissible for white antiracists wishing to remain within the bounds
of recognition.

**The Information-deficit model**

As we have seen, *overstructuration* is the discursive tendency to emphasise the structural
causes of Indigenous ill-health and elide Indigenous agency. It is necessary to a concept of
remediable difference that can accommodate a viable postcoloniser subjectivity. A parallel
discourse is the *information-deficit model*. This is the attribution of Indigenous ill-health to
a lack of health information. The information-deficit model can be seen as a subset of
overstructuration if the state of ‘lacking information’ is considered to be a structural
problem. White antiracists would see lack of health information as a structural problem of
access, while racist discourses would construct it as an agential problem of “ignorance”.
However we classify it, this discourse serves a similar function of producing remediable
difference.

Sociologist Deborah Lupton describes the ‘deficit model’ of human behaviour “which
explains behaviour in terms of the individual ‘lacking’ attributes such as knowledge and
self-efficacy…They suggest first that lifestyle habits are amenable to change, and secondly,
that most people, if rationally told the ‘risks’, will make efforts to do so.” (Lupton 1995:57)
Health promotion discourse pathologises unhealthy activities and assumes a “highly
rationalized body dominated by a conscious will” that seeks to be healthy (Lupton
1995:75). Anti-smoking campaigns, for example, create

the view of the subject as having a genuine, real persona, the authentic self – the non-smoker –
versus the false self of the ‘smoker’ who is controlled by the drug. There is a non-smoker behind the
bars of tobacco waiting to be freed. (Lupton 1995:117-8)

Like the Indigenous subject I discussed above, the generic public health subject is always
hypothetically healthy, if only they had access to the right information.
The most important recent example of the information-deficit model within Indigenous health is the book *Djambatj Mala: Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen 2000). Its author, Richard Trudgen, arrived in the remote northeast Arnhem Land community of Raminginning in 1972 to work as a mechanic, and eventually became an educator for a Christian community development organisation based in Arnhem Land. His book was warmly received in the general media and very popular among white antiracists in Darwin. When I arrived from Melbourne at the end of 2000, most people I met had read it and recommended it to me. I was moved by its clear and passionate message: Yolngu people are unhealthy because they don’t understand Western health information.

Trudgen recounts personal stories like that of David, a man who was told by doctors for 13 years that his kidneys were bad because of diabetes, and he should eat a diet low in sugar and salt and give up smoking. He had not acted on any of this advice, and he was soon to be forced to move from his community into Darwin to receive regular dialysis. But he was saved by the good fortune of having Trudgen act as an interpreter during one 20 minute consultation with a doctor. David had a “very good knowledge of English” and had traveled widely as a national Indigenous leader. But his “different world-view” meant that he did not understand the Western concepts he had been hearing all these years until Trudgen explained them to him using metaphors he understood, like comparing kidney function to an engine filter. Once Trudgen properly explained to him why he should stop smoking and restrict his sugar and salt, he immediately did so, and his health dramatically improved (Trudgen 2000:98-101).

The picture painted here is ineluctable for the white antiracist. Again, the Indigenous person is hypothetically healthy, if only Western health workers could make themselves better understood. Misunderstanding is certainly a remediable difference. To effect health improvement, white antiracists do not need to change Indigenous people, a task abhorred

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162 See [http://www.ards.com.au](http://www.ards.com.au). It is not a coincidence that the information-deficit model that irks many postcolonisers is generated in this case by a Christian organisation. In Chapter 8 I will discuss the missionary heritage of white intervention and the problem this poses for postcolonisers.
by postcolonisers as “social engineering”: all they need to do is tailor health information to the cultural background of the recipient.\textsuperscript{163}

The information-deficit discourse is exceptionally flexible. Any piece of information can be constructed as the key to overcoming a general incomprehension. At the Institute, the specific ‘information’ required to fill the ‘deficit’ varies depending on the project. The project associated with the researcher quoted below aims to show that a lot of kidney failure in young people is linked to untreated skin sores. Here she explains how this information will make parents more vigilant about cleaning their children’s skin infections and getting antibiotic treatment:

There isn’t the sense that the connection [between skin infections and kidney failure] has been made. But once the connection’s been made, [people might say] ‘this is why cousin John died last week at nineteen on the footy field’, and suddenly someone says, ‘well, he had bin get his skin sores treated, as a kid, he’d be fine, he’d still be playing next week’. [Transcript 2:16]

Remedialism hinges on these imagined moments of collective bulbs flicking on above the collective mind. Word spreads that John’s premature death was actually caused by untreated skin sores, and suddenly mothers flock to the clinic to get antibiotics they will religiously deliver every dose of, and dressings they will dutifully change. We imagine that all that is needed is to provide the right information, and the community will swing into action.\textsuperscript{164} Lea explains it this way:

The underlying theory is relatively simple: if Aboriginal people knew exactly how sick they are, and what causes it, they would want to work on themselves with greater vigour and determination. If they

\textsuperscript{163} Note that the reason ‘lack of health information’ does not feature in the list of causes of Indigenous ill-health that appears at the beginning of this section (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet 2006), even though health education is a cornerstone of public health. This absence indicates that the information-deficit model is not popular in Indigenous public health. Attributing ill-health to a lack of health information is seen by some as an outdated and somewhat racist practice, as it diverts attention away from the structural causes of Indigenous ill-health (Mowbray & Senior 2006) (in an example of the overstructuration discourse), and because it can be taken to imply that Indigenous people are not smart enough to understand standard health information (Williams 2001:160). For these postcolonisers, the information-deficit model is still uncomfortably close to the idea of alterity and thus smacks of ‘victim-blaming’. In contrast, I critique the information-deficit model for the way it distances postcolonisers from the possibility of radical difference.\textsuperscript{164} Note the parallels between this reasoning and what Povinelli (2002:118-125) identifies in the discourse of Aboriginality of the 1930s and 40s as “sympathetic rationality”.

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could understand the true import of the alarming data that professionals have to hand, they would readily commit to appropriate lifestyle changes. As one health bulletin recently put it, information sharing is critical because ‘how can people be expected to manage their disease if they do not understand it?’. (Lea 2002:26)

In the section above on the inauthenticity critique, I asked the reader to suspend their judgment about whether researchers genuinely listened to their Indigenous reference groups or were really trying hard enough to engage with Indigenous perspectives, and accept that an inauthenticity critique was a style of argument inherent to remedialism. In this section, the reader may think I have gone too far. Surely it is reasonable to say that Indigenous people from remote communities - isolated from mass communication, with poor literacy, and their own culturally distinct health beliefs - lack Western health information. And surely it is reasonable to think this is a major reason why they smoke more, drink harmfully more, and are more likely to be obese? (Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003; Thomson et al. 2006)

For the purposes of destabilising this view, I will look again to statistics. My purpose is not to argue that Indigenous people don’t lack certain health knowledge, or that health information is not important and useful, but that the information-deficit model reflects a remedialist style of thought more faithfully than it reflects other sources of ‘truth’.

So, is Indigenous ill-health due to a lack of knowledge about their health problems? One answer to this is provided in research on smoking. A recent study of six remote Northern Territory communities asked residents in 1999 whether they believed that smoking causes lung cancer and heart disease. Eight-five percent of people reported that they believed lung cancer was linked to tobacco use, and 82% reported that they believed heart disease was linked to tobacco use (Ivers et al. 2006). In contrast, data collected at around the same time indicated that only 60% of the general Australian population believed smoking causes lung cancer and only 32% believed it causes heart disease (Trotter et al. 1997). But this higher level of knowledge is not reflected in lower rates of smoking. Sixty-eight percent of Indigenous people in these communities smoked, in contrast to 24% of all Australians at
that time (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001d), and knowing the dangers of smoking did not mean people were more likely to give up (Ivers et al. 2006).

There are a multitude of reasons why Indigenous people might smoke at higher levels than non-Indigenous people, some of which were cited in the article which reported on this study, but lack of health information does not appear to be one of them. According to this study and others, Indigenous people in these remote communities are more informed than other Australians. Yet they are nearly three times more likely to smoke.

A Trudgenesque response to this would be that although Indigenous people might say that they knew smoking causes lung cancer and heart disease, they don’t really understand the relationship between smoking and serious illness. If they did, they would soon stop. Note the appearance of the inauthenticity critique here. ‘Real’ understanding is reflected in behaviour change: a lack of behaviour change proves the health education proffered is inauthentic, regardless of how culturally- and linguistically-appropriate it might appear to be.

In the previous section I argued that one function of remedialist discourse is to maintain the viability of white agency. As remediable difference is constructed as external to Indigenous people, postcolonisers can improve Indigenous health without acting directly on Indigenous people. Foreshadowing a point I will make more thoroughly in Chapter 8, postcolonisers relish the idea of changing the ‘system’, but are highly discomforted by the idea that they might be changing Indigenous people themselves.

Here I wish to highlight the corollary of this point. Postcolonisers are highly discomforted not just by the idea that they might be changing Indigenous people. They also resist the possibility that Indigenous people themselves might need changing: that they are so different from the model ‘healthy person’ (who, as we will see in Chapter 9, is actually white and middle-class) that to become more healthy requires them to fundamentally

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165 The community-wide interventions that followed the baseline study led to small increases in the proportion of people who believed smoking caused lung cancer and heart disease, but no significant change in smoking habits.

166 This is not unique to Indigenous people. The public health literature has shown that knowledge of health risk does not necessarily lead to behaviour change (Ory, Jordan, & Bazzarre 2002).
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change, rather than simply improving their circumstances. To put it another way: remedialist discourse serves to distance postcolonisers from Indigenous *alterity*, that is, the possibility that Indigenous people are *radically different* from postcolonisers. Of course, the distinction between ‘changing one’s circumstances’ and ‘changing one’s self’ is impossible to maintain in practice: the two overlap substantially. Nevertheless, this distinction is crucial to postcolonial logic. It is the difference between benevolent help and malevolent “social engineering”.

Let’s consider the researcher who hopes that information gleaned from medical research will make mothers take more notice of their children’s skin sores. Listening to formulations such as this one, the medical anthropologist in me is always suspicious. The question appears silently in my mind: why are they not already treating their children’s pussy, swollen skin eruptions? If skin sores are normalised such that they do not warrant attention, why on earth should we expect that the internalisation of any new-found piece of epidemiological evidence will suddenly change this? The tobacco example above suggests it might not. But the deficiency in this argument is never raised because it leads us into the uncomfortable territory of radical difference. Postcolonial logic attributes the unhealthy behaviour to a cause external to the person, either structural causes (overstructuration) or to a lack of information (the information-deficit model). Regardless of epidemiological or experiential evidence to the contrary, postcolonisers will adhere to the explanations that postcolonial logic prescribes: *if they knew that skin sores caused kidney disease, they would do something about them*. As Lea puts it, behind the information-deficit model is the assumption that “they could not possibly live as they do knowingly”. (Lea 2002:26, emphasis in original)

Deborah Lupton argues that the problem with the deficit model is that it profoundly underestimates the power of social norms that are often discordant with the norms that public health attempts to instill.167 This problem of mismatched norms is compounded by the fact that the health promotion workforce is predominantly middle-class and female. While this workforce may accept a model of subjectivity founded on “rationality and self-control”, this may not be the case for the recipients of public health discourse (Lupton

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167 The argument that public health in general is a tool for instilling norms in the population has been made by many scholars (see for example Bunton 1992; Hall 1992; Lupton 1995; Petersen & Bunton 1997).
In Chapter 7, I embellish this bland sociological term, ‘differing social norms’, that stands for a lifeworld where skin sores are not seen as a problem, or perhaps knowingly ignored, despite the weeping flesh and high fevers. But even the more palatable ‘differing social norms’ is somewhat taboo among Indigenous health researchers. In Indigenous health, difference is racialised. ‘Difference’ carries with it multiple layers of sociohistorical baggage, which is why the discourse of remedialism must tread so carefully. In the next section, I explore the discourse of difference through the concept of orientalism.

Orientalism

I hate being white, it would be much more interesting, life would be much fuller if I was from somewhere interesting. [Fieldnotes 6/4/04 4:2]

I always felt so cultureless, but I identified most closely and was almost most jealous of two groups: Indigenous people and Jews. From a very young age I did a lot of reading in those areas. It's bizarre in a sense but I've always been aware and always been attracted by, I guess the positives of difference. [Transcript 14:13]

Remedialism derives from the welfare liberalism of white antiracists. The injustice of inequality, of one group living on average 17 years less than another group, is a strong impetus for taking action. But, as I have discussed, there are additional reasons for white people to become involved in Indigenous issues in particular, when so many other instances of injustice might demand their attention. Concern for Indigenous people is always already racialised. As I argued in Chapter 3, the very existence of the category of ‘Indigenous people’ is the result of a process of mutual recognition between ‘Indigenous people’ and others, in this case ‘white antiracists’. Thus in analysing white antiracists, it is not enough to point to liberalism alone – the encounter between two groups with a specific relationship must be taken into account. As I discussed in the opening of this chapter, the concept of orientalism is a useful trope in understanding this element of the encounter.
Orientalism is as much psychological as it is political. An important function of orientalist representations, both derogatory and reverent, is to mark the boundaries of self and other. Any discourse of identity requires an opposite in order to have any meaning and thus power (see Butler 1993). Hall draws on Derrida’s term “constitutive outside” to refer to “those shifting mechanisms of ‘otherness’, alterity and exclusion and the tropes of fetishization and pathologization” that are mobilised within enlightenment discourses to make a unified ‘civilisation’ possible (Derrida 1976; Hall 1996a:252). Taussig’s meditation on alterity sees "the marked attraction and repulsion of savagery as a genuinely sacred power for whiteness." (Taussig 1993:150) Catherine Hall expresses this through the language of psychoanalysis:

The projection of the ‘other’ is always about repressed aspects of the self. Relations between coloniser and colonised are characterised by deep ambivalence, the ‘other’ is both an object of desire and derision, of envy and contemp, with the coloniser simultaneously projecting and disavowing in an essentially contradictory way, asserting mastery but constantly finding it slipping away (Hall 1996a:70).

Orientalism is thus a rich psychoanalytic theatre where repressed desire and derision (respectively ‘positive orientalism’ and ‘negative orientalism’) are projected onto the radically different. Philosopher Alphonso Lingis argues that traveling to the developing world allows Westerners to break through the “blank face” of their “bland and formless” white identity:

The darkness of that skin, its bronze-red or cream complexion draws us vertiginously with its condensed intensity. A carnal craving – now that the blank walls of our faces have faded away – longs to see, touch and smell; to hold that body; to pour upon it all we have of kisses and caresses. (Lingis 1998:187)

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168 Important works that try to flesh out this concept theoretically and historically include Chakrabarty 2000, Cooper & Stoler 1997, Hall 1992, Trouillot 1991 and Todorov 1999[1984].
The pleasure of melting into the Other promises to alleviate the burden of identity, “the dead weight of meaning” required to live a modern life (Lingis 1998:184). I am sympathetic toward accounts such as this, particularly where they concur with aspects of the postcoloniser subjectivity I encountered in this ethnography (intimacy with Indigenous people is important to Institute researchers, as I discuss in Chapter 8). However, I am attentive to the way that the West is represented. Immersion in the other is supposedly necessary due to the pathology of a ‘Western identity’, a trope which is often naturalised and unconvincingly explained with general allusions to individualism and the nation-state. These representations reflect an occidentalism – an essentialist notion of the West – that is shared by some of the white antiracists at the Institute. Indigenous societies are seen as encompassing everything that the West lacks: strong kinship ties, compassion, environmental responsibility, a relaxed attitude to life, and so on. This researcher reflected on the sense of belonging she felt in Africa:

I remember being very upset when I left Uganda because I actually felt more secure, emotionally secure in that family and community than I did in the white community in Australia…. [I felt] a sense of belonging and family connection that I hadn't felt ever in all those years of my life in a white community before. [Transcript 2:1]

Belonging, emotional security, and a sense of family are associated with Africa, while “the white community” is defined as lacking those things. Another researcher expressed the view that Indigenous people needed to teach white Australia about “land and country… [and the] amazing sense of wellbeing and insignificance in the world” that comes with Indigenous knowledge [Transcript 9:11]. In the Introduction, I alluded to my sense of envy as an outsider sitting in on Institute seminars, gazing at other researchers’ photos of “beautiful island beaches and lily-strewn billabongs, fresh crabs and damper roasting on the fire”. This was an Aboriginal domain of experience I could only ever approximate on my frequent camping and hiking trips.

Bhabha has perhaps most famously applied psychoanalytic categories to colonial discourse. The stereotypical image of the colonised is the object of desire and derision. This relates to Freud’s notion of the fetish, and to Lacan’s ‘Imaginary’ which begins the moment a child recognises her image in the mirror as her own, and goes on to presume a series of equivalences in the world around her. There are two forms of ‘identification’ associated with the Imaginary – narcissism and aggressivity. Narcissism is associated with the metaphoric function of colonial stereotypes; aggressivity with the metonymic function (Bhabha 1994b:77). It is thus the recognition of the self in the other – the same, but not quite – that triggers the ambivalent affective response on the part of the (post)coloniser (Bhabha 1994a).
Lattas argues that a sense of alienation from the land is constitutive of white Australian nationalism. “Reconciliation with the spirituality of Aboriginal people is posited as the means for healing that sense of being lost in space which is seen as being at the heart of the alienation belonging to settler society”. The pathology of the West is the absence of a “deeply spiritual relation to the land” (Lattas 1997:244). The authentic Indigenous voice I described in Chapter 4 has a redemptive role to play in healing the spiritually-empty settler. Discourses of Aboriginality, the land and the unconscious collapse into one another.

Unsurprisingly, the idea that the Indigenous person is a psychoanalytic canvas on which the postcoloniser projects their contradictory desires is abhorrent to white antiracists. The best way to deal with such a potential source of shame is prohibition, and both the denigration and the romanticisation of Indigenous lifeworlds are frowned upon at the Institute. However, as the existence of such a prohibition is itself taboo, it is not explicit and is commonly violated. The orientalism that fuels postcolonial logic is thus an orientalism that disparages its own existence.

The anti-orientalist orientalist

The public health list-serv I belong to regularly sends me emails advertising remote Indigenous community jobs in the Northern Territory health department, mostly for nurses and nutritionists. The rapid turnover of staff who find bush work too demanding means the same jobs are often advertised a few times each year. They all include this standard paragraph:

This position offers the unique attractions of living in the Top End, i.e. spectacular scenery, flora and fauna, enviable weather conditions, and the opportunity to work in beautiful and fascinating areas that are inaccessible to most Australians. This role promises unique opportunities not experienced elsewhere in Australia.

The authors of these ads know how best to lure white professionals from their cosmopolitan urban lives to places like Borroloola and Kalkaringi. They flaunt the novelty of the
experience: ‘unique’, ‘enviable’, ‘fascinating’, and most importantly, ‘inaccessible’. While those who take up these positions will eventually learn from their peers that orientalism is wrong, like this researcher they might recall it was the pull of the forbidden that brought them there:

I remember a couple of years prior to actually going out to [work in] Arnhem Land I came for a holiday up to Darwin. You know when you go into Kakadu you can only go as far as Cahill’s crossing without a permit? And I remember standing of course on the right side of the river, the side that you’re allowed to stand on, and looking across and seeing that sign saying, this is east Arnhem Land, trespassers will be prosecuted, you cannot enter this land without a permit, and just thinking, ‘What’s there?’, you know, ‘What’s this east Arnhem?’ [Transcript 1:3]

In this narrative, she stands barred from crossing the East Alligator river (the same crossing I was allowed to make on the community’s Open Day in the introduction), the lack of access heightening her desire. For the researcher quoted below, it was the promise of adventure that brought her to Indigenous health after a personal crisis realigned her priorities:

I was a classic sort of physician in a public hospital setting in a big city until I got sick myself, very sick, in the mid to late 1980s. And on the other side of that I decided to, I guess, step out of the mainstream of my specialty and what I call ‘go adventuring’. I thought life was too short not to do that…I decided I didn’t want a career as such where you climb up a ladder, I basically wanted to be in the moment and learn a lot about myself and learn a lot about the world and not miss out on all the opportunities for adventure that are before us… I opened my e-mail about two days later and there was an opportunity to come and work up in Darwin and I thought well, here’s an opportunity I could never pass up. So that’s how I came up here. [Transcript 2:1] 170

Southerners come north in search of mystery and adventure. They are certainly to be found in inaccessible remote communities, but, as this last quote suggests, they can also be found in Darwin, easily reached via a four-hour flight from southern capitals. The town and its residents are an object of desire for those who find the balmy weather, tropical environment

170 Recall also that Deb in Chapter 5 came to Darwin seeking ‘difference’.
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and small, ethnically-diverse population exotically different from their temperate homes.\textsuperscript{171} These ‘southerners’ are lured to Darwin for numerous dry season festivals and for access to nearby national parks like Kakadu. The Darwin market scene is a drawing point for visitors. Local markets offer a vast array of Asian food stalls crammed between local white artists offering arty photographs of frangipanis and black children, cheap jewelry and clothes from India and Thailand, and Aboriginal buskers playing didgeridoo and clapsticks.

\textbf{Figure 16:} Tourism image of Darwin: Mindl Beach Sunset Markets\textsuperscript{172}

One Sunday during the dry season I host some friends of the family who are visiting for the Darwin Festival. We go together to visit a local art dealer who runs a small Aboriginal art business from his home, a business known mostly by word of mouth. His flat is full of exquisite pieces bought from the artists he has come to know during many years of working in remote communities. I admire the artworks along with the visitors.

The visitors are treating me like an Aboriginal expert, a doctor and an anthropologist to boot. Looking at paintings from the Tiwi islands, she says, ‘you’ve spent time on the Tiwi islands haven’t you?’

\textsuperscript{171} See Stepan 2001 for a historical exploration of the construction of the ‘tropics’ in the Euro-American imagination. Note that the tourist season is from May to August when the humidity is tolerably low.\textsuperscript{172} Source: \url{http://www.australianbedandbreakfast.com.au/northern-territory-bdb/gallery/markets.html} Accessed 20th September 2006. Image courtesy of and copyright to Tourism NT Australia.
'Well no, not much time at all actually', I reply, feeling reluctant to disappoint. (I have been there only for the football finals a few years ago, an occasion when a couple of hundred white Darwinians fly there for the day).

Canvases are piled up on the massive desk in the front room, alterity in the form of indescribably beautiful paintings, $14000 a pop, but with small $800 souvenirs always on hand. The bold lines and colours go straight to the emotional centres, as we ooh and aah over them. On questioning from the visitors, the local art expert is happy to share his strategy for how culture can be maintained while urgent social issues are simultaneously addressed. The balance, the visitors struggle to recount in the car as we drive to the market for fresh mango smoothies, between cultural maintenance and community development is intercultural development, is that what he said, or was it intracultural development, or intercommunity development?

At the markets I am the calm local in the buzz of my family friends and the other visitors, all up from down south for the week, isn’t it all marvelous, isn’t it beautiful here, what interesting work you do, what a great place to live, what a relaxed lifestyle, I know it’s not like this all year but isn’t the weather heavenly, can you really not swim in that gorgeous gorgeous sea. [Fieldnotes 16/8/04 1:20-21]

Orientalism is relative. From ‘down south’ (the term used in the north to refer to large city dwellers) everything in the Territory is exotic. To postcolonisers who live in Darwin, the town is merely a gateway to remote communities or remote national parks where the exotic dwells. Postcolonisers who regularly visit remote communities crave trips to outstations, tiny settlements of just a few houses surrounded by bush, accessible only by many hours of 4WD track or a charter plane landing on a small strip of cleared land.

White antiracists of Darwin occupy an intermediate position on the scale of the exotic. While many of us were temperate city dwellers longing for the north not so long ago, we are now called on at southern dinner parties to expound on Indigenous issues and tell tales

173 Swimming in the sea is advised against from October to May because of box jellyfish, but many locals refrain from swimming all year because of crocodiles and out of habit.
174 Outstations are another phenomenon of the self-determination era. Remote community dwellers began in the 1970s to create smaller, even more remote settlements on their traditional land, efforts which were supported by governments from the later 1970s. See Altman 2006 for a discussion of the history of the outstation movement and an outline of current debates about them.
of hunting trips and what remote Aborigines ‘really’ think. Our position affords us a view of orientalism from both sides. And we don’t like what we see.

For the staff at the Institute and other white antiracists, there is a general awareness that orientalism is wrong, or at the very least, mildly distasteful. We feel uneasy when we are taken as experts by other whites by virtue of our proximity to Indigeneity. We are reluctant to be ‘speaking for’ Aboriginal people, a position of power that we spend most of our time resisting (see Chapter 8). We are mildly perturbed by their uninhibited pleasure at the sight of a beautiful desert painting or the taste of green pawpaw salad from the local markets. We know it is wrong to ‘romanticise’ Indigenous people (or a tropical lifestyle for that matter) as this homogenises Indigenous people and questions the authenticity of many of them, as well as diverting attention from the important sociopolitical forces that continue to drive their disadvantage.

And perhaps our discomfort is also a recognition of the familiar. We fear we may differ from our southern counterparts only in that we have learnt to conceal our romanticism. Above all, it is wrong to embark on a career in Indigenous health because of a desire to be close to Indigenous people, or a desire to valiantly save them. Deb’s career goal, “to provide opportunities for self-determination”, is infinitely more acceptable. White antiracists at the Institute are, to greater or lesser extents, anti-orientalists.

Anti-orientalist views are expressed about both negative and positive orientalism. Here an Institute researcher reflects on his earlier work in Africa:

I remember when I first went to Africa...I saw Africa as the dark and scary continent where things, bad things happened, and there was so much need, there was more need in that place than the whole of the world put together. I needed then to go and make a difference in the world. So I went there for my need to make a difference. And once I got there, there was this sense of, what a ridiculous reason to go to Africa, what a ridiculous reason. The reason really is about discovering the world and yourself, you can’t fix things. Often, we’ve got this need to fix things… Rushing off to save the world is a compulsion for so many people, including myself, I’m as guilty of that. But it’s a wank. [Transcript 14:2]
The narrative here is a quite sophisticated anti-orientalist self-critique. On reflection, he believes his idea of the ‘dark and scary continent’ was an orientalist fantasy constructed to sustain his need to be a saviour to the needy masses. This desire is rejected as a ‘wank’, a masturbation.

It is not surprising that negative depictions of ‘dark and scary’ others are abhorred at the Institute. Perhaps less expected is the degree to which ‘positive orientalism’ is viewed disparagingly, as seen in the words of this researcher:

I realised that many Australians have a ‘noble savage’ view of Aboriginal people, and I felt that was really very destructive to Aboriginal people...I think it’s a very racist view to have, this concept of noble savage...instead of just accepting people for the way they are without making too many judgments about them and letting them find their own way they’re too keen to praise everything that goes on in Aboriginal culture at the denigration of their own Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Australian culture. And I think that’s a very negative way to behave. [Transcript 4:3-4]

Again, little interpretation is required here. The researcher effortlessly uses social science concepts to critique what she sees as a dominant occidentalism among antiracist whites. She argues that valourising Indigenous people and denigrating Anglo-Saxon culture is just as destructive as conventional racism. While most Institute researchers would not put it so strongly or succinctly, they would generally agree that it is wrong to romanticise Indigenous people.

Despite this aversion to romanticising, there are some postcolonisers who admit orientalist tendencies in some contexts. As the quotes opening this section show, some Institute researchers are happy to acknowledge (if not in public, at least in the semi-public spaces of this ethnography) that they hate being “cultureless” and have always longed for a non-Western identity. In the fieldnote excerpt below I describe an encounter with Jeremy, a researcher who is not afraid to exhibit his sentiments toward his research participants:

On Thursday, after the data meeting, I run into Jeremy who beckons me to his office, have I shown you my photos? He shows me his computer file of photos he takes of everyone he enrolls into his study [which he prints out, laminates, and gives to the family at his next visit to the community]. They
are in folders for each community called ‘Milingimbi’ and ‘Umbakumba’ with the date. He clicks through them – *look at that family, how beautiful they are, look at that kid, look at the sheen on that skin, that girl there is just lovely, that old lady there looks after that whole mob, there is her sister and her family. Those boys there are just so bright, look at that smile there*, as he points out a rare smile among the deadpan faces that are typical of photos of bush people. And the photos do look beautiful blown up on the screen, the colourful mission dresses and basketball gear, bright sunshine on black faces. There are few smiles, but mostly cheerful-looking people perhaps a bit bemused at the enthusiastic photographer in front of them. We sit looking at the screen, at Milingimbi and Umbakumba responding to Jeremy. [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:14]

Some people working in Indigenous health would applaud his enthusiasm and his obvious affection for his research participants. Others would respond to his adjectives with a sense of unease – ‘beautiful’, ‘lovely’, ‘sheen’, ‘bright’ might seem romantic and paternalistic, minimising the disadvantage and poverty those families face, and overinflating his relationship to them and their estimation of him. As an Indigenous academic once said to me, ‘you [white people] don’t know what we [Aboriginal people] say about you behind your back.’™️ Maybe, this critique suggests, those photographed are just agreeing to give their blood samples to get rid of this intrusive white man and get back to what is really important to them, and his pleasure in the photographs is entirely one-sided, an orientalist masturbation. Whether this is really the case is beyond the purview of this ethnography: we can’t know what those photographed feel for Jeremy. But the threat of an anti-orientalist critique – the *possibility* that his affect is not returned, and that the only substance of his relationship with them is an orientalist desire for a relationship – means that these shows of affection are uncommon at the Institute.

Postcolonisers are quick to cast doubt on the affective ties that other postcolonisers form with remote Indigenous people. This researcher launched a typical attack on other researchers who delight in their ‘adoption’ by the remote Indigenous people they work with:™️

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™️ [Fieldnotes 18/11/04 2:57]. Cowlishaw has been similarly told at a conference, ‘You can never understand Indigenous people’, which she also received as an “implied accusation that close friendships with Indigenous people are shallow, opportunistic or neo-colonial”. (Cowlishaw 2004b:67)

™️ The adoption of white anthropologists by Indigenous people has recently become the subject of scholarly attention (Kan 2001).
Yes, everyone becomes a brother, 3 minutes after they arrive in an Aboriginal community, and they go away saying, ‘Oh, I’ve got my Aboriginal family now’, but no-one really learns the language, learns the idioms or the expressions. [Transcript 4:18]

Adoption is constructed here as superficial, enjoyed by the white antiracist but not leading to ‘real’ engagement with Indigenous culture. One could read in this narrative the suggestion that adoption leads to complacency among whites that prevents them making efforts that would really assist the community, like learning the local language. Among experienced postcolonisers, affective ties are kept close to the chest, for fear they will be exposed as unrequited love for the exotic other. Not love at all, but a form of oppression posing as love.

In the tearoom one day, a retired bush nurse who had spent decades in Aboriginal communities is part of the circle of coffee drinkers, visiting an old colleague at the Institute. The conversation around her is about people’s first experiences of remote communities. We are swapping stories of naïveté, of not organising to be picked up at the airstrip and waiting for hours in the hot sun, or of arriving in the middle of a funeral with the community deserted.¹⁷⁷ “We say we’re trying to help but we’re worse than useless when we [first] go out there”, one researcher says. The older bush nurse listens to us making fun of our cultural blunders, and pointedly says:

Do you know why I went to an Aboriginal community? I went to an Aboriginal community because they live in the now and they’re a happy race of people. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:8]

The rest of us fall silent, some raise their eyebrows slightly. She has committed a faux pas by stereotyping Indigenous people as “living in the now” and being happy (her use of the word ‘race’ is suspect in itself), but perhaps more so by openly expressing a desire for those attributes, and confessing that that desire was the motivation for seeking out close contact with Indigenous people. The deliberate way she said it suggests she knows she is transgressing the dominant view, a view she does not share perhaps because the start of her

¹⁷⁷ Funeral ceremonies are usually held some way away from a community.
career preceded the self-determination era. Her comments are assured to produce silence and raised eyebrows because postcolonial logic is profoundly anti-orientalist. An anti-orientalism fuelled, at least in part, by a suppression of orientalism itself.

I was told a story about another researcher at the Institute, one who rarely expresses an orientalist thought and who is stridently committed to Indigenous self-determination. Before coming to work at the Institute, he worked at a remote community for many years. When he left the job at the community, a dance was performed in his honour. In the first year of his new job at the Institute, women from the same community were flown into Darwin to perform at an Institute event. To his horror, they performed the same dance they had performed when he left the community, and he was visibly upset [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:23-4]. The possibility that the dance performed for him alone was not a symbol of their unique love for him, but a generic dance performed for official white occasions, was devastating. His stake in the affective tie to those he worked for was revealed only in the moment it was threatened. The circulation of this story at the Institute functions as a cautionary tale against the presumption of affective ties.

Postcolonisers shun orientalism because they know the disempowering effects of essentialist representations, and want to avoid them. The material presented here suggests there is another element of the resistance to orientalist accounts. Postcolonisers recoil not only from the oppressive effects of orientalism, but the psychological states that produce orientalist accounts, particularly ‘positive’ ones. They are most unnerved by accounts that evoke a desire to love, and to be loved, by the other.

Love for the other threatens to destabilise the clinical efficacy of remedialism. How can the postcoloniser be serious about the project of postcolonial justice while simultaneously reinforcing romantic stereotypes of Indigenous people? But as we will see in Chapter 8, once postcolonial logic has broken down, the postcoloniser may retreat into the pleasure of alterity as recompense for their lost certainty. This retreat into intimacy, while problematic, may contain the seeds of alternative models of recognition in the postcolony.
The remainder of this chapter shows how the tension between remedialism and orientalism is exhibited at the Institute through a million variations of the one simple question: Are Indigenous people the same or different from white people?

**Sameness and Difference**

Are Indigenous people the same as or different from white people? This question generates an overabundance of discourse about Indigenous people. Popular academic titles like *Aboriginal Suicide is Different* (Tatz 2005[2001]) line up against *Indigenous Australians and Alcohol: Meeting Difference with Indifference* (Brady 2004) in the discursive battle of Indigenous particularity. Is the difference real, and our blindness to it the problem? Or is it a fantasy (perhaps a white fantasy, perhaps also an Indigenous fantasy) and worse, an excuse for white indifference?¹⁷⁸

In one corner we have Maggie Brady, a respected medical anthropologist and long-time ethnographer of Indigenous substance misuse. She argues that developments in approaches to alcohol rehabilitation in the 1980s and 90s did not have an impact on Indigenous alcohol programs. Residential treatment programs that preached abstinence were found to be ineffective and costly, but they continued (and still continue) to monopolise limited Indigenous health budgets because of the misguided perception that they are culturally-appropriate. This can be attributed, Brady argues, to a few charismatic Canadian First Nations alcohol activists who were a major influence on Indigenous alcohol policy circles in the early 1990s. Their ideas were received as pan-Indigenous wisdom, but actually reflected North American attitudes to addiction that are at odds with the rest of the world. The resulting bureaucratic marginalisation of Indigenous alcohol programs has most probably worsened the alcohol problem, at the very least by withholding what we know to be effective harm minimisation strategies (Brady 2004).

In the opposite corner we have Colin Tatz, veteran political scientist and historian who has researched various aspects of Indigenous society for 45 years and counting. His recently re-

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¹⁷⁸ The following two paragraphs briefly summarise two complex arguments. I refer the reader to the two interesting books referenced for the whole argument.
issued *Aboriginal Suicide is Different* (2005[2001]) argues that Indigenous suicide is radically different from suicide in the general community. He calls for a separation of suicide research, treatment and prevention into an “Aboriginal suicidology”. In contrast with Brady’s argument, Tatz sees strong similarities between suicide in Indigenous, Maori and Inuit communities. Aboriginal suicide is not caused by depression, and should not be treated by biomedical means. Individual suicides can be understood either as an existential crisis provoked by social alienation, or as an expression of resistance to colonisation. They are a reflection of the marginalisation of Indigenous people in white society, and should be remedied with empowerment and community development programs, mirroring some Maori developments (Tatz 2005).

Placing these two popular and well-respected books alongside each other presents a microcosm of what I call ‘The Difference Wars’. Are Indigenous people fundamentally different to non-Indigenous people, or not? And does racism reside in the depiction of difference (as Brady might argue), or in its denial (Tatz’s contention)? These questions reverberate through Indigenous health discourse without ever nearing a consensus. As the reader may now predict, my interest in these questions is not in the relative merits of the two opposing arguments, but in why difference matters so much. I’ll explore this meta-question through ‘the difference wars’ that play out at the Institute.

**The Difference wars: Or, ‘it’s racist to say that Indigenous people don’t care about their blood glucose level’**.

In 2000, the most recent national inquiry into Indigenous health was tabled. The committee on inquiry (made up of members of federal parliament) quote the first National Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989) on the first page: “In Aboriginal society there is no word, term or expression for ‘health’ as it is understood in Western society” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989:ix). This is the reason, they argue, that decades of government efforts to improve health have failed:

The continuing poor state of Indigenous health and the many efforts of successive governments to address the issue has seemingly left a nation at a loss to know what to do for the best on this issue.
The committee believes that many of the difficulties come down to these differing world views about health, about how it should be defined and about the sorts of services needed for good health. (House of Representative Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs 2000:vii)

Indigenous particularity is ubiquitous in Indigenous health discourse. As we will see, when tying Indigenous cultural difference with Indigenous ill-health, one must proceed with care. But it is safe enough to simply state that Indigenous people are different from non-Indigenous people, especially if the speaker is Indigenous. Take for example this emailed advertisement for a short course run by an Indigenous health organisation in a southern state:

The aim of the course is to provide a broad overview of Aboriginal health... it will aim to provide an understanding of the historical, socio-economic and cultural contexts of ill-health in the Aboriginal community.... Aboriginal presenters will lead all sessions. The way this course is delivered differs from other courses. The process is as important as the content and students will have the opportunity to learn a new way of listening. They will have access to Aboriginal people from the community who will provide unique perspectives. [Fieldnotes 24/6/05 4:67, my emphasis]

To understand Indigenous health and ill-health, one must understand Aboriginal culture, and what better way than a course delivered by Aboriginal people themselves. The appeal of the course is the promise that Aboriginal difference will be revealed through the medium of the authentic Indigenous voice (see Chapter 4), providing answers to Indigenous health problems where biomedical and conventional public health perspectives founder. Note the unashamed appeal to orientalist desire for the ‘other’. Just like the Northern Territory health department job advertisement in the previous section, the white antiracist reader of this ad is promised “access” to a “unique” Aboriginality.179

The opposition of Indigenous and Western perspectives can be difficult to sustain in the field of public health, where holism, sociocultural contexts and community involvement are

179 As with all examples of Indigenous health discourse, it is possible that this ad will be interpreted differently by some audiences, and/or that it was intended by the authors to be read differently. For instance, it may be that the course intended to be “unique” by unpacking and critiquing romanticised notions of authentic Aboriginality. However it was intended though, I maintain that it will be interpreted by most white antiracist readers as the promise of the authentic Indigenous voice.
second nature (see Brady 1995; Lutschini 2005). This difficulty requires additional
discursive work, as in this example, where an Indigenous academic explained Indigenous
views of health at an Institute seminar:

[Aboriginal constructs of health] challenge a Western construct of health, it’s holistic, and it’s different
and more complex than the holism of Western culture. It’s about practicing ceremonies, language,
wisdom of elders, and traditional healing practices. It’s wider than the generic 1946 WHO [World
Health Organisation] statement which states that health is “a state of complete physical, mental and
social well being and not merely the absence of disease.”
[Fieldnotes 30/6/05 4:73, emphasis added]

He names here ceremonies, language, Indigenous knowledge and traditional healing as
evidence of the difference of Indigenous health constructs. However the thrust of the
statement is not to explain how Indigenous health is different, but to stress a number of
times that it is different, wider, more complex, and that it challenges Western views, even
those that claim to be holistic.

The researcher quoted above is taking his cue to some extent from the way difference is
constructed in the first National Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989), perhaps the most oft-
cited document in Indigenous health. This passage comes immediately after the sentence
quoted in the 2000 report above. In it, Indigenous culture is defined as the opposite of
Western culture:

Aboriginal culture is the very antithesis of western ideology. The accent on individual commitment,
the concept of linear time, the switch in focus from spiritual to worldly, the emphasis on possession
and the pricing of goods and services, the rape of the environment and, above all, the devaluing of
relationships between people, both within families and within the whole community, as the
determinant of social behaviour are totally at variance with the fundamental belief system of

This example illustrates that these claims to Indigenous particularity are never far from
orientalism (or as the authors are Indigenous, we might call it auto-orientalism (Lindstrom
1995) or strategic essentialism (Spivak 1988)) and its twin, occidentalism. ‘Indigenous
difference’ in this context implies Indigenous cultural superiority undone by a debasing Western culture.

These appeals to difference can be understood as examples of that particular relationship between minorities and the state known as the ‘politics of difference’. As I explored in Chapter 3, ever since formal equality was achieved in the 1960s, minorities have shifted the terms of their struggle from equality to particularity. Appeals to state support are made on the basis of the specificity of Indigenous needs and understandings.

The statements of Indigenous difference above would not generally be considered controversial. Their point is simply that Indigenous people are distinctly different from non-Indigenous people. Controversy arises, however, when one attempts to syncretise Indigenous claims with the functions of the liberal state. In Chapter 3, and in the introduction to this chapter, I highlighted the tension between liberal values and minority rights. Some liberal scholars struggle to reconcile the universality of liberalism with the particularity of minority rights (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994; Young 1990), while others suggest that the two may be constitutively irreconcilable (Mehta 1999; Scott 2003).

Using the terms of this thesis, it is when remedialism is blended with orientalism that the controversy begins. It is when difference is not an end in itself, but a way to understand Indigenous suffering and its alleviation, that we move from simply ‘difference’ to remediable difference. It is here that we can see ethnographically the instability of the concept of remediable difference, an instability borne of the productive tension between orientalism and remedialism. When postcolonisers see Indigenous difference in the context of their efforts to equalise Indigenous statistics, they divide up into the two corners of the ring, difference v. sameness, Tatz v. Brady.180

First, the difference corner. Declarations that Indigenous perspectives on health are different from non-Indigenous ones are commonplace at the Institute. Less often, a more

180 Note that although I have selected here the clearest examples of this controversy from the Institute, these positions are most often blurred and indistinct. This comment from an Indigenous researcher is emblematic of the confusing simultaneous claims to sameness and difference: “We have more similarities than differences but we frame it differently” [Fieldnotes 30/6/05 4:83].
extreme version of this argument is heard: that Indigenous perspectives are so different as to be incommensurable with Western views. As one Institute researcher put it:

On a list of priorities, health is about number 2 or 3 for us – for them, it’s about 12. They just have different priorities, it goes back a long way. But we expect them to have our priorities. They do care, but not as much as we do. I was there in Borroloola on Tuesday, and the mother of one of the health workers died, they had to close the clinic to smoke it. Those are their priorities. We don’t bother to understand, and if we bothered, we probably couldn’t understand anyway. You can get your knickers in a knot because they don’t care about their blood pressure but that’s just the way that it is. Their world is just different. I mean, fuck what would anyone want to remember their birthdays for? There is not a single mirror in Ngukurr, you know. What would they think of botox??

(Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:15)

This narrative shares with those cited earlier elements of both orientalism and occidentalism. We have the ancient cultural practices (smoking a place where someone has died) and a disregard for individualism and physical appearance, with a corresponding antipathy for Western arrogance and vanity. But this is more than simply a statement of Indigenous difference. Here is the distinction: the desire to improve health is depicted as another Western habit. We care about our blood pressure, health is high on our list of priorities, but not for them, the discourse goes. What is labeled here as Western, and missing from an Indigenous world view, is the individual equivalent of remedialism. In this formulation, remedialism is trumped by orientalism. The authentic Indigenous voice denies the possibility of the self-determining Indigene who cares about improving their health (see Figure 10 and Chapter 4).

Note that the researcher does not consider this Indigenous disregard for health as a bad thing. On the contrary, Westerners’ concern for their blood pressure is compared to remembering one’s birthday and the use of botox, intended as examples of an obsession with linear time and outward appearance. It is not the apparent Indigenous rejection of remedialism but Western remedialism itself that is the subject of criticism. This is bluntly put by another colleague who has worked in Indigenous communities for decades:
Part 2: Chapter 6

We have to examine our fetish for length of life and vitality in general. Perhaps instead we need new ways to care for the sick, and hope that will result in people trying to change their behaviour to avoid sickness. But we shouldn’t impose a Western idea of length of life on people.

[Fieldnotes 5/11/04 2:46]

Her opinion clashes head-on with the remedialist goal of “closing the life expectancy gap”.¹⁸¹

To suggest that Indigenous people do not care about their health in the same way that white people do is a risky path to take. In the first instance, it can easily be interpreted or co-opted as a racist statement, something like: Indigenous people don’t care about their health which proves they are primitive, ignorant, immoral, and so on. Postcolonisers who adopt these formulations will be wary of this and preempt any racist interpretations. These critiques of remedialism are also risky because they undermine the subjectivity of the postcoloniser, a contention I will turn to in Chapter 9. Although this is not a risk that most postcolonisers would be consciously aware of, it contributes to the force of arguments that defend remedialism.

Let’s turn then to the opposite corner, where we find discourses of sameness. Here, the idea that remedialism is a Western trait irreconcilable with Indigenous culture is strongly contested. One function of these discourses is to highlight the racist potential of Indigenous particularity. At a seminar where there was discussion about Indigenous people’s different notions of health, a senior researcher commented that “it is racist to think that Indigenous people don’t care about their blood glucose level” [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:15]. To suggest that Indigenous people do not care about their health in the same way as white people, that is, to admit the possibility of radical difference, is to move into dangerous political and moral territory. As another researcher put it, to allow the idea of Indigenous people as fundamentally different is unacceptable in the public domain “because you are letting the government off the hook, or saying you don’t think Indigenous people deserve to have equal infant mortality, or saying you think they are incapable of it” [Fieldnotes 5/11/04 2:47].

In an argument similar to Brady’s, this researcher makes a plea for a remedialism unspoiled by Indigenous particularity:

Pat Anderson\(^{182}\) says if a person has chest pain, treat the chest pain, don't try to define it as Indigenous chest pain…. Alcohol issues are so bad they demand a public health response, not a touchy-feely response… Indigenising research to be politically correct cuts them off from the expertise they need. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:10]

As I have detailed above, the rejection of remedialism that follows from claims of Indigenous difference precludes the possibility of the self-determined Indigene who adopts the goal of statistical equality as their own. In contrast, discourses that defend remedialism identify Indigenous aspirations as compatible with Western ones. A recent interview with an Indigenous businessman from the Northern Territory states that “Indigenous people want to live comfortable lives, with jobs and cars and modern houses, but don't know how to get them” (Hodge 2004). The role of the state is thus to extend its remedialist embrace to Indigenous people.

While difference discourses suffered from accusations of racism, discourses of sameness are vulnerable to accusations of assimilation. If remedialism assists Indigenous people without attention to their cultural specificity, it may attenuate their differences from non-Indigenous people. And if Indigenous people are no different from non-Indigenous people, then their claims to special treatment come under scrutiny.

One way to resolve this dilemma is to steer a course between difference and sameness, simultaneously sustaining Indigenous particularity and their receptiveness to Western attempts at melioration. An example of such a balanced approach can be found in this quote from an Indigenous bureaucrat who sets out his ideas of ‘what Indigenous people want’ in a seminar discussion:

\(^{182}\) A prominent Indigenous representative in health, former CEO of the Aboriginal Health Service in Darwin and former chairperson of the national representative body for Indigenous community-controlled health services.
Indigenous people want the opportunity to enjoy country and culture, to live free from racism, for their children to be educated, to have a full and healthy life, to have a collective identity, and to have the right to control their future. [Fieldnotes 30/6/05 4:71]

This formulation of Indigenous aspirations has it all: a concern for (perhaps Western) health and education, a desire for self-determination, with generous lashings of cultural difference in the benign language of liberal multiculturalism (country, culture, collective identity).

An even more ingenious resolution to the difference wars is to locate remedialism within orientalism. The final example below finds within Indigenous culture a prototype of a remedialist mechanism, or even better, a remedialism that is superior to that found in the West. A colleague sent me a draft of an article on health promotion she was writing. In it, she invokes a common critique of health promotion programs that are not “culturally-based”, describing them as ineffective and possibly harmful to Indigenous people. She then goes further to suggest that Indigenous culture contains within it an entire “health promotion intervention model”:

The culture has a successful ongoing evaluation of its own interventions. Australian Indigenous culture provides a health promotion intervention model that preceded any current models and incorporates some of the most sound and comprehensive organisational methods described in current literature. These methods are based on respect, inclusion, planning and reinforcement for those ceremonial life events and concerns that affect individuals within the group. [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:22]

Most anthropologically- or historically-informed readers would find this view anachronistic at the very least. It doesn’t make sense historically or culturally to simply read something called “health promotion intervention models” into Indigenous culture. Each of the four words in that term is specific to Western culture, and an argument would have to be made for applying each of them to specific aspects of Indigenous culture. But in the article there was no attempt to substantiate any anthropological argument. The statement does not require substantiation, as it draws on postcolonial logic for its meaning. It is a form of orientalism, in that Indigenous culture is presented in an idealised way, and there is an
implied accompanying critique of Western culture. Not only is Western health promotion inappropriate for Indigenous culture, the argument might go, but Indigenous culture is better at Western health promotion than Western health promotion itself.

This is orientalism, but a peculiar form of orientalism indeed. Recall that positive orientalism is valourising all things Indigenous to the detriment of the West. But that works by contrasting two opposite cultures: the superficial, individualist West against a spiritual, community-orientated Indigeneity. Here, a Western “health promotion intervention model” is pitted against an Indigenous “health promotion intervention model” that is prior and superior to the Western version, but not its opposite. Indigenous culture is not the opposite of the West, but a purer, more perfect form of Western culture.  

This discourse resolves the tension of remediable difference. Remedialism is read into a distinctive Indigenous culture. In this utopian vision of the postcolonial frontier, the authentic Indigenous voice is speaking the language of health promotion intervention models. Indigenous people differ from white antiracists only in that they are naturally better at remedialism. Postcolonisers are therefore immune from imposing remedialism on Indigenous people, as they already excel at it.

This complex construction of sameness-within-difference is an example of the discursive lengths required to sustain remediable difference. In the next chapter, I will explore the lived experiences of postcolonisers and Indigenous people that threaten this ambiguous and unstable concept.

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183 This argument has overtones of the “archaic Caucasian” hypothesis that was developed in Australian racial science of the 1920s, see Anderson 2002b:181-194.
Part 3 – Postcolonial logic breaks down

This section examines how postcolonial logic is ruptured by radical difference, and the consequences of this for white antiracists. Chapter 7 explores the concept of radical difference, which I alternatively call alterity. I show how postcolonial logic requires that alterity be discursively split into sanitised and unsanitised varieties. Chapter 8 describes the features of a postcoloniser who has experienced radical difference and so lost the certainty that postcolonial logic once provided.
Chapter 7: Radical difference vs. remediable difference

Orientalism and alterity

In the previous chapter, I described orientalism, the concept that explains how perceptions of difference can work to oppress colonised peoples. There and in Chapter 3, I discussed some political and psychoanalytical theories of difference as they relate to colonial and postcolonial encounters. That work is but a slice of an enormous philosophical archive that considers why and how difference exists.

Alterity, “the state of being other or different” (OED 1989), is a multivalent term in anthropology and a range of other disciplines. Its contemporary use draws on a range of intellectual trajectories, from post-Hegelian philosophy to psychoanalysis. It is used to explain colonial oppression (Said 1978), misogyny (Beauvoir 1953), religion (Csordas 2004), and much else.\(^\text{184}\)

Van Alphen usefully identifies three broad philosophical approaches to alterity. Much post-Hegelian philosophy takes a *hermeneutical* approach that sees alterity as a device that gives meaning to the self, either through a struggle to assimilate the other into the self or through the act of excluding the other. The *epistemological* approach focuses on how knowledge about both the self and the other is produced, an approach typified by Foucault. The *psychological* approach draws on Freudian theory to argue that the ‘other’ is actually a part of the self that is repressed and thus becomes both strange and feared (Van Alphen 1991). Importantly, in all of these modes of inquiry alterity does not exist in isolation, but is the result of a relationship. *Alterity is relative.* What functions as alterity for one person may, in turn, see them as alterior.\(^\text{185}\)

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\(^\text{184}\) Some of the most influential accounts include Fabian 1983, Kristeva 1991 and Ricoeur 1992.

\(^\text{185}\) Thus my reference to certain Indigenous lifeworlds as alterior takes postcolonisers as the vantage point. A study of Indigenous subjectivities might consider white antiracist lifeworlds as alterior, for instance, the argument that Indigenous people construct themselves in opposition to the colonial state (Cowlishaw 1988; Morris 1989).
The argument presented here does not depend upon a specific philosophical approach to alterity. I use the term to refer to *the lived experience of perceived difference*. In this ethnography, alterity occurs when postcolonisers at the Institute perceive differences between themselves and the Indigenous people who are the subject of their remedialist efforts. For the purposes of my argument, it is important to make a distinction between *orientalism* and *alterity*.

As I have explained, orientalism is the lens through which the ‘West’ and the ‘Westerner’ encounters that which is designated as ‘the other’, creating and maintaining a discourse that shapes the way Westerners and others see themselves as well as the power relations between them. While the concept of orientalism has proven tremendously effective in revealing the fields of power that saturate encounters between Westerners and subalterns, some of its implications are problematic. To some, orientalism explains difference away entirely. This can be the result of a *hermeneutical* approach to the self and alterity where the other is not considered to exist independently, but only as an invention of the self for the purposes of identity formation. The radical difference that Westerners might see becomes a creation of their over-active desires or nightmares. MacCannell, for instance, argues that in the modern world there are no longer “primitives”, only Westerners who continue to desire the unique difference of the essentialised primitive, and “ex-primitives” happy to play the part of primitives for social and economic gain. Although the effect of the “ex-primitive” performance makes them seem different, underneath they are the same, and perhaps even better off than many Westerners (MacCannell 1992:34).

Some scholars have responded to this form of anti-essentialism by questioning its underlying political project of renouncing the epistemological privilege of the West (an issue I will turn to in the conclusion) (Scott 1992). Others have pointed out that this approach entirely erases any differences, making everyone Western in a profoundly ethnocentric move. Indigenous people who seek to embrace their difference are labeled by MacCannell’s argument as ‘inauthentic’. This desire for nonessentialist accounts, at its extreme, can rob Indigenous people of the representational means required to make sense of

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186 My rendering of a postcoloniser subjectivity would be illuminated by (and perhaps also inform) various philosophies of difference, but such a task is beyond the scope of this thesis.

themselves and the world. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy have argued for an “anti-anti-essentialism” that reinstates agency into the self-representative practices of subalterns (Gilroy 1993:102).  

My problem with this approach, however, is slightly different. My concern is not with the politics of difference, but the ontology of difference. Let’s look at one of the stories from Chapter 5, where Robyn told us about her first contact with remote Indigenous people while nursing in Alice Springs Hospital:

And I remember I showered this old Aboriginal man from Kintore who was very traditional and he had the cuts across the chest and he was just really dark and I remember treating him just the same and saying, ‘Now Mr so and so, come in to have your shower’. And I remember he looked at me and he said, [in a low voice] ‘You shower me sister’. And of course I did it because I was so frightened...

Robyn’s encounter with this naked, black, ritually scarred man could be viewed as an example of orientalism. An orientalist explanation of this situation might go like this: Robyn’s ignorance and unacknowledged racism toward Indigenous people leads her to exoticise this man. This explains some of her language – “very traditional”, “really dark” – and her fear of him. Read this way, this encounter certainly gives weight to the idea that Indigenous people face racism when accessing healthcare (Henry, Houston, & Mooney 2004). Although this is not a story of explicit racism, it does describe ignorance that could deny the old man the care that he needs.

My question is this: does removing Robyn’s orientalist gaze make the man described here any less black? Does it erase the scars on his body that testify to initiation rituals?

An anti-orientalist protagonist in place of Robyn would tell this story differently. It would not include language that hints at exoticism, and it would not describe fear, or for that matter, desire. It would construct the man as remediably different, perhaps by emphasising

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188 See also Ien Ang’s discussion of Ian Anderson’s use of anti-anti-essentialist discourse (Ang 2001:196). For an important argument against the sole agency of colonialism in essentialist depictions of Indigenous people see Hamilton 1998.
the social disadvantage that led him to become ill in the first place (using the discursive technique of overstructuration), and the inability of the hospital system to provide culturally-appropriate care. But it would still describe an encounter between two radically different people, a young white female nurse and an old black man who may well have lived his early life without any contact with Western people or culture.

My point is that **orientalism** and **alterity** are not the same thing. Remove the orientalism from the account, and the radical difference may still remain. I do not expect the reader to simply accept this: the empirical material in the next section can speak for itself (or not, as the case may be). But to follow my argument, one must remain open to the possibility that radical difference can exist independently of orientalism. I wish, then, to draw a distinction between the cultural politics of the gaze, and the lived experience of difference. Although Western accounts of radically-different Indigenous people must be interpreted as (at least partly) orientalist accounts, this does not mean that they are not based on a lived reality of difference. A subset of Australian Indigenous people, those ‘traditional’, ‘remote’, ‘community’ people, do live in ways radically different to white, middle-class, educated people.  

The anti-orientalist whites that populate this study are the first to contest essentialist representations of Indigenous people (both ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ orientalism). They tend to downplay the ‘otherness’ around them: recall in the Introduction how my white antiracist colleagues and neighbours downplayed the actions of Tiwi longgrassers, the drunk man exposing himself, the woman covered in blood from smashed shopfront glass. And there are good reasons to do so. Denigrating or romanticising inclinations are generated by Western fantasies of the other, as I have addressed above. Admitting these differences is also unpalatable for postcolonisers, because once admitted, they are so easily co-opted by those wishing to denigrate Indigenous people.

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189 Again note that I foreground that 20% of the Indigenous population that lives remotely, speaks Indigenous languages and are the least educated because this is the group that the postcolonisers of this ethnography work with. My argument here and elsewhere may well apply to the other 80% of Indigenous people, most of whom live in urban areas and speak only English, but further empirical work is required to investigate this possibility.
And yet, in the story I tell here, the very radical differences that postcolonisers might deny the existence of play a key role in the unraveling of postcolonial logic. This considered playing down of difference is thus an ethnographic point of interest. Once anti-essentialism becomes part of the cultural field under investigation, a new set of ontological problems emerge. Are these radical differences that some postcolonisers would like to deny, but that persist in troubling them, actually real? Or are they still an effect of the Western gaze, even if the Westerner in question doesn’t want them to be there? Do they attest to the tenacity of the imperial subconscious, which is able to essentialise the subaltern despite conscious will (as perhaps I imply by coining the phrase “The anti-orientalist orientalist”)?

Let’s explore these questions through the sense of smell. The stories that postcolonisers tell about radical difference often include a smell, especially first-contact stories (see Fabian 1999:62).

My first image of getting off the plane at [remote community] was a house burning down…and I was walking with all my bags with Bininydji through the town and there was this house on fire and I said, ‘Well, where’s the fire brigade?’ ‘Bayngu [no] fire truck’. And everybody just stood there and watched this house burn to the ground and that put me into a bit of state of shock. But then it was just time [to get used to it]; language, images, smells, the dogs, and not being able to communicate really made me feel out of my depth. [Transcript 17:5]

It was wet season. It was really, really, really wet and the smell of the country was something I’d never smelt before so that was really strong, you know, [the] sense of difference for me was the smell of the soil and stuff. [Louise, Transcript:5]

Below is another example of a postcoloniser – this time, myself – encountering alterity. It is a description of entering a remote community council office at the start of a field visit with a non-Indigenous colleague:

We arrive in the community after a 6 hour drive, mostly though a lush green and red-earthed landscape, and head to the council. The small building is graffitied and every surface has a thick coating of red dust – why do they make anything white in these places? As I enter through the
crowded verandah there is a waft of sweat, an Aboriginal smell. As racist as that might sound, it is a smell I have smelt in inland Aboriginal communities and nowhere else. [Fieldnotes 29/11/04 2:67]

While the previous examples do not identify a source of the noticeable smell or attribute it to the environment (respectively), I locate a human source. This gives the quote a different flavour, and a decidedly distasteful one. Writing those notes, I was clearly aware of the racist allusions to Indigenous people being smelly, as reflected in my qualifying phrase, “As racist as that might sound”. And reading them again, I am discomforted by the phrasing. I would not say “an Aboriginal smell” out loud, or to anyone else at the Institute. But I did think it, and write it in my notes.

I fear it will be read as denigrating, but this was not how it was experienced. I experienced my olfactory sensations nostalgically as it had been two years since my last substantial visit to an inland community to see Indigenous friends. The smell reminded me of long hours bumping around in a hot 4WD learning language from old ladies as we travel to the best place to get bush honey, or honey ants, or bush medicine.

But does this qualification make any difference? Am I arguing that my experience should be taken not as negative orientalism but as positive orientalism, alongside the previous quotes about smells? Even if I convince the reader that I meant well, does that make it any better?

How is a postcoloniser to react to such experiences? One antiracist response would be to ignore the smell in any account of such an experience, either suppressing it when writing the account, or even at the level of the olfactory experience. Such an antiracist might deny the council office was smelly, saying they didn’t smell anything unusual (at this point it becomes impossible to assess who is ‘telling the truth’ and who is ‘making it up’). A simpler response would be to acknowledge a smell, but attribute it to something else, like the environment. Yet another response would be to acknowledge a human smell, but immediately explain that this is due to a failure of the government to provide access to water needed for regular washing (overstructuration). Others might acknowledge a smell

190 For the record, a 2001 survey of housing in discrete Indigenous communities found that only 21 small communities with a total population of 90 (i.e. an average of 4.5 people per community) had no organised
but say that white people also smell bad to Indigenous people, or that white people are unhealthily obsessed with cleanliness (occidentalism). Less commonly, white antiracists might argue that desert people did not traditionally wash every day due to the scarcity of water, and they need to be convinced of the benefits of daily washing before they adopt it (information-deficit model).  

Why does the experience of smell generate this universe of discursive possibilities to account for it? One obvious explanation is that it is offensive in Western culture to talk about human smells. While that may be true, I offer here another answer: that a perception of a different smell is a sign of alterity – of a different context and approach to living that produces a different smell – and alterity is troubling for postcolonial logic. The remediable difference that postcolonial logic relies on is challenged by the possibility of radical difference contained in an olfactory sensation.

Elizabeth Povinelli’s work on Indigenous alterity and the liberal multicultural state makes a similar argument. An important theme of her work is the ambivalence of the liberal state that embraces an ethics of tolerance while rejecting those differences that appear to be in opposition to liberal values. Some of the alterities that concern Povinelli are non-consensual and group sexual practices associated with ceremonies and ritual punishment, practices clearly unnerving for a liberal rationality. When enlightened anthropologists, tolerant bureaucrats and native title lawyers alike face alterity, the limits of their own morality are reflected and magnified.

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191 This last possibility was voiced by an Indigenous researcher at an Institute seminar discussion on the incidence of trachoma, an eye disease largely prevented by daily face washing. The white antiracist audience responded with embarrassed silence, as the information-deficit model smacks of ‘victim-blaming’ (see Chapter 6).

192 Her work opposes “the two moral imperatives of late liberalism: I must be tolerant of cultural difference; I must not allow the repugnantly illiberal” (Povinelli 2002:109). These two forces of tolerance and repugnance map onto my concepts of remediable difference and radical difference. Where my work builds on Povinelli’s is a fleshing out of liberal tolerance into its constituent parts of remedialism and orientalism. My elaboration is influenced by the site of my analysis. Remedialism is more pronounced in the realm of health than in that of native title, although this is changing with recent moves to encourage home ownership though the modification of community title (Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination 2006).

193 Although in her most recent work she considers the alterity of skin sores just like those I discussed in the previous chapter (Povinelli 2006).
[Experiences of alterity] make liberal readers experience the compulsory nature of their moral sense and obligation, even as these same readers struggle to maintain their idea of liberal “tolerance” and “rationality”. This compulsory, visceral reaction was long ago noted by Spencer and Gillen, who remarked “it is one thing to read of these ceremonies – it is quite another thing to see them prepared and performed.” (Povinelli 2002:108)

We saw this distinction between the visceral and the rational in my experience of a smell, and my discomfort with the racist allusions of the experience. The visceral experience of alterity produces

the feeling of a destabilizing indeterminate “something” that lurks beside and rattles liberal understanding; a teetering into the sublime that this indeterminate something threatens and promises; and the deferred ethics of alterity haunting the politics of freedom and cultural difference in Australia. (Povinelli 2002:73)

The threat of alterity is incommensurability. The alarming implication of incommensurability is that nonviolent coexistence will remain the noble but unreachable goal of liberal multiculturalism. The term was first coined in science studies, referring to the incommensurability between paradigms of scientific thought (for instance, between geocentric and heliocentric paradigms) (Kuhn 1962). The term was adopted in anthropology to refer to two different cultures or language systems that were mutually untranslatable (Davidson 1984). As I will explore more fully in the last section of this thesis, if Indigenous lifeworlds are incommensurable with those of postcolonisers, the concept of remediable difference disintegrates, and with it the basis of a viable white antiracist subjectivity. The result is nothing less than the undoing of the remedialist project of the Australian state.

The hotly debated question of whether different cultures and religions are in fact commensurable is not of concern here. The ethnographic task at hand is to show how postcolonisers cope with the possibility of alterity contained in their experiences of remote

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194 Samuel Huntington is the political scientist most closely associated with the “clash of civilizations” hypothesis (although he does not apply it to Indigenous Australians as he classifies Australia as a wholly Western country). His position contested by many anthropologists (Herzfeld 1997; Huntington 1996).
Indigenous worlds. Povinelli (2002:107) describes the role of anthropology in civil discourses of the 1930s and 40s as “transcoding moral horrors into reasoned/reasonable difference; that is, alterity into difference.” This is analogous to the role of postcolonial logic in contemporary Indigenous discourses whereby radical difference is transcoded into remediable difference. In order to avert incommensurability, postcolonial logic ingeniously tames alterity by splitting it into two.

**Sanitised and unsanitised alterity**

From the point of view of postcolonisers, there are two distinct types of alterity, that is, there are two kinds of ways in which they perceive Indigenous people are different from them. There is ‘good’ alterity: kinship, hunting skills, language, art, living on breathtaking outstations, unspoiled beaches and billabongs teeming with wildlife. Then there is the alterity of sleeping with bodies pressed together onto dirty foam mattresses with blankets trampled by mangy dogs, and of eating fried food and coke from the take away for most meals. Not to mention the darker aspects of social life on many communities: substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse of various kinds.

These divisions between the delightful, the unfortunate, and the abhorrent would seem self evident to liberal readers. Of course, detailed knowledge about the country and its flora and fauna, integrated into a glorious cosmology to boot, is a good thing. Of course, having children kept up by their relatives’ noisy drunk fights night after night is a bad thing. Again, for the sake of the argument I am trying to make, I request a suspension of belief. Let’s assume an anthropological null hypothesis: that culture is what people do, full stop. Let’s assume that any categories we impose on what people do (such as moral and immoral) achieve some end. Often this ‘end’ is an extremely good idea, such as imposing

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195 Historically, anthropology as a discipline has provided much material with which to understand alterity (such as the study of magic and religion), but has been blind to its own role in sustaining a relationship of alterity between white Europeans and those ‘others’ that are the subjects of conventional anthropological attention (Fabian 1983; Thomas 1991; Tyler 1986). This tendency has been happily troubled by anthropologies of globalisation (see for example Inda & Rosaldo 2002).

196 Child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities was splashed across national headlines as I wrote up this thesis (Australian Broadcasting Association 2005). My inclusion of these extreme behaviours in the ledger of unsanitised alterity is not intended to imply that these phenomena do not occur in white disadvantaged communities (or in white privileged communities for that matter), or that these things are tolerated in the communities that suffer them. My point is that these aspects of social life appear alien to postcolonisers.
law and order sufficient to make a community livable. But here I want to show how the
divisions that liberals read into Indigenous lifeworlds perform another function, the
function of operationalising postcolonial logic and thus maintaining the viability of
postcoloniser subjectivities. The key to this division is whether or not the alterity in
question is congruent or incongruent with remediable difference.

I call these two types of alterity sanitised and unsanitised respectively, because the
distinction between them relates to the moral sensibilities of white antiracists. (Whether
some or all Indigenous people would make the same distinction is an interesting point, but
not one I address here.) As we will see in the next section, sanitised alterity can be made to
appear congruent with remedialism to produce remediable difference. This postcolonial
alchemy is only possible for differences that lie within the bounds of liberal rectitude.

‘Sanitised’ alterity refers to all the aspects of Indigenous life that are self-evidently
desirable to antiracist whites. A catalogue of sanitised alterity would include: the beauty of
living in the desert or the tropics, the deference to the needs of one’s family, the
unquestioning sharing of all resources within the family, the abundance of close personal
contact, the extended hours given over to simply sitting and quietly chatting with one’s
relatives, the autonomy granted to children, the incredible richness of sacred life, the
comfort of knowing one’s precise place in the natural world and one’s relationship to all
other beings, the feeling of complete belonging to country and so forth. Following from my
argument in the previous chapter, this list can also be read as a catalogue of ‘positive
orientalism’, designed to comment on the opposite features of Western culture: the
drabness of the city, selfish individualism, spiritual emptiness and so on.

There is yet another unspoken set of opposites of this list. Many of these positive aspects of
Indigenous life have their downside. For example, the unquestioning centrality of family
can be associated with the inability to refuse (what postcolonisers would consider)
‘unreasonable’ requests from kin (such as demands for money to buy alcohol and drugs
when children are hungry), the inability to prevent one’s house being overcrowded and
vandalised as well as the inability to hold down a job because of family commitments.
It is these undeclared accompaniments of sanitised alterity that I call unsanitised alterity: the range of life experiences that challenge the moral sensibilities of liberal whites. These moments of moral challenge are rarely talked about publicly, as white antiracists are well aware of the danger of being interpellated as a racist or of feeding racism with tales of Indigenous malaise. They emerge between postcolonisers, ‘backstage’ in the halls and tea rooms of the Institute, or outside work hours on back verandahs. Here’s a selection:

I think it’s tragic, the little kids. Because they don’t know any better. They’re sick all the time and they think it’s normal, if their parents are alcoholic they think it’s normal, if they don’t eat regularly they think that’s normal. [Fieldnotes 1/4/05 4:3]

People tell this story [in the remote clinic] about a woman who brought her kid into the clinic to be looked at because the kid’s ears weren’t discharging pus. It was normal for her that kids’ ears had pus running from them. [Fieldnotes 4/8/04 1:12]

Where I worked there was a great young football player and I said to him, you should play for the All-stars [national Aboriginal football team] one day, and he told me he didn’t want to because others would be jealous of him and he might die from sorcery. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:8-9]

I was on a ferry once in the morning between islands and there was a kid there on her way to school and she was eating a packet of Tim Tams [chocolate biscuits], she was sucking the chocolate of them and putting them back in the packet. And I thought, shit, someone has given her that for breakfast. [Fieldnotes 14/4/05 4:13]

In the eyes of postcolonisers, unsanitised alterity is the *pathological made normal*. It is shocking, and it is tragic. As I discuss in the next section, unsanitised alterity is incompatible with remediable difference, and can only appear at the Institute in highly attenuated forms.

This taxonomy of difference, which I argue is central to postcolonial logic, differs from the ways that anthropologists, those specialists of alterity, have classified difference. Well into the twentieth century, Australian anthropology (like anthropology elsewhere) was guilty of concentrating on the aspects of life deemed ‘traditional’: the songs, totems, kinship, rituals
and so on. Aspects of life influenced by colonialism were professionally ignored and privately lamented as the dusk of a great culture (Cowlishaw 1986; Stanner 1979). As mentioned in the Introduction, the ‘continuity and change’ approach that was adopted from the 1960s onwards recognised in Indigenous cultures both the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, but maintained a dichotomy between the two.197

Since the 1980s, ethnographies of Indigenous people in towns and cities have explicitly attempted to overcome this division. An introduction to a volume of the anthropology about “settled” Australia seamlessly places households, welfare, swearing, fighting and alcohol use alongside language, kinship, and beliefs (Keen 1988b). But a division is still discernible. In discussions of Australian Aboriginal English, modified kinship structures, mobility, and the allocation of resources, care is taken to establish these as legitimate aspects of contemporary Aboriginal culture. Discussions of the racism that Indigenous people face in the classroom, in accessing health care and in public spaces are similarly straightforward: racism shapes contemporary Indigenous experience (and is wrong). However, discussions of fighting, swearing, and alcohol are qualitatively different. When discussing this kind of alterity, arguments tend to multiply.

For example, in a chapter that analyses fighting among central New South Wales Aborigines, Macdonald argues that fighting “should not simply be attributed to too much alcohol (for often it is absent altogether), to violence characteristic of those of low socio-economic status (as in a culture of poverty thesis), or to the ravages of colonisation” (Macdonald 1988:187). Her argument is that fighting is “an integral part of the social system and essential to its working”, a functional and instrumental aspect of Aboriginal culture (Macdonald 1988:191). So, drinking might be straightforward deviance in the context of substance abuse; or a reflection of class oppression; or the effects of colonial oppression; or (her argument) a rational and culturally-based dispute resolution process.

Drinking alcohol, swearing and fighting generate a much broader landscape of explanation than evolutions in kinship terminology. Behaviours that disrupt liberal morality also disrupt

197 These arguments about the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ led to debates in the 1990s about the status of ‘modernity’ that continue to monopolise the attention of cultural anthropology (see for instance Appadurai 1996a; Gilroy 1993; Schein 1999).
anthropological reasoning. An illustration of this is the debate among Australian anthropologists surrounding what was coined as the “resistance model”. The late 1980s saw the publication of a number of Foucauldian-influenced works that examined Aboriginal practices of representation and performance as opposition to the colonial state (Cowlishaw 1988; Keefe 1988; Morris 1989). These works generated a wealth of responses from other anthropologists on several grounds. A prominent critique, particularly of Cowlishaw’s book, was that her consideration of “swearing, drinking and unruliness” (Lattas 1993:240) constituted an “elevation of much pathological and self-destructive behaviour above actions more conducive to Aborigines' physical and emotional survival” (Rowse 1993:287).

While the idea of Indigenous people resisting was itself problematic for many commentators, to argue that unsavoury practices of “swearing, drinking and unruliness” were a form of resistance was beyond the pale. It is not my intention here to either argue for or against a notion of resistance (I offer instead the trope of inhabiting spaces of recognition as explained in Chapter 3). My point is that perhaps the greatest strand of debate in Australian anthropology concerns unsanitised, alterity. Thus while anthropology might aspire to symmetry in the treatment of all aspects of social life, that which a liberal standpoint considers “pathological and self-destructive” is handled differently.

Just like anthropologists, postcolonisers at the Institute draw on a range of explanations to understand neglected purulent ears, disabling beliefs about sorcery and Tim Tams for breakfast. Some of these experiences are considered the manifestation of poverty and oppression, others an expression of Indigenous culture, or culture gone awry in the context of poverty and oppression. In a conversation with one researcher, we discussed the rubbish that litters most yards in remote communities (which my friend Sarah commented on in the opening passage of this thesis). In the course of a few minutes she covered seven distinct reasons for this, reflecting on her experience of working at a particular remote community. As she was talking, I classified them in my field notes:

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198 For an overview of the critiques and counter-critiques, including consideration of the role of “essentialism” in the discourse of both sides of the debate, see Lattas 1993 and Rowse 1990. For a recent deployment of the ‘resistance’ argument in relation to sexual health, see Willis 2003.

199 A debate that continues to this day with its most recent form concerning whether Aboriginal violence is resistance or traditional culture, and the ethics and politics of talking about this (see Cowlishaw 2003b; Sutton 2001 and 2005).
1. Cultural alterity:
   
   "I was speaking to one local woman… and she said, our people don’t see that rubbish. In the old
days they used to travel from place to place and they know that when they left their rubbish there
when they came back the next season it would be gone."

2. Benign neglect of self-determination:
   
   "Something happened since the 70s to create the situation today that was different to the previous
situation [the mission days]…people were less dependent on rations then….

3. Ignorance/Lack of access to mainstream media:
   
   "There are no mass media campaigns telling them to clean up."

4. Trauma of colonial displacement:
   
   "People are depressed/in despair, they don’t have the energy or motivation to clean up…
Because it is not their land. There is no feeling of ownership over the country, why should they
keep it clean?"

5. Failure of parenting due to breakdown of culture:
   
   "You remember the ‘Do the Right Thing’ campaign? There were fines for throwing things out the
window. I remember driving with my parents and them saying, ‘don’t throw that out, there might
be a policeman and we might get fined.’ And I’m teaching my kids to do that, it takes a lot of effort
to get kids to clean up after themselves. Behaviours have to be modeled."

6. Structural barriers
   
   "We discuss how in some cases there are no rubbish collection services, but in the case of this
community there is a daily rubbish service run by a couple of old men on CDEP. And what will
happen when they pass away? My colleague wonders…
And it’s the overcrowding: no-one could possibly keep a household of 10 or 20 clean. You’d need
two full-time cleaners wouldn’t you?"

7. Oppositional Indigenous identity
   
   "When I was staying at the guest house at the community [community member] came to visit and
I had just cooked some scones and I gave them to the kids and there were crumbs everywhere
and this guy’s wife got up and started sweeping the crumbs and he says [in language] ‘that’s not
Aboriginal way, that’s whitefella way’. Is not worrying about rubbish expressing your identity?"

[Fieldnotes 14/4/05 4:17-8]
This précis from another researcher is typical in its appeal to a variety of diagnoses for Indigenous malaise:

I just think that the culture’s imploding: they’re not sending their kids to school; their kids are eating crap; little kids are, **babies**, they don’t even have a chance when they are in utero! They are already **sick** before they are even **birthed**. And then you see little babies and they are given chicken legs or coke or chips to suck on. So you have all that lifestyle stuff. They don’t go to school, maybe it’s passive resistance. Then you have the culture itself imploding because there’s so many wrong-way marriages, young people aren’t listening to the old people. [Transcript 17:25]

In this narrative, the cycle of ill-health caused by behaviour such as poor nutrition and poor school attendance is attributed primarily to a breakdown of traditional culture, with a secondary role given to resistance (presumably resistance to colonialism and Western culture including Western education). What is prominent here is how this postcoloniser is strongly affected by these experiences of alterity, regardless of how they are explained. The outright passion that this researcher feels for the babies *already sick before they are even birthed* is fueled equally by a remedialist desire for health equity and an orientalist desire for the restoration of traditional Indigenous culture. In the next chapter I will explore the affective dimensions of the postcoloniser subjectivity. First, however, we visit the Institute, where the sentiment that alterity produces is subdued for the cause of remediable difference.

**Altesity at the Institute**

At the Institute, the performance of sanitised alterity not only appears untroubled by its silent accessories (occidentalism and unsanitised alterity), but also manages to accomplish a fusion with remedialism. Take this example of an Institute seminar about a health promotion project where an involved remote community member was invited to present a section of the seminar. The first part of the seminar proceeded as usual: health promotion models, project hypotheses, numbers recruited to the different arms of the study, demonstrable changes with p-values (measures of statistical significance) included. Then the remote community collaborator took the floor. She explained her people’s conception
of health as an expression of Indigenous law, drawing on an Indigenous sense of identity and the concept of freshwater meeting saltwater:

This is law about how people live their day to day lives. It’s about how people connect and relate with each other, how people connect with land, and with the environment such as trees and plants and animals. The [law] is a value to guide us and empowers us to feel strong. When we feel strong we feel healthy, because we have connections to the land. Land gives us recognition and identity of who we are. And that is why I have my [family], kinship around me, so that leads to [correct behaviour]. That team, those other people are giving me discipline on how to live my life, a life that protects me. This little boy – he is [clan]. He is eating yam and that is [clan] totem. [Yam]. That [yam] has songs and dance and a process for him to learn that will guide his life.

[Referring to Figure 17] This is a river... that is flowing from the land carrying dry leaves, sticks, bones and any rubbish. It is taking all these to the mouth of the river where it will be filtered as it joins with the salt water. In other words it is telling us we need to take all the bad parts away from our body and with everybody around us we need that healing.

[Fieldnotes 7/2/05 3:20, words in square brackets have been translated into English]

**Figure 17**: Image of a freshwater river, and the freshwater meeting the saltwater (insert)
Those in the audience would have had varying levels of understanding of these statements. Some will have experienced them in a vague way – something to do with kinship and the environment – leaving these statements to operate primarily at the (already powerful) level of the symbolic (see Chapter 4). Others with some prior understanding of Indigenous culture, and of the specific Indigenous nation that the speaker belongs to, will have experienced the presentation more anthropologically, incorporating it into their existing knowledge and perhaps puzzling over how to operationalise it in a health program. But all will be comforted by sanitised alterity: here, we have real Indigenous knowledge, their unique views on health, perhaps this way things will finally change.

Where sanitised alterity appears at the Institute, remedialism and orientalism happily meet – the authentic Indigenous voice engaged in the task of improving Indigenous health statistics. Note that the nature of her engagement in the remedialist project is somewhat opaque. Despite the conviction of the researcher quoted in the previous chapter, there is no obvious “health promotion intervention model” translatable into health policy. Commensurability between her narrative and the remedialism of the audience is largely circumstantial: she is here, included in the seminar, she is a co-investigator on the project, reading off a power point presentation. It is not at all clear, except via the intuitive paths of postcolonial logic, that these half-understood ideas about Indigenous wellbeing can be translated into demonstrably improved health outcomes.

Perhaps aware of the rather loose connection between saltwater and yams on one hand, and a trial of a health promotion program on the other, the Institute researcher who spoke directly after this part of the presentation attempted to address this discrepancy:

Our health promotion mantras through the project are to exercise every day; stop smoking; eat bush foods; eat fruit and vegetables; choose sandwiches, salad and stew from the takeaway; and drink water or diet drinks. And perhaps we should have a seventh message, taking in what [remote

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200 The narrative attached to Figure 17 could be interpreted as arguing that practicing Indigenous culture and living on traditional lands are good for health. This hypothesis is in fact the subject of exploratory research (Burgess et al. 2005; McDermott et al. 1998). The sanitised alterity that these projects attempt to operationalise is troubled by the statistical record which indicates that those who live in remote areas are the most likely to have ‘culture’ (in terms of attending cultural events and speaking an Indigenous language) and the most likely to live on their traditional lands, but also have worse health than Indigenous people who live in non-remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001c and 2002b).
community colleague] was saying: take time for family, friends and country. [Fieldnotes 7/2/05 3:21]

The fairly standard health promotion fare outlined in the six project ‘mantras’ are already inflected with postcolonial logic. Its evidence-based health promotion messages include the culturally-appropriate mention of bush foods and stews, deferring to ‘traditional’ Indigenous culture and Indigenous food preferences, respectively. However, the inclusion of the remote community collaborator in the seminar (itself a reflection of postcolonial logic) made it clear to the white presenter that this health message, although antiracist, did not sufficiently incorporate alterior Indigenous perspectives. Thus a seventh message was spontaneously added, one based not on Western evidence but standing outside it. The research project does not attempt to address whether ‘taking time for family, friends and country’ is a fair reflection of Indigenous aspects of wellbeing, whether this could be incorporated into health promotion, or whether this would be effective in improving health. The inclusion of this ‘indigenised’ message remains at the level of the symbolic, and incommensurability is avoided. The result is remediable difference: provisional, unstable, but intact.

Recall Figure 10 that depicts the process of mutual recognition in postcolonial spaces. The space of recognition where Indigenous people are recognised by white antiracists consists of two aspects that correspond to the two poles of postcolonial logic. Remedialism produces the \textit{self-determined Indigene} who seeks to improve themselves in line with liberal aspirations; orientalism produces the \textit{authentic Indigenous voice} which testifies to a unique Indigeneity. Remedialism and orientalism meld to produce \textit{remediable difference}, a difference that can be brought into the norm.

Sanitised alterity is alterity compatible with remediable difference, the happy intersection of orientalism and remedialism, of yam dances and health promotion models. Sanitised alterity is the sound of the authentic Indigenous voice. While unsanitised alterity remains an unspoken counterpart of sanitised alterity, remediable difference is unshaken. Where it emerges as the plainly evident, it disrupts remediable difference. The clue that tells us unsanitised alterity is anathema to remedialism is the use of the word “normal” in the quotes of unsanitised alterity in the section above. In the moment the pathological is made
normal, the self-determined Indigene vanishes, and orientalism eclipses remedialism. If there is no awareness that suppurating ears and Tim Tams for breakfast are ‘abnormal’, there is no desire to improve them. This is radical difference.

To defer this possibility, unsanitised alterity appears at the Institute only in a highly-attenuated form. Of course, postcolonisers are not consciously aware of this instrumentality. White antiracists tread lightly around unsanitised alterity as they do not want to appear to be engaged in racist ‘victim-blaming’ by gratuitously discussing uncomfortable aspects of Indigenous social life.

Let us consider three descriptions of similar situations. They concern one area where the unsanitised alterity of Indigenous lifeworlds cannot help colliding with postcoloniser sensibilities. When remote Indigenous people are employed on research projects, the unsanitised version of “deference to the needs of one’s family” – the inability to hold down a job because of family commitments – comes into play. Remote Indigenous employees may not attend work regularly for a wide variety of reasons, some of which transgress the division between sanitised and unsanitised alterity (thus illustrating the specificity of our categories). These reasons include: kinship obligations to care for relatives, cultural events such as funerals, lack of sleep due to noisy overcrowded houses, drinking too much alcohol or kava, dealing with a violent or suicidal drug-effected teenage relative, an opportunity to go for a hunting trip, relatives jealous of one’s job who demand that they stay home for a spurious reason, not feeling like going to work, or suffering domestic violence. In a tea room conversation, this researcher recounts to me her attempts to work with a local women’s centre to employ remote community members as research officers:

We have money for three workers, but they can only find one who wants to work – they complain that there aren’t any jobs, but you can’t find people for the jobs that are there – so we send the recruitment package to them and they deny that they received it. I organised a map for each researcher of the community, plans for each day’s work, everything, and it’s just ‘we didn’t get nothing’, I send it to the council because their fax machine isn’t working because they are always on

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Note this list is relevant to women more than men, reflecting the fact that most remote Indigenous people employed on research projects are women (which in turn reflects the high proportion of white women working in public health).
the phone and all they have to do is walk 20 metres up there and it's 'nothing, nothing'. I ask them what happened to the visitor's book I gave them [to keep a record of everyone that visits their office as a demonstrable outcome to show their funders]: 'nothing, nothing, someone took it'. You can't use the video player because someone stole the lead to the TV. And they say, 'the project should pay for my car to be fixed because I'm working on the project', well we did that already and you didn't do any work. [Fieldnotes 18/4/05 4:22]

This passage could only have been said in private, from one frustrated white antiracist to another sympathetic one. To an outsider, this narrative could easily be classified as racist. It is safely spoken to a colleague (in this case me) who knows that this researcher has spent five years working with the women’s centre, that the collaboration is widely considered to be highly successful, and that she holds her remote community colleagues in high regard, even as she is frustrated by them.

In a semi-public forum, such as an Institute seminar discussion, these experiences of frustration are expressed more sympathetically. The focus is on the (good) reasons why remote Indigenous workers have difficulties fulfilling the expectations of white researchers. The spectrum of reasons cited above, a spectrum that spans both sanitised and unsanitised alterity, is glossed here as “enormous personal issues”:

We've had a variety of experience employing Indigenous people on communities and research assistants. We've been on the phone week after week, 'who's got the car', 'the keys are lost', 'it's out of fuel', that kind of thing unravels the work you're trying to do. People have enormous personal issues they don't want to disclose, lots of obligations. Lots of sick leave, lots of time out, it makes it difficult for us. The Institute has to be more flexible, allow different sorts of relationships, a person is not going to fulfill a job description. They will do a certain part of the job, but not the whole job. We might need two or two and a half people to do one job. [Fieldnotes 22/11/04 2:65]

These white researchers have attempted to treat remote Indigenous employees like any others – as if they were white – expecting full-time work for a full-time wage, providing a work car, and so on. They found their attempts “unraveled” by the alterity of Indigenous lifeworlds, alterity circumscribed by that flexible phrase, “enormous personal issues”. But even this somewhat sanitised account is on shaky political ground – the suggested solution,
to employ multiple people to do one job, might suggest that Indigenous people are incompetent and only able to cope with part-time or casual work. This also keeps them in a financially precarious position, particularly in contrast to the white antiracist researchers on full-time pay (plus travel allowance) who claim to be ‘collaborating’ with them as equals.

To successfully constrain the alterity of Indigenous work practices, more drastic measures are required. We saw in Chapter 4 how one postcoloniser achieved this ultra-sanitisation:

There are so many different, I don’t want to say ‘levels’, but types of skill sets that we require in research projects. [Fieldnotes 22/11/04 2:64]

Alterity is successfully circumscribed to the point where almost nothing at all is said.

I have chosen the example of Indigenous workers on Institute projects in this section as it is the epitome of applied remedialism. Those Indigenous people willing to inhabit the subjectivity of the self-determined Indigene would jump at the chance to work on a health research project. Not only can they learn a new skill, gain a qualification (through training organised by the Institute), boost their self-esteem and work ethic, but they will be helping their community at the same time. The obstacles that white researchers encounter when employing remote Indigenous people – no matter how much they tailor their employment practices to be culturally-appropriate – are of particular concern as they directly threaten the viability of remedialism. If the most educated and motivated remote Indigenous people cannot cope with a full-time job with the most flexible and understanding employer, how viable is a future of statistical equality? This question haunts postcolonisers (as I explore in Chapter 9).

The experience of being troubled by the possibility of radical difference is what separates this group of white antiracists from those who remain unacquainted with the alterior Indigenous lifeworlds of the postcolonial frontier. My discussion of postcoloniser subjectivities in the next chapter begins with the introduction of another category of postcoloniser: the urban liberal.
Chapter 8: The pain of lost certainty, the pleasure of alterity

People come to the north to make a difference, to feel good, to stop what was ‘smoothing the dying pillow’,\(^\text{202}\) to help people get self-determined, become more empowered, less powerless. But, you know, the thing is that when you work in this world, well I’ve felt, me personally, I reckon the more I know the less I know. The more I work out with that mob on the community and I just think, ‘Oh! Now I understand.’ And it just turns on its head and I don’t understand any more. [Transcript 17:15, my emphasis italicised]

In this chapter I explore aspects of a postcoloniser subjectivity as it manifests at the Institute. Recall that this subjectivity is a result of an interaction, a process of mutual recognition. For postcolonisers in Darwin, this discursive recognition occurs at close quarters. These are proximate advocates, who have chosen to devote their professional lives to improving the life circumstances of remote Indigenous people. Like the researcher quoted above, postcolonisers at the Institute are generally conscious of the specific, racialised desire they felt to work with Indigenous people, and the impact of “this world” on them. “This world” is the postcolonial frontier, where alterior Indigenous lifeworlds meet those of white antiracists.

In a mirror image of the orientalist representations that postcolonisers create of Indigenous people, let’s start our exploration of these postcolonisers with what they are not. Antiracist whites at the Institute are careful to distinguish themselves from racist whites, but also from another intra-racial collective: antiracist whites from ‘down south’.

[In Darwin] there’s definitely more willingness to make things happen, a different kind of culture of research up here than there is down south…From down south there is more of an ‘us and them’ approach, or maybe an unwillingness to tackle the issues. Like I went to this seminar yesterday, on the breastfeeding guidelines. They were talking about, should the guidelines be applied to Aboriginal people? And the guy [from down south] said, ‘Oh, I don’t want to get into that…and that’s for you people

\(^{202}\) This phrase refers to the social Darwinist belief of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that ‘tribal’ Indigenous people would die out as a result of their contact with the superior European race and that this extinction should be as painless and comfortable as possible.
to discuss.’ I mean there is just a reluctance to face Indigenous issues at all... for fear of offending people or generalising or whatever. Which is understandable, but you can’t just avoid the issue altogether. [Transcript 9:5-6]

In the image painted by this researcher, we can see the performance of white antiracism. Like the white antiracist in Chapter 4 who calls himself the “default presenter”, and like Louise in Chapter 5 who cuts her presentation short, there is a reluctance to speak about Indigenous people for fear of enacting (post)colonial oppression (“fear of offending people or generalising”). The researcher is sympathetic towards the “down south” antiracist’s position, but carefully distinguishes herself from it. While the “down south” researcher can only approach Indigenous issues in terms of “us and them”, researchers at the Institute inhabit the intercultural space of the postcolonial frontier. Postcolonisers “up here” can speak about things Indigenous by virtue of their immersion in Indigenous issues and proximity to Indigenous people.

I use the term urban liberal to refer to these “down south” antiracists. In contrast to the proximity postcolonisers of the north enjoy, urban liberals have only symbolic contact with Indigenous people. This contact might be attending a lecture given by an Indigenous speaker or a protest march about an Indigenous issue, reading books on Indigenous studies or taking courses, being involved in a local reconciliation group, or even visiting an Indigenous community. They are mostly, but not exclusively, found in urban areas or larger Australian cities. Southern urban dwellers may well have more than a passing acquaintance with Kooris, Murris or Noongahs if they work for Indigenous organisations or are heavily involved in Indigenous political campaigns. In urban centres such as Darwin, Alice Springs, Cairns, Broken Hill or Broome, which have a high proportion of Indigenous people, the average white antiracist is more likely to have everyday contact with Indigenous people; although this may still remain at a superficial, symbolic level.

Note that my assertions about urban liberals are not based on finely-grained ethnographic work. Just as this is not an ethnography of Indigenous people, this is not an ethnography of urban liberals, and my discussion of them must remain somewhat abstract. Just like the

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203 Terms for Indigenous people from and in (respectively) south-eastern, eastern, and south-western Australia.
‘Indigenous people’ in this thesis function as representations with which to understand white antiracists, ‘urban liberals’ also function as a heuristic device to understand the proximate advocates who are the focus of this thesis.

Like the postcolonisers of this ethnography, urban liberals ascribe to postcolonial logic as I have described it in Chapter 6. That is, they believe that the problems of Indigenous people derive from their experience of colonisation and that carefully-directed and appropriately-resourced government intervention can alleviate these problems. The two groups differ in their exposure to the destabilising effects of radical difference. For urban liberals, postcolonial logic remains undisturbed by the possibility of alterity. For Institute researchers, a degree of familiarity with alterity (or more correctly the possibility of alterity) disturbs postcolonial logic. After this initial unsettling, postcolonisers who inhabit the postcolonial frontier experience a permanent sense of uncertainty, as the quote that opens this chapter suggests.

Drawing on the terms of the previous chapter, ‘urban liberals’ are able to maintain the cleavage between sanitised and unsanitised alterity necessary to sustain the idea of remediable difference. Alcohol and other drugs, poor school attendance, unemployment and so on are perceived as consequences of colonialism; the Indigenous people who suffer from these problems would change immediately if they could, and all Indigenous people want the government to help them see the end of these ills. That which is designated by ‘Indigenous culture’ is wholeheartedly positive, and can only be a solution to social problems. This division allows Indigenous people to maintain a moral position congruent with white antiracist sensibilities, “the tribesman longing for change” (Tsing 1999:171), exotic and deserving in equal parts.

Encounters with alterity on the postcolonial frontier problematise this division and thus make it visible. As one researcher commented during a discussion of a research project in difficulty:

We go around communities like this with blinkers on [he holds his wrists up to his temples, fingers pointing straight forward]. We don't want to see what we don't like. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:4]
From his experience of remote community work, he recognised that he and his colleagues partition Indigenous lifeworlds into acceptable and unacceptable portions, and then ignore that which is unacceptable. In recognising the need to split alterity into two, he is recognising the demands of postcolonial logic. For those who inhabit the postcolonial frontier, postcolonial logic is made visible.

Postcolonial logic is revealed in the moment of its undoing. In this moment, the postcoloniser suspects that the difficulties of the remedialist project are not temporary obstacles surmountable by projects that are truly culturally-appropriate, community-controlled, sustainable, holistic, or capacity-building. In this moment, the postcoloniser suspects that the difficulties of the remedialist project are inherent to the remedialist project. This is the realisation that apparent project failure is not due to things ‘failing’, but due to things working as they should (Mosse 2003). Using my term from Chapter 6, in this moment a postcoloniser moves from an inauthenticity critique to what one might call a fundamental critique. And as I have been suggesting, this movement occurs when the possibility of radical difference disrupts the concept that postcolonial logic rests on: remediable difference.

Here one researcher explicitly lays out the tension between postcolonial logic and the alterity of Indigenous lifeworlds:

I think it is good [that Indigenous people are encouraged to do their own research], but there’s so many things happening on communities and people have got so many things on their mind and so many worries, and often sort of struggling to get through one day and not thinking even about the next…the theory behind it is great, but in some of the remote top end communities you wonder how it will work. [Transcript 3:12-3]

We can read this narrative as one of premature failure, perhaps with racist undertones. This white researcher seems to be giving up on the possibility of Indigenous control, resigning herself to being in control, failing to see the capacity that exists in the community and avoiding her responsibility to build on it. This inauthenticity critique implies that a more committed or more experienced postcoloniser could overcome these obstacles to producing Indigenous-led research. Such a reading constructs the differences she is talking about –
lives so challenged that thinking about tomorrow is beyond one’s capabilities – as remediable differences.

An alternative reading is to take what she says at face value, as an observation gleaned from years of working in remote communities. (Note that whether this researcher thinks these radical differences are a result of (post)colonial oppression, or are an expression of Indigenous culture, is both impossible to tell from this quote and beside the point.) If we accept her reading of radical difference, this narrative illustrates the relationship between the downfall of postcolonial logic and alterity. “The theory” of postcolonial logic is great, but when confronted with Indigenous lifeworlds, it is undone.

One sign that postcolonial logic has broken down is the ability of the postcoloniser to perform it while simultaneously critiquing it. Here a researcher is discussing the push for Indigenous people to be running their own health research projects (the same issue as discussed in the previous quote):

[In recent years] there has been a lot more recognition of power inequalities in Aboriginal health research and a promotion of more active involvement and leadership and driving by Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities. I believe that is a good thing, is the right thing and all that... [but] if you look at what’s required to set research priorities and to drive research there are skill bases and experience that are required and certainly in the Northern Territory we are still dealing with problems of basic education, and of differences of world view which are going to come up even if there’s perfect education... [Transcript 14:3, my emphasis]

Similar to the previous quote, this researcher rehearses an aspect of postcolonial logic (redressing power inequalities in health research), and then critiques it. In this case, she identifies both poor education (only about 1% of Indigenous Territorians have a University degree (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b:22)) and cultural difference (“differences of world view”) as barriers to realising the goals of postcolonial logic.

Dividing the narrative into two parts (rehearsal and critique) is a statement explicitly supporting postcolonial logic: I believe it is a good thing, the right thing. The previous quote had a similar phrase, I think it is good. Why are these qualifications needed? The
answer is obvious to any white antiracist. As my inauthenticity critique of the previous quote showed, to express doubt about the viability of postcolonial logic is to stray into racist territory. Why would this speaker assert that Indigenous people are not educated enough to run their own research projects – is she implying that Indigenous people are stupid? Or that the structure of research projects should not change to fit Indigenous people?\footnote{Recall that Louise argues that the idea that people must be educated to manage a project is itself racist: Where’s the evidence to say that you have to be educated to have any actual involvement in program development for Indigenous health. [Transcript:9] Thus Louise would probably think this researcher’s comments (that Indigenous people are not educated enough to run research projects) were racist.} This is the pivotal problem for the postcoloniser: where their experience leads them to challenge postcolonial logic, how can they be honest without being racist? Postcolonisers who have lost their certainty in postcolonial logic must rely on qualifications if they still wish to remain recognisably antiracist.

Let’s consider the final words of the qualifying phrase: \textit{and all that}. Although it may sound flippant, it is not. This researcher takes the aims of increased Indigenous control seriously. “And all that” is shorthand for postcolonial logic in an ‘insider’ conversation, from one postcoloniser to another. In the discourse used between postcolonisers – between those familiar with both postcolonial logic \textit{and} the alterity that unravels it – the phrase signals both an acknowledgment of postcolonial logic and a departure from it. It indicates that the speaker takes postcolonial logic as a starting point, rather than an end in itself.

The undoing of postcolonial logic can be initially traumatic. Having once been certain about the power of self-determination, supported by committed and coordinated state efforts, to fix Indigenous problems, the breakdown of postcolonial logic is experienced as a loss of certainty. We can see the effects of this loss of certainty ethnographically.

In the tearoom one day, I sat with another social scientist who works at the Institute. He was criticising the government’s attempts to build the economies of remote communities through culturally-based businesses like art and ecotourism rather than fostering more conventional businesses. He expanded to a critique of public health interventions that are based on the revival of cultural practices: “We are constructing the ‘other’ in terms of deficits, and keeping a romantic idea of the victim, assuming people are stupid”. This was
Part 3: Chapter 8

essentially a critique of the orientalist pole of postcolonial logic. A young researcher listened to him, her face progressively falling. After a silence, she said:

You know, I’d rather not be doing this. I’d rather spend time at home, having babies, or doing something creative. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:6]

This uncharacteristic sentiment from a researcher usually enthusiastic about Indigenous community development represents a moment of postcoloniser disenchantment. When doubt disrupts the narrative of postcolonial logic, a crisis of white antiracism is precipitated. For if we are not instruments of a postcolonial renaissance, what can we be doing but perpetuating coloniality? This crisis often induces a reflex of retreat, in this case a retreat into domestic life and personal pursuits.

This crisis is illustrated in the book Balanda, a recent white antiracist memoir of life in a remote community (Jordan 2005). The story is told by a young white woman from Melbourne who spends a year working in the arts centre at Maningrida in western Arnhem Land. In this passage, the entry of a younger and more naïve white woman into the white Maningrida community causes the narrator to muse on the ideas of Aboriginal people she held before she left Melbourne. She realises that she had held a “romanticised perception” of Indigenous people, and had come to question the role of white workers in the community:

I had changed…Speaking to Jodie reminded me that in my first six months, my illusions had disappeared as I struggled to make sense of community life. Even now, I was confused. I was able to rely on just one certainty when I grappled with the world I found myself in: the realization that nothing was simple, that everything was paradoxical, that there were no clear answers. (Mitchell 2002:149)

Like Jordan, the researcher quoted below held a damning critique of white benevolence. He argued that white researchers could not escape being in a position of power over Indigenous

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Her memoir not only illustrates a crisis of postcolonial logic but exemplifies, at various points in the text, nearly every concept I have developed in this thesis.
people no matter how good their intentions or their rhetoric. He went on to say that such
ideas were held by many of his colleagues, but not expressed:

It's like a lot of things in life, you just don't talk about things. It's just one of those things that isn't
accepted so most people aren't comfortable even talking about it, because it exposes them to a lot of
self-criticism. I mean, you're sitting here with an NH&MRC [National Health and Medical Research
Council] grant, and suddenly you have to question the whole validity of your existence, the whole
validity, and people find it I think very confrontational. You can navel gaze so much that you quit, give
up. And people blank it out I think, they're aware of all the issues, but it's a self-defence mechanism.
[Transcript 4:12]

Another researcher describes a similar crisis that must be deferred to allow one’s work to
continue, calling it “being paralysed by trying to do the right thing” [Transcript 14:6]. What
they are describing is a fundamental critique, a critique that undermines the raison d’etre of
the white antiracist. In the next chapter I will flesh out this vaguely-described but acutely
felt crisis, showing how it consists of two underlying tensions that are revealed once
postcolonial logic unravels: the dilemma of historical continuity and the dilemma of social
improvement. But for now, it is enough to note that underneath the seamless working of
postcolonial logic, the Indigenous-employment-strategies and incorporation-of-Indigenous-
methodologies and cultural-consultants that characterise postcolonial health research, is a
disquiet that leads the postcoloniser to question the whole validity of your existence if one
dwells on it for too long.

The turmoil of watching postcolonial logic unravel must have an upside, or why would
many researchers endure it indefinitely? A major pleasure of the postcolonial frontier is
familiarity with all kinds of Indigenous people. Recall from the Introduction the way my
colleague and neighbour defended Tiwi longgrassers against those who seek only to stop
their ‘anti-social’ behaviour:

The [longgrassers] there, you see them everyday, there's some that are connected with people
staying at Daisy Y [a local Aboriginal hostel] but there’s permanent camps there, lots of Maningrida
people camping there, and every day you wave, or say hello, I've never had any trouble.
[Fieldnotes 05/09/05 4:91]
My neighbour, like myself, relishes a friendly familiarity with groups of Indigenous people who camp in the coastal reserve and drink. During our evening walks to the beach, we are happy to say hello and stop for a minute to talk. If there is a drunken fight going on, we politely look the other way, or call for help if necessary.

In this way, postcolonisers at the Institute can be distinguished from two other sub-groups of white people, racist whites and urban liberals. In contrast with our relaxed familiarity with alterity, racist whites despise alterity and urban liberals are instinctively either drawn to it or shrink from it.\(^{206}\) We have lost our orientalist impulses – or at least learnt to control them – and we are quietly proud of it. The following exchange at the party of a friend (who also works at the Institute) is typical of conversation between those postcolonisers who are proximate to Indigenous lifeworlds:

Ros tells us about her recent holiday, a road trip through the Simpson Desert. Her boyfriend Mike had to do a job interview (for doing adult education in Indigenous communities, a job vacated by my other friend who’s going off to the Western Desert to do community development) so they drove into Cooper Pedy via the back way. They parked in a roadhouse and Mike did the interview on the mobile phone. Ros describes the scene:

*And they’re asking him, ‘do you have experience working with Aboriginal people’, and in the background there’s this massive screaming match going on between a man and a woman, they’re standing outside their car screaming at each other. The woman’s screaming away [she demonstrates with her right hand held high fist shaking] and then she pulls down her T-shirt and pulls her tit out [demonstrates more fist shaking punctuated with slapping the front of her shirt]. And all these foreigners and southerners are standing around looking [mimes looking shocked and horrified] and she sees ‘em all looking at her and starts to scream at them and they run off terrified. We’re all pissing ourselves at her story. And the locals are like, ‘oh yeah whatever’. Somebody else adds, ‘Or like, ‘Hello Gracie!’.*

[Fieldnotes 30/8/04 1:34-5]

This is a complex exchange, both the story that is told and the way it is received by this group of white antiracists. There are at least four subjectivities present here: the radically-

\(^{206}\) Note again that the ‘urban liberal’ functions here as a heuristic device to understand Institute researchers rather than a category supported by empirical evidence.
different Indigenous couple engaged in a very public fight; the ‘foreigners and southerners’ who stand by, silenced by shock, and then flee; the ‘locals’ who are unperturbed by the public display, possibly because they are on familiar terms with the main actors (so can meet this display of alterity with ‘Hello Gracie!’); and us young white antiracists who find the story hilarious when told on a balmy Darwin verandah one night.

The climax of the story, the funniest bit, is when the group of naïve whites fearfully escape the screaming Aboriginal woman. By laughing at them, it is this group of whites from elsewhere who we (at the party) are most concerned to distinguish ourselves from. While urban whites shrink from alterity, we casually embrace it, reveling in our familiarity with scenes such as this, and our solidarity with the ‘locals’ who are also familiar. An ‘urban liberal’ reading of this incident, by contrast, might focus on the systematic racial disadvantage suffered by the fighting pair, and the racism of white locals who stand by impassively rather than offering assistance to the distressed woman. Above all, what distinguishes us party-goers as Darwin antiracists is the pleasure we take in the comedy of the situation.

The material I present in the rest of this chapter is an elaboration of two key aspects of postcoloniser experience: the pain of lost certainty, and the pleasure of alterity. Once postcolonial logic is ruptured, the main casualty is a white antiracist subjectivity. The narrow terms of a viable postcoloniser – creating opportunities for Indigenous self-determination – come undone, and discomfort with white agency becomes acute. Below I explore the multiple ways postcolonisers express and cope with this discomfort. I show how the figure of the missionary is an important symbol of self-critique, and one which reveals the centrality of affective ties. In the final section I explore the contradictory ways that postcolonisers love the other, and suffer for it.

**The dangerous white “I”**

In the courses I have run with health professionals (that I discussed in Chapter 6), participants are asked to choose, from a range of quotes, one in particular that resonates
with them. This quote (from an article about Aboriginal responses to racism) always proves to be popular:

You don't have to do anything to help me. You don't have to do anything to help my people. Just be there. As soon as you say you want to help me, that puts me down. Always remember that. (Interviewee ‘K03’ in Mellor 2004)

The attraction of this quote is the promise that by ‘just being there’, it is possible for white antiracists to be useful to Indigenous people. Paradoxically, to be ‘helpful’ white people must not act, and must not declare that they want to act. Similar statements that minimise the agency of white antiracists are made by Institute researchers. Deb in Chapter 5 stated her role was “supporting individuals giv[ing] them the capacity to do what they see fit…providing opportunities for self-determination”. She is not following her own volition, but supporting Indigenous people to follow theirs. Louise stressed that when she was a nurse in a remote health clinic “I was merely just facilitating what [the Aboriginal Health Workers] had been doing for a long time.” Louise uses the tame verb “facilitate”, but this is still uncomfortably assertive. Not one but two qualifiers – “merely” and “just” – are needed to diminish the agency of the “I”.

This dangerous white “I” must be constantly caveated because white agency is inherently problematic. Recall that in Chapter 4 I described the space of recognition where Indigenous people are recognised simultaneously as authentically “Indigenous” and full of Western ambition. In some ways, the space of recognition where white people are recognised as antiracists is just as contradictory. According to postcolonial logic, the knowledge system that shapes this space of recognition, Western institutions are the cause of Indigenous ill-health and other social ills. White people can only assist Indigenous people through “facilitating” Indigenous control. Although good intentions are necessary, they are not sufficient: in attempting their task of assistance, there is the ever-present danger that white people will take over, inadvertently silencing Indigenous voices and imposing oppressive Western structures. Remedialism compels them to act: orientalism condemns their actions as inevitably racist. This stalemate is illustrated by the following exchange:

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207 An ambivalence toward white agency can be discerned in the bureaucracy of Indigenous governance at the dawn of the self-determination era. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (the bureaucratic instrument of
RESEARCHER: It's like the more you [us white people] do the more damage you do.
EK: So doing less might be a good thing?
RESEARCHER: I don't know, not less either. I mean you can’t just sit back and do nothing.
[Transcript 9:14]

Doing nothing is not an option (although as we have seen, at times of weakness we muse about staying home to raise babies and make art). Postcolonisers must inhabit their contradictory space of recognition and weather the wearisome task of minimising one’s agency. It is one thing to say that you are not doing anything but just, merely, helping others do something: it is another thing altogether to enact it. In this section, I explore how postcolonisers at the Institute deal with their own dangerous agency.

A commitment to postcolonial logic requires a degree of auto-distaste. For this researcher as for many others, the language of white action is tied to Indigenous disempowerment:

RESEARCHER: The whole word intervention is very, conjures up [the idea that], ‘these [Indigenous] people don’t have the ability to do it themselves and you [white people] have to intervene’.
EK: Can you think of a better word?
RESEARCHER: Well, maybe, ‘help’, ‘listen’, ‘share’, I don’t know. It’s just so impersonal, the whole intervention thing.
[Transcript 9:16-7]

She went on to critique the alternative words she suggested (‘help, listen, share’) as also being guises for white dominance and exploitation. Whatever term is used, white agency grates against the ear.

A distaste for white agency is expressed through suspicion of researchers’ motives. Indigenous communities are portrayed as victims of those who purport to help them,
harassed by researchers clamouring for their involvement. In this typical formulation, white researchers see Indigenous research as an avenue to guaranteed research funds:

That group who were at Galiwin’ku got the equivalent of one research grant application or expression of interest from a white researcher per day, they were just inundated… there’s a disrespect in researchers saying, ‘Oh, well, let’s put in for some money and look at, um, Hepatitis A amongst Aborigines. That'll get us a good grant.’ [Transcript 11:16]

This criticism also commonly surfaces in the accusation that white researchers “build their careers on people’s ill-health” [Transcript 16:7], while hiding our selfish motives by “cloaking what we do in good intentions” [Transcript 8:2]. Recall Deb’s words from Chapter 5:

We are all making money and careers out of the poor situation in Aboriginal communities and that’s terrible. I used to think that good intentions were enough but they are not because you can still do harm with good intentions. [Transcript B:1]

Deb’s quote leaves open the possibility that white antiracists are unintentionally benefiting from Indigenous misery. This researcher, who is also a doctor, makes it clear that researchers in particular are self-interested as well as damaging to Indigenous people:

People who do research as opposed to service provision are primary interested in what they can get out of it for themselves… I think non-Aboriginal people are taking away research projects that could be done by Aboriginal people. Because they’re more articulate and have access to funds, they are in fact hijacking the research agenda. [Transcript 4:6]

This self-effacing view that white antiracists have of themselves was also illustrated in the workshop I mentioned above. At one point, those in the workshop tried to think of a term for white people who worked in Indigenous health. Terms like ‘altruistic’ and ‘helper’ were tried and rejected, and no term was found. The next day, a participant approached me at a break to tell me that she and other workshop participants had come up with the perfect label: “White Helpers on Indigenous Projects – WHIPS!” (Kowal & Paradies 2005). The irony of the acronym was intentional, and exemplifies the problematic agency of
postcolonisers. While we try to establish a position of neutral assistance, we cannot escape our role as ‘whips’, instruments of discipline and castigation.

Which brings me to perhaps the most widespread trope of self-critique for white people working in the Indigenous arena: that old line about how everyone who works with Aboriginal people are either “missionaries, misfits or mercenaries”.

This phrase has been used to refer to white people that work in a variety of development contexts the world over. It is always cited as a piece of insider knowledge, a local joke. Two cross-cultural consultants from Alice Springs tell us that “there is a tired old saying in the NT that the kardiya [white people] who come from South to work with yapa [Indigenous people] are either mercenaries, missionaries or misfits” (Price & Price 1998), while the author of a New Canadian Magazine article about development workers recalls “a person from Oxfam told me there are three kinds of people who do this type of work...” (Silverman 2005). Two recent books have used this title (Hall 1996c; Loney 2001), as well as a 2002 Australian Medical Association conference about Indigenous health held in Darwin.

The cross-cultural consultants (a Warlpiri woman and her white husband) explain the categories:

The mercenaries are fairly straightforward. Self enrichment at the expense of naively trusting and tolerant yapa [Indigenous] communities and a jaded and cynical public service is a long established industry in the North. It is part of the frontier experience...

Then there are the missionaries, the old, Christian and conservative and the new, rationalist and radical, out to change the world. Many of the old are exhausted and burdened by self doubt. The new are energetic and confident... Feminists, environmentalists, various brands of socialists, anti-nuclear activists and others all come with burning, youthful zeal...

Misfits turn up in all groups of course. In the North they become 'colourful characters' and find a ready acceptance in yapa [Indigenous] communities. It's a little like the old French Foreign Legion. (Price & Price 1998)

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208 All citations I have found to this tripartite term are similarly anecdotal. The genealogy of this phrase begs for an analysis that has not, to my knowledge, been undertaken.
As we have seen, postcolonisers at the Institute are contemptuous of any self-interest in their colleagues or themselves – vis-à-vis the mercenaries. The discourse of misfits surfaces in light-hearted quips about us “mangy collection of odd-bods” who work in Indigenous health [Transcript 6:16]. The issue of missionaries, however, is more complex and fraught.

In the Prices’ narrative, mercenaries and misfits, along with the “old” missionaries, are products of the colonial frontier. The postcolonial frontier is inhabited by what they call the “new, rationalist and radical” missionaries. Postcolonisers at the Institute also critique themselves as ‘new missionaries’:

I think that 100 years ago people from our societies went away and became missionaries, and that is how they got their raison d’etre for being good. And they got their positive feedback about themselves and their lives. I think now what people do is, in the last 20 years or 30 years… I think people from southern states, not everyone, but a certain group of people have got their raison d’etre from coming up to save the black man. If necessary, from himself as well. And they would have been missionaries, I think, three or four generations ago, and they’ve now become ‘people who work in Aboriginal health’. Now that’s reasonably denigrating, but I think that’s the way to understand it, myself probably included in this. [Transcript 4:5]

The charge of “missionary” is a serious charge to make against a postcoloniser. Missions were set up all over Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with different denominations claiming different regions. From the turn of last century until the 1960s they were the main arm of government administration in most parts of Australia (Swain & Bird Rose 1988). This narrative from the website of the Australian Museum in Sydney is typical of the current dominant understanding of missions in Aboriginal Australia:

Since the European colonisation of Australia, Indigenous Australians have had contact with missionaries and their missions. This relationship has been a difficult one. In some instances missions became instruments of government policy, engaging in practices such as forcibly separating

209 Where authors accuse progressive whites (such as development workers and Indigenous rights activists, respectively) of being ‘like missionaries’, there is no need to discuss the charge in detail. It is assumed that those so accused are misguided (Henkel & Stirrat 2001; Niezen 2003).
Aboriginal children from their families in order to maximise control over the child's education into Christian ways and beliefs. In this way, missions contributed to the suppression of Aboriginal cultural practices and languages. (Australian Museum 2006)

Thus comparing someone to a missionary implies they are *imposing* their belief system on Indigenous people, and that their failure to respect Indigenous culture will have deleterious effects.\(^{210}\) It is an accusation that secularity is no more than a guise behind which lurks the imposition of values neither less damaging nor more beneficial than Christianity.

White antiracists who work in Indigenous health suffer from a permanent identity crisis of sorts. This is not a crisis of uncertainty about who they are, but rather a crisis of certainty: whether missionary, mercenary or misfit, they are white, and thus destined to inflict harm on Indigenous people by exerting power over them. The postcoloniser desires to minimise their agency, to act without acting on Indigenous people. As one researcher reflected, being a non-Indigenous researcher requires “a studied selflessness” [Transcript 11:3].

Inhabiting this dangerous subjectivity requires constant vigilance. The white researcher below manages a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. The possibility that any problem that arises might be a result of, or exacerbated by, the whiteness of the researcher is of perpetual concern:

**Constantly**, constantly, constantly, you are thinking: ‘Am I not seeing the Indigenous side to this’. You know? And often that will have nothing to do with it. But you are always thinking, ‘Is this an Indigenous issue?’ And then when you think that you are not stepping across the line, sometimes you probably have, when you look back over it. [Transcript 13:21]

\(^{210}\) Although these charges are largely true, it is of course a much more complex picture. See Swain & Bird Rose 1988 for Australian anthropological and historical material, and Swain 1993 for an influential argument about the impact of missionaries (and other external influences) on Aboriginal religions. For important studies of the impact of missions on Indigenous societies elsewhere, see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991 and White 1991. Postcolonisers are not the only ones who seek to differentiate themselves from missionaries. Anthropologists share with the postcolonisers of this ethnography a concern to distinguish themselves from both missionaries and government administrators (see also Higham 2003; Pels 1999). For a related account of how another discourse about missionaries - the term “the missionary position” - has been variously used in broader contexts, see Priest 2001 and replies.
In Chapter 5, Deb recounted similar self-doubt over whether to evaluate the “Indigenous-led” project she worked on:

You can no longer assume that what you believe isn’t culturally based…So, you know, if I was doing a research that wasn’t Indigenous research, I might say, we should do an evaluation. I wouldn’t even question it, but you know you have to question yourself every step of the way, where does that come from? Why do I want to do it? Is it in the best interests of this research or is this just my way of working?... And at some point you do have to get a resolution but it’s just you’re not so confident any more. [Transcript A:13]

One can see how this constant mental toll can easily turn into a fundamental critique, a critique that makes one question the validity of your whole existence, or at least seek a change of career. To defer this outcome, postcolonisers have a range of discursive devices that make their subject position tenable. The first avenue available is the ‘in five years time’ discourse. White antiracists deal with the problematic nature of their agency with the self-assurance that it is only temporary. For postcolonisers, “the ultimate endpoint is to be out of a job”, either because the statistical gaps have finally yielded to reasoned intervention, or because Indigenous people are filling all the positions [Transcript 14:7]. White antiracists take up positions on remote communities (as town clerk, sport and recreation officer, health promotion officer, clinic manager, or store manager) with the intention of mentoring a local worker so that ‘in five years time’, they will be happily redundant and able to hand over to the now-suitably-skilled Indigenous person.211

The disempowerment of Indigenous people is such that in some communities none of the jobs, none of the really big jobs are actually taken by Indigenous people at all. And I think that we have to start being critical of that and even if it’s just a transition program that’s put in that, you know, you say ‘in five years time’, and I know that people have talked about this before but it’s never really been facilitated. [Transcript 15:18, my emphasis]

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211 This discourse has been around for decades (Cowlishaw 1999b; Levi & Dean 2003:117; Tatz 1972). Batty describes a related strategy for dealing with the problematic nature of white agency, where a senior Aboriginal person “leases” their Aboriginality to a non-Indigenous person in order to give them authority to speak (Levi & Dean 2003). In my terms, they are leasing their authentic Indigenous voice to a white person.
In this quote from a researcher, ‘in five years time’ is cited in a shorthand way. There is no need to explain it to a fellow postcoloniser such as myself who is similarly versed in this discourse. And note the circular logic of an *inauthenticity critique* here: these types of ‘transition programs’ may have been around for decades, but the problem is that they have never really been implemented properly, otherwise they would have worked, resolving the problem of white agency.

Another discursive device that attempts to resolve the problem of white agency is to claim to be the least of all possible evils, the ‘good-enough postcoloniser’. As one researcher put it, “I think that if I don’t do this job, maybe someone else will do it who does not care about Indigenous issues at all”. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:7] The example below combines this device with the language of the temporary to produce a joyful meeting of remedialism and orientalism.

The researcher here is discussing a project where a remote community is provided with dialysis machines and renal nurses in their own clinic, so that community members currently stuck in town on dialysis can return for extended visits.\(^{212}\) Her public health training makes her disparaging of this technological, tertiary intervention: the considerable amount of money involved would be far better spent on the prevention of kidney disease. But at the same time, she acknowledges that it appears to be an example of self-determination, as the dialysis machines were the community’s express request. I ask her whether she thinks she should try and intervene to encourage them to shift their agenda to prevention:

Well part of me really thinks I should but part of me really thinks I shouldn’t and that I should trust their process and that they’ll get to it eventually. I trust that they’ll get to the preventative stuff eventually. My worry is that someone else will come in like me and slant them in another way. So if I just trusted them and their process I’d be really happy with that and I’d know that they’d get to that [prevention]. But there’s so many other contaminants and this is where my anxiety comes from

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\(^{212}\) Indigenous people suffer high rates of chronic kidney disease with many requiring dialysis three times a week. Although the government is required to provide home dialysis machines to anyone who can dialyse themselves, this option has not been feasible for almost all dialysis patients from remote communities, who must therefore live in town, hundreds of kilometres from home (see Devitt & McMasters 1998).
because I think, ‘Well I’ve got to say something because some other non-Indigenous prick’s going to come along [laughs] and could really contaminate that whole situation’.

EK: So it’s like you’re the least of other evils?

Yeah, I reckon I’m going to do less harm than someone else and I reckon that there’s a lot of us who just think like that. [Transcript 15:14, my emphasis]

In an imagined future world of decolonisation, of immunity from the poison of white agency, Indigenous cultural processes will naturally lead to the same priorities as Western public health, “eventually”.\(^{213}\) When the authentic Indigenous voice speaks the language of remedialism (as we also saw in Chapters 6 and 7), postcolonisers will be happily out of a job, or consigned to the margins as ‘technical experts’, providing advice only when asked. But the threat of contamination by other white people destroys the possibility of this postcolonial utopia, and brings the postcoloniser back into the picture, if only until such time as Indigenous people are less susceptible to contamination.

A further way to deal with the disquieting possibility of being a “new missionary” is to create roles that are more acceptable to postcolonisers. One researcher commented that she had been discussing the three M’s with her colleagues.

You know the three M’s? Well, we think there is one more: Motherers. [Fieldnotes 3:54 17/03/05]

To conjure the figure of the mother is a complex move.\(^{214}\) It is clearly meant to depart from the other three M’s, and most importantly, missionaries. Paradigmatic mothers differ from paradigmatic missionaries in that they are women, and their love is unconditional, not tied to religious affiliation or the task of improving souls. This feminised and secularised concept is somewhat more acceptable to postcolonisers. The researcher below used the language of maternity to describe the sense of obligation toward the Indigenous people she tries to help. I asked her why she thought some white people were drawn to work in public health:

\(^{213}\) The desire for a “decolonising” process that neutralises colonial oppression is also seen in anthropological discourse (see Harrison 1991).

\(^{214}\) Hage (2003) describes the ‘mothering’ role of the state and how it has dwindled under neoliberalism. He sees the mothering role in a positive light, in contrast to postcolonisers. They are clearly uncomfortable because their role as “motherers” is analogous to the state, leaving them open to critiques of paternalism (or in this case maternalism).
Well it’s human nature, people feel deep inside that they want to help. It’s like humbug [when a relative makes an unreasonable request], you have a deep sense of obligation. I mean, you have to be cruel to be kind but you have a fear of losing someone if you don’t share with them. It’s like being a mother, it’s unconditional love. Even if a child is on drugs, you hope that one day they’ll wake up and that core of love will be a healing ingredient in the future. A mother can see the naughty things your children do but you also see the potential, you understand the feelings people have inside. [Fieldnotes 14/4/06 4:19]

In this short narrative, she moves from a universal reason (“human nature”) to an Indigenous analogy (“like humbug”) to a notion of (a presumably universal) motherhood. This researcher accounts for a postcoloniser subjectivity through the endless empathy of unconditional love. She fears she will lose the affective tie to those she loves – her children/her Indigenous collaborators – if she allows annoyance or frustration to eclipse her maternal feeling.

This emotive language is clearly at odds with the dry task of remediating statistical inequality, a fact readily acknowledged by postcolonisers. The researcher who suggested the ‘4th M’ meant for the category of ‘motherers’ to be as problematic as the other three categories. The most obvious problem is the use of a mother-child analogy for the relationship between white antiracists and Indigenous people. The association of Indigenous people and children is clearly a discourse of orientalism that positions subalterns as passive charges. Although maternal authority is perhaps softer and kinder than paternal authority, it is authority just the same.

To escape such authority, a final strategy for postcolonisers is to divest themselves of power altogether (if only discursively). Some white researchers express their ambivalence about their own agency by explicitly trying to give it up. As one researcher said, “I’m not wanting to drive the process at all, I want to give the process away.” [Fieldnotes

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215 A debate rages in whiteness studies on whether giving up one’s power is the only ethical course of action for white people (the abolitionist position), or whether this desire to ‘give up power’ is simply another manifestation of white power (see Haggis 2004; Moon & Flores 2000).
Another researcher with a medical background chatted to me about her recent fieldwork at a remote community:

I am trying to counter the whole power thing that comes from being a doctor. If I go there with the doctor hat on, people treat me a certain way. But if I go there with my community development hat on, people are completely different. Out bush I am the kid and they are the absolute experts.

[Fieldnotes 10/9/04 1:47]

There is delight in the way this sentiment is expressed. In taking on the subservient role of white “kid” to Indigenous “absolute experts”, postcolonisers can remedy their excessive and pathological power over Indigenous people. An important aspect of this sentiment is the desire to be vulnerable to Indigenous people. To be hunting in a remote place, knee-deep in mangrove mud, totally reliant on your Indigenous host to find your way back to the car, and then to direct you down barely-visible tracks through the bush, back to the dirt road (see Figure 18).
To be in the middle of a lively discussion in a language you don’t understand, reliant on translation. To make halting attempts to speak a few words of language and be heartily laughed at. To hand over control of important possessions on demand – the driver’s seat of your car, your keycard for the purchase of camping supplies.

In these moments we feel the delight of cross-cultural exchange – of direct access to the authentic Indigenous voice – and the relief of oppressiveness shed, if only temporarily. The stalemate of remedialism and orientalism is resolved through the figure of the child. The child has no remedialist agenda, and their fascination with the other is innocent of orientalism. In this extreme inversion of colonial power relations, the ultimate goal of postcolonial spaces is realised. Perhaps the ideal self-image of a postcoloniser is neither overbearing father nor tender mother, but fervent child.
As this material shows, postcolonisers recoil from oppressiveness not just because they dislike a negative image, but also because they don’t want to hurt those they care for. For many, the task of minimising white agency is tied to affective relations between white antiracists and Indigenous people. In this next section, I explore the affective aspects of postcoloniser subjectivities as they manifest at the Institute.

**Intimacy and Suffering**

How are we to love the other? This question is the silent backdrop to much postcoloniser behaviour. Intimacy is a sign of love, and many postcolonisers crave intimacy. But intimacy is not enough to ensure Indigenous safety: as the missionary attests, our best intentions can be their worst nightmares. Postcoloniser love is dangerous love indeed.

In the midst of this uncertainty, suffering becomes important. There are many possible reasons why. Suffering can be yet another way to insulate oneself against harming Indigenous people (*If I am suffering, I cannot be inflicting suffering*); an empathetic embodiment of the suffering of Indigenous people (*If I am suffering, I understand the other’s suffering*); a symptom of frustrated orientalist envy (*I am suffering because I cannot become the other*); or a reflexive manifestation of anti-colonialism, a display of white guilt (*I am suffering because I deserve to suffer*). We could even draw on the missionary analogy and see the suffering of postcolonisers as redemptive (*I suffer because Christ suffered*). The psychic possibilities for understanding the experience and discourse of suffering are multiple, if not endless. In terms of the conceptual frame of this thesis, intimacy and suffering are employed once the certainty of postcolonial logic has been lost and the perilous agency of white antiracists has been revealed. Intimacy and suffering can be understood both as attempts to maintain a viable postcoloniser subjectivity, and as signs of its undoing.

Researcher: What can I do Emma? I’m only one person. I’m not a missionary, I’m not a saviour.

EK: What are you then?

Researcher: I’m a workhorse, a donkey, a mule.
I caught this researcher in a moment of weakness. The project she was working on was not going as well as she had hoped. Utilising culturally-appropriate community development principles, she was supporting the development of a clan-based fishing business, an intervention that would hopefully improve nutrition and physical activity in the community. Although her community collaborators had been initially enthusiastic about the project, embracing the chance to access the skills and resources needed to start their own business, there had been little progression in recent months:

I am totally zapped of energy. You know how it is, when you go out there, you have a list of 10 things you need to get done and if you get 2 things done you are lucky and to get that done you have to do doglegs everywhere around the community….We buy the equipment, we facilitate training in food storage, occupational health and safety, first aid, book-keeping, we take them to talk to small businessmen in town. The boat just circulates around the family and there’s no local business. Maybe it takes me to go there and walk them through the whole process? Maybe we have to be the drivers because they sit around and watch us and laugh, ‘stupid whitefella’, that’s being cynical I know. People don’t want to take control, or they don’t know how to do it – that’s being nice about it. But maybe they do watch us, learning by observation and discussion...

Here the researcher cycles through frustration, anger, hurt and hope. Frustration about the apparent lack of motivation among her Indigenous collaborators, and anger over the possibility of being used, the boat bought with government money diverted for private purposes with no demonstrable ‘project outcome’. Beneath these feelings is the pain of the possibility that the Indigenous people we work hard for are secretly laughing at us ‘stupid whitefellas’. This is the fear of betrayal that I discussed in Chapter 6, the fear that you [white people] don’t know what we [Aboriginal people] say about you behind your back. But, somehow, the narrative returns to hope. The unsanitised alterity of intentional passivity (“People don’t want to take control”) is transformed – via the information-deficit model (“they don’t know how to do it”) - into something more palatable, something a postcoloniser can hope for. The narrative ends with hope in the community development process (“maybe they do watch us…”), hope in the possibility that underneath what appears to her as inaction and opportunism is an Indigenous community development process, and
hope that behind the scenes, the researcher’s efforts are having the desired pedagogic effect.

The experience of suffering is prominent in this account. The postcoloniser is “workhorse, donkey or mule”: stubbornly hard-working, indefatigable in the face of obstacle after obstacle. In particular, the postcoloniser doggedly soldiers on even when postcolonial logic fails them. This researcher sighs heavily (with frustration, fatigue, disappointment) as he recounts how the Indigenous stakeholders in his project appeared to stipulate two opposite things simultaneously:

We tried to involve a reference group to help us decide what the right way was and we took advice and we made changes. An example is: it seemed to be very important to have a majority of Indigenous staff members. So we did that. There was a trade-off there in terms of some staff lacking in some basic skills but that was okay, that seemed to be an important thing, and training and development was an explicit goal [of the project]. But then [sighs] we got some feedback that some people in the community didn’t want to participate because they knew the people who were on staff and they were worried about confidentiality. They preferred to go to someone that they didn’t know, didn’t know their family, that kind of thing. So I don’t know what you do. [Transcript 10:14]

I did what I was supposed to do, “the right way”, and it didn’t work. The reaction of this researcher is not anger, but tired confusion. Postcolonisers expect that working in Indigenous health will be difficult (recall Deb in Chapter 5), and they are not disappointed. The researcher below, who stopped working exclusively with Indigenous people to work in Asia, refers to this ‘tired confusion’ as “studied selflessness”:

I could never [work only in Indigenous health] because I find it overwhelming... it’s very easy to get caught into some kind of vortex of politics and jealousies ….you go back to what it was that makes it hard for some white researchers and the particularity of those white researchers who have worked [in Indigenous health] in a sustained way. And for many, I think there is a fairly studied selflessness about always being a passive white helper. [Transcript 11:4]

Here we have another formulation of the narrow space of recognition that constitutes a viable postcoloniser subjectivity. Studied selflessness is required to neutralise one’s agency
sufficiently to be a “passive white helper”. But studied selflessness does, on occasion, pay off. Although overwhelming confusion and frustration are common by-products of loving the other, sometimes its fruits are sweeter. Here a researcher talks about her previous experience working in a remote community:

When I got to Yarralin I was allocated a cultural support person, I didn’t arrange it but she would come to my place every day after work and we’d pull the blinds down and shut the windows and she’d tell me everything that had gone on [in the clinic], the true story and she’d make me hold my sides [with laughter] a lot of the time. And she’d tell me ‘you did this wrong, you’ve got to learn Jacqui’ and she taught me what I should have done…. And actually one of my cultural mentors is coming to visit next week. [Fieldnotes 18/5/05 4:31]

This story of intercultural consultation describes a relationship that most postcolonisers could only dream of. This white antiracist was blessed with an Indigenous person to guide her through, to ensure any negative impact of her agency is minimised, to counter the opacity of alterior social relations with the ‘true story’. Important here is the way that this relationship is an intimate one. It takes place behind closed doors, in the heat of the house instead of the breezy verandah, not even a window open, the weight of the air only slightly lessened by the whirring fans.

This is simultaneously an image of intimacy and of cultural appropriateness: the blinds pulled so that no-one can hear, including spirits that might listen in and use sorcery to punish her for gossiping. The effect is heightened by the last mention of her ongoing affective ties: the cultural mentor is coming to stay with her next week, they will sit again in the intimacy of Jacqui’s home with the freedom to say anything and everything out of range of prying ears. And to bring the point home, Jacqui later tells me that although cultural mentors are crucial for white people working in remote communities, their allocation can’t be mandated by the state. It can’t be assimilated into bureaucratic mechanisms of postcolonial logic through orientation manuals and departmental policy. The community has to want a particular white person to have a cultural mentor (because they like them, because they want them to stay a long time), and then the elders will arrange it – it is not done routinely but on the basis of the affective tie between the white antiracist and Indigenous people [Fieldnotes 18/5/05 4:32].
As I explored in Chapter 6, postcolonisers crave intimacy with the other, but this is an ambivalent craving. Most learn to hide it for fear of being exposed as harbouring an improper orientalist desire. Thus while I have drawn out the intimacy in the account above, it is not plain to see. The pleasure of intimacy is inextricably linked to another ambivalent experience: the suffering of service. It may seem strange, even distasteful to talk about the ‘suffering’ of white people, when it is Indigenous people that have so clearly suffered under (post)colonial regimes. Nonetheless, I ask the reader to approach the suffering of antiracist whites as an anthropological phenomenon rather than a moral one.216

I have described the frustration postcolonisers experience when their projects fail despite following postcolonial logic to the letter. This is one form of suffering. The mere existence of the affective tie between postcolonisers and Indigenous people is another potential source. We saw in Chapter 6 how a researcher was devastated when a dance, supposedly performed in their honour, was suspected as a generic dance performed for all white people. The bonds of friendship they thought were strong were threatened in that moment with dissolution: perhaps they don’t love me after all. Another researcher with both Asian and European heritage described a similarly upsetting incident she experienced while working in a remote community. At a community meeting, she was publicly insulted by a senior man:

He just said, ‘What would you Chinese people know? You have no business being here, you don’t know anything about our law’. I honestly nearly fell off the chair…not one of these people in that meeting came to speak up for me. And yet I’d worked with these people for four years really, really closely and not one of them spoke up for me….I was devastated. I was betrayed, devastated, unloved, untrustworthy… I’m not Aboriginal, you know, I’m **not** Aboriginal. I’m not indigenous, I’m

216 The bare anthropological record of white people in the Indigenous domain offers some support and an explanation for my observation of postcoloniser suffering. Sullivan describes the young radical white employees of an Aboriginal organisation in the Kimberley: Whenever confrontation surfaced between the [government] administration and Aboriginal groups these committed whites absorbed most of the aggression. This was partly because Aborigines themselves were frequently exploitative, being so concerned not to allow the capture of their organisations by whites that they tended to use and discard them, always sure that there were others to take their place. (Sullivan 1996:115) From my perspective, a key question is why this Aboriginal organisation could be assured that more white people prepared to ‘absorb their aggression’ could always be found.
identified as Chinese and it doesn’t matter if I lived there a hundred years I still wouldn’t be an Aboriginal person. [Transcript 17:17-8]217

Elsewhere in the discussion she rationalises the abuse, recognising that she was a convenient scapegoat used to resolve a clan conflict without anyone from the community being ‘shamed’. But this understanding does not greatly temper the sense of betrayal and rejection from those the postcoloniser has become close to. She laments that she is not only “betrayed, devastated, unloved” but also “untrustworthy”. Like the story of the duplicated dance, it is in the moment where affect is betrayed that it is revealed. In longing to be trusted, she wants to be different to other whites who are not only unloved, but whose motives cannot be trusted. This is a desire not just to be loved (as Indigenous people have been known to love those who don’t deserve it), but to be worthy of being loved.

As well as the suffering of betrayal, there is the suffering of service. Here a researcher talks about the hardships of staying at the community where she commonly works:

I go there and sleep on the floor at the women’s centre, I don’t have a proper shower... And the airline won’t let you put more than 3 things on the plane, and they ask you what you want to prioritise if you have to leave something, and I’m like, ‘it’s all a priority, this is my food and what I need for work.’ When I stay there the old chooks [term of endearment for old women] come along too to keep me company, which is a big ask for them, to leave their other responsibilities. But you’ve also got to feed them, and it’s hard to cook for 6 people out of a billycan and no knife. The toilets at the women’s centre when I went there last were disgusting, there was poo on the walls. So I went and bought them big mobs of cleaning materials out of my travel allowance.
[Fieldnotes 18/4/05 4:23-4]

Similar stories of poor accommodation abound in researchers’ tales of their field trips, along with complaints about the battered vehicles hired out at exorbitant rates by the town council, the poor range of food available at remote community stores, and the risk of being attacked by unrestrained dogs that roam the community. Note that this kind of suffering is

217 This researcher is one of the few in my research who identified as non-white. The position of non-white non-Indigenous people within my conceptual schema is a complex and interesting question. It is largely beyond my scope here, although I touch on it in the conclusion.
also tied to the affective relationship between the postcoloniser and Indigenous people. Alongside the narrative of deprivation there is also the pleasure of alterity. The suffering of poor accommodation, of poo on the walls, is not attributed as the fault of Indigenous people but is a shared suffering. We can clearly see the affective tie between her and the ‘old chooks’ who also suffer, sacrificing other responsibilities to look after her.

The figure of the mother can go some way to understanding this kind of suffering which seems so linked to intimacy. Mothers love and mothers suffer for their charges. Recall that the quote at the start of this section ends on a hopeful note. This transformation of despair into hope is another echo of the ‘mothering’ discourse I described in the previous section: a mother can see the naughty things your children do but you also see the potential. For these white antiracists, the endless hope of unconditional love is linked to the selflessness of enduring eternal frustration and disappointment.

These affective dimensions of postcoloniser experience only pertain to those Institute researchers who do fieldwork. About half of Institute researchers do not personally venture into remote communities, but manage projects, analyse data and write publications. Some of these researchers are eagerly waiting for an opportunity to work in remote communities. But others are Darwin-bound by choice. For these researchers, the intimacy and suffering that come with extreme proximity to alterity may be too much, and they abstain from forming these affective ties. The prospect of doing fieldwork in remote communities can arouse great fear, as it does for this researcher:

Still to this day I am deep-down terrified of research involving remote communities and remote people just because it’s, I guess it’s an understanding of my limitations. I don’t know that I have much to offer really. [Transcript 14:2]

This fear is likely to be multivalent. It might include a fear of radically different Indigenous people, but also a fear of his own reaction to that alterity. He might fear that in his own discomfort, he will be found out as personally deficient in his dealings with “remote people”, or even a closet racist. Another researcher, who began fieldwork after encouragement from her supervisor, frets as her first remote community trip looms:
I don’t know if I walk into a house and feel disgusted how I am going to hide that from people. I’m scared of offending people. I’m a clean freak, and they will be able to see it on my face…. My friends tell me that whatever I’m feeling they can see it on my face. And I told [my supervisor] this… He said, I think you’ll be fine, but I know the stats from the community – so many houses with toilets not working!” [Fieldnotes 20/10/04 2:12]

The researcher here is not afraid of alterity as much as her reaction to it. She is concerned that her inability to hide her disgust at overflowing toilets and mangy dogs will “offend” Indigenous people. Although she assures us it is her problem – she’s a “clean freak” – she fears that in her flinch, in her barely-concealed grimace they will see a white lady calling them dirty. As this researcher well knows, she needs to master the art of hiding her disgust to avoid reenacting colonial power relations.

Which brings me to another, related way to understand the suffering of white antiracists at the Institute: perhaps this suffering derives not from the love of the other, but from the guilt of the perpetrator. As I have discussed, postcolonisers are those that take on personal responsibility for the (post)colonial crimes of the Australian state. This can be a heavy burden. The researcher who left Indigenous health explains that he “just could not cope with the emotional overload of having Aboriginal politics and Aboriginal needs as central.” [Transcript 11:4] He described a formative experience of Indigenous suffering when he was a student activist in Brisbane:

Maureen Cockatoo and I were having a drink at the bar and she was talking about why she was called Cockatoo [she was allocated the name by white administrators]. Maureen is from Palm Island and by the time she’d finished talking to me about Palm Island I walked out of the pub in tears and that was it. And I just couldn’t go back. I couldn’t go back. I was at a point where I could have decided, ‘well, I’ll now work in Aboriginal health’, because I was an undergraduate student. I said, I can’t do this…I cannot carry this amount of hurt. [Transcript 11:4]

He sees the decision of a white antiracist to work with Indigenous people as an acceptance of postcolonial responsibility. For many postcolonisers, empathy with Indigenous suffering is inextricable from a sense of guilt, which in turn prescribes postcoloniser suffering. As a young man, this researcher could not cope with “feeling guilty by association” about
Indigenous oppression [Transcript 11:7]. Others that can cope with the guilt may believe they cannot feel guilty enough. This researcher is commenting on the process of ethical review that many researchers find arduous and frustrating:

There’s a lot of opportunity for ethics [committees] to make some changes to what’s being done [by researchers] and it’s definitely a good thing. It’s certainly harder for us but that’s the way it should be, it should be even more rigorous. [Transcript 9:20]

This is deliberate, almost masochistic, suffering. Through suffering, the postcoloniser can demonstrate their awareness of the dangers their subjectivity poses to Indigenous people and take the appropriate precautions. Their suffering is a badge of learned harmlessness. This perhaps explains Hamish’s benign attitude toward ethical review processes that have cost him much time and effort (see Chapter 5).

Armed with postcolonial logic, white antiracists can create postcolonial spaces where remedially different Indigenous people, once freed of (post)colonial oppression, can experience the benefits of modernity. But exposure to the possibility of radical difference sours this picture of the postcolony. This chapter has shown how the problem of white agency (which is inherent to postcolonial logic) becomes acute when postcolonial logic is undone. White antiracists at the Institute struggle to find a tenable model of white agency. The crisis of whiteness erupts in the shadow of the missionary, one who forbids, misunderstands and disciplines, but most importantly, one who imposes. Postcolonisers attempt to escape the missionary through maternal love and childlike innocence, attempts which show the importance of loving the other. Postcolonial spaces, supposedly designed to bring about postcolonial justice, turn out to be a stage where the pleasure of intimacy and the pain of suffering are enacted. The final chapter of this thesis explains why exposure to radical difference has such a dramatic effect on postcolonisers. It explores the twin

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218 This sentiment is also a reflection of the ethical guidelines that researchers working in Indigenous health must follow. White antiracists must be “able clearly to demonstrate personal integrity, specifically in the development of the proposal.” (National Health and Medical Research Council 2003a:20) An Indigenous researcher involved in writing the guidelines clarified this at an Institute seminar: “Researchers need to demonstrate their willingness to modify the [research] protocol. If there is evidence of negotiation, if they show that they have changed something, it sorts out other issues [i.e. their personal integrity].” [Fieldnotes 2:66 6/12/04] White antiracists must show how they changed their plans, bent to Indigenous desires, if they are to demonstrate their “integrity”. In effect, they must demonstrate the inverted power relations of postcolonial spaces through the bureaucratic process of ethical review.
dilemmas of postcolonial logic that are revealed, dilemmas that threaten the possibility of an ethical relationship with the other.
Part 4 – The postcolonial condition

In the last section, I explain the two dilemmas that underpin postcolonial logic: the *dilemma of historical continuity*, and the *dilemma of social improvement*. I explore the various ways that postcolonisers make their subject position livable once the certainty of postcolonial logic has been lost. In the conclusion I consider some implications of my argument for Australian Indigenous policy, for liberal multiculturalism, and for the project of peaceful coexistence in the postcolony.
Chapter 9: The twin dilemmas of postcolonial logic

The thing that bothers me is if it hasn’t been taken up well and the community don’t own it, well do they really want it? [Transcript 13:17]

Maybe in traditional Aboriginal culture, spiritual health was more important than living longer…[the question is] whether that’s a better life, a better quality life than a shorter life lived to the full, a shorter life that is more spiritually fulfilling. [Transcript 10:12]

Many postcolonisers at the Institute have wondered, aloud or in private, whether they really want our interventions designed to improve their lives, or whether they value more highly a shorter life that is more spiritually fulfilling. These are examples of the fundamental critique I alluded to in the previous chapter.

The result of a fundamental critique is that ethical white action becomes an impossibility. If Indigenous people don’t really want our interventions, if they truly have radically different priorities, then the project of statistical equality becomes a burden imposed upon them. Not postcolonial justice at all, but merely the most recent colonial imposition. Once this frightening possibility surfaces, the narrow space where Institute researchers can be recognised as antiracists evaporates altogether. This is what the researcher in the previous chapter warned about: thinking too hard about Indigenous health makes you question the whole validity of your existence. The ‘postcolonial condition’ is the lived experience of inhabiting a subjectivity that is forever threatening to disappear.

Out of context, the doubt expressed in the two quotes above may seem racist. How can a white antiracist suggest that Indigenous people want the shorter lives that are the embodiment of colonial oppression? Surely, they cannot be suggesting that Indigenous people enjoy the trauma of frequent funerals, the pain of limbs amputated because of diabetes, the throbbing of infected skin sores?

Postcolonisers are only too aware of the racist connotations of their musings. Such questions are not posed lightly, nor are they uttered publicly (it is only my insider status as
observing participant that brings them to light). The last thing Institute researchers want to do is to degrade Indigenous people or provide ammunition for others to do so. They are well rehearsed in the discursive techniques of postcolonial logic which tell them that if communities appear uninterested in improving their health or in increasing their life expectancy, this is because of poverty, marginalisation, and colonial dispossession. And yet, exposure to the unsanitised alterity of gambling away welfare payments and Tim Tams for breakfast leads postcolonisers to ask themselves these disturbing questions about shorter, more fulfilling lives.

Postcolonisers know that their failure to employ the inauthenticity critique appears to be victim-blaming, but for them, the distress caused by rejecting this critique stems from far more than the appearance of racism. It is not only the standing of Indigenous people that is at stake, but the very feasibility of their own subject positions. Postcolonial logic binds the morality of Indigenous people and white antiracists tightly together. As we have seen (in Chapter 4), Indigenous people must be part-authentic and traditional, part-self-determined and forward-looking. They must genuinely desire to improve their social indicators, to reduce violence, poverty, sickness, illiteracy and unemployment. In turn, white antiracists must act to remedy the effect of colonialism and improve social indicators, while always respecting and preserving the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous people. If either of these two halves is threatened, postcolonial logic fails. Those who inhabit the postcolonial frontier feel the effects of this intertwined morality. In their suspiciously-racist musings on radical difference, they threaten not just their recognition as antiracists, but the viability of both white antiracism and the remedialist project of postcolonial justice.

Once the possibility of radical difference causes the postcoloniser to reject an inauthenticity critique and instead wonder if they really want it, the twin dilemmas I explain in this chapter act as an escalator that rapidly leads to the decline of the remedialist project. Once doubting has begun, this slippery slope is near inevitable. It ends with this: if Indigenous are so different as to think about health in a different way, our attempts to help them improve their health (or their education or their housing) are really imposing our belief systems on them, and we are no better than missionaries.
Recall the Prices’ description of “missionaries, misfits and mercenaries” I discussed in the previous chapter. In the category of ‘missionaries’ they recognised the familiar “old, Christian and conservative” but also the “new, rationalist and radical”, such as “feminists, environmentalists, various brands of socialists, anti-nuclear activists and others.” One might venture to add ‘left-wing health researchers’ to this list. The description of these left-wing whites is designed to goad:

The new missionaries behave like nineteenth century evangelists. They preach, cajole, berate and moralise. The worst sin in their eyes is the imposition of values. That is, of course, the imposition of values not their own. To them the world would so obviously benefit from the adoption of their own values that they don’t see it as an imposition. (Price & Price 1998)

As the authors are aware, this is the worst accusation one can level at a white antiracist. They abhor above all else the very thing they stand accused of: that they are imposing their values on Indigenous people. Being that which one despises is the fate of the postcoloniser once postcolonial logic breaks down. This Institute researcher who is also a clinician expresses her worry this way:

We offer inducements to do research at every level. I don’t know where it stops, it just pervades all research that gets done, doesn’t it, at some level or another. And it’s either open bullying or not quite so open bullying. I don’t know the answer to this. That’s why I’ve sort of backed off with research a bit because I just don’t know the answer to these things and I find them very troubling. [Transcript 4:11]

I will return to this reflex of withdrawal, of backing away, later in this chapter. First, I explain the twin dilemmas I have referred to: the dilemma of historical continuity and the dilemma of social improvement.

Both of these dilemmas stem from remediable difference, the product of an unstable union between remedialism and orientalism. Despite its outward sheen (seen for instance in stories of yams and saltwater in Chapter 7), remediable difference is a rickety vessel for traversing postcolonial spaces. Orientalism tilts us toward radical difference, threatening to capsize the remedialist project; remedialism steers us back toward sameness, nearly out of
view of the differences that lured us onto the postcolonial frontier in the first place. Orientalism without remedialism removes our drive to help, and thus our reason for being there. It turns us into voyeurs, or worse, anthropologists. But remedialism without orientalism turns us into assimilationists. Without difference filling our sails, the tide of liberal melioration leads us ever toward the ideal ‘healthy subject’ which, as we will see, turns out to be white and middle-class.

Remediable difference provisionally solves this predicament by constructing a difference that will yield to reasoned intervention. But the possibility of radical difference – of a shorter life that is more spiritually fulfilling – makes remediable difference visible to the postcoloniser. Remediable difference is then stultified in two ways. First, history returns to haunt the postcoloniser, reminding them of past remedialisms and their unhappy fate. As remediable difference is made visible, so to is the historical discontinuity that shields it from the judgment directed at past remedialisms. Postcolonisers are no longer comforted by the certainty that they were wrong and we have learned. This is the dilemma of historical continuity.

The second dilemma follows from the first, and is more shocking. This dilemma locates the assimilationist tendency not in past remedialisms, but in remedialism itself. As Von Sturmer puts it:

What remedialism means in practice, according to my experience, is more of the same. In short, it becomes, regardless of intentions, merely a further step - often a sledge-hammer blow - in the direction of assimilation....We get caught in a great circularity, and behind it we suspect the continuing workings of a covert Social Darwinism, notions of European Cultural Supremacy and a Social Evolutionism that take it for granted that change is inevitable, not along new lines (which might represent a legitimate use of social evolutionary thought, adaptations in terms of potentials and responses to actual historically-produced environments) but according to the West's historical consciousness of its own history of change: in other words, the future becomes for the other (though not subjectively) merely a replay of what the West conceives itself as having endured.

(von Sturmer 1995:113)
In this lurid vision of remedialism, there is no remediable difference that can be brought into the norm through reasoned intervention; no self-determined Indigene that willingly adopts the positive aspects of Western lifeworlds while remaining authentically Indigenous. No matter how well we mean, regardless of intentions, the effort to help Indigenous people can only harm them. Von Sturmer suggests that the goals of Western social improvement are incommensurable with Indigenous lifeworlds. (In the conclusion I will revisit the “new lines” of social change Von Sturmer offers in place of remedialism.) This chilling possibility is the dilemma of social improvement.

The dilemma of historical continuity

Lea’s ethnography of white health bureaucrats in the Northern Territory highlighted the role of history for postcolonisers:

If Aboriginal people act like they do because of what was done to them in the past, then the action this behooves is clear: we must refuse to be like the oppressors of yesteryear (by being more inclusive, more culturally sensitive, more willing to recognise, respect and even avail cultural difference) in order to ‘turn things around.’ (Lea 2002:200)

White antiracists distinguish themselves from contemporary white racists of various kinds – conservative governments and judges, rednecks, exploitative mining companies – but also white racists of the past.219 An important feature of Institute researchers is their historical consciousness. A doctor-turned-historian of Indigenous health recalled that before he knew anything about the history of research, he “had somehow long known that past research was wrong, that it was bad, that it was racist. I do not know the cause of my certainty, but I know that it is shared by most of my Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues.” (Thomas 2003:2). Like the subjects of Lea’s ethnography, Institute researchers are mindful of Australia’s colonial history, and consider invasion and colonisation to be the ultimate cause of Indigenous ill-health. A diagram popular in Indigenous public health makes this diagnosis clear (Figure 19).

219 Parts of the following paragraphs draw from Kowal 2004 and 2006.
**Figure 19:** Colonisation as the underlying cause of Indigenous ill-health (Mathews 1996:36).

This diagram, first penned by a prominent health researcher in 1995, was recently reproduced in a British Medical Journal special issue on Indigenous health, cementing its salience for years to come (Cunningham & Stanley 2003). The Cunningham & Stanley version of Figure 19 included two additional elements. Alongside “COLONISATION” were added “cultural genocide” and “stolen children”. These additions refer to a specific era of Australia’s colonial history: the assimilation era. In learning that colonisation is the cause of Indigenous ill-health, postcolonisers learn that their predecessors were misguided in many ways.²²⁰ Above all, they were misguided in thinking that colonisation might be beneficial to Indigenous people through the mechanism of assimilation.

²²⁰ The historiography of Indigenous health research provides a similar narrative of misguidedness as researchers influenced by ‘social Darwinism’ attempted to show why Aborigines were an inferior and dying race (Anderson 2002b; Thomas 2001).
Like the discourse of the missionary, the discourse of the assimilation era in Indigenous health is simplified and partial. The historical consensus is that the ‘assimilation era’ began in the late 1930s when the government realised that the ‘full-blood’ Indigenous population was not dying out (as ‘social Darwinism’ prescribed) and the ‘half-caste’ population was increasing. Assimilation was seen by the government as the mechanism of absorbing Indigenous people into the white Australian polity (Rowse 2005b). It is there that consensus ends with even these bare facts being contested by some. For example, Indigenous historian John Maynard argues that establishment of the Native Institute for Aboriginal Children at Parramatta in 1814 was an early manifestation of assimilation, and that assimilation persisted late into the twentieth century (Maynard 2005). In contrast, Rowse highlights A.P. Elkin’s benign view that assimilation was about “removing Aborigines from beneath restrictive legislation, administering education and health services, improving their working conditions, and combating white prejudice”, goals that few present-day white antiracists or Aborigines could argue with (Rowse 2005b:9).

The depiction of the assimilation era in the popular discourse of the current self-determination era is comparatively unified. Assimilation is most commonly associated with the removal of Indigenous children, a phenomenon known as the ‘stolen generations’ and widely equated with cultural genocide (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). An educational web resource funded by the federal education department to combat racism tells the history of state policy toward Indigenous people this way:

1937: First Commonwealth and State conference on ‘native welfare’ adopts ‘assimilation’ as the national policy. In practice, assimilation policies lead to the destruction of Aboriginal identity and culture, justification of dispossession and the removal of Aboriginal children....Assimilation means, in practical terms, that it is expected that all persons of Aboriginal birth or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do. (Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers 2006)

Respected Indigenous professor, Mick Dodson, similarly puts it:

Assimilation relied on the well-established and widely-accepted view that we were inferior to white Australians, that our way of life, our culture and our languages were substandard. It assumed that we would willingly give up our Aboriginality and adopt the dominant white culture. Assimilation
presupposed that the Indigenous people of Australia were a dying race. Embedded within the policy of assimilation was a clear expectation of the cultural extinction of Indigenous peoples. (Dodson 1996)

In popular discourse, assimilation is portrayed as white people dictating how Indigenous people should live, and tantamount to cultural genocide. Clearly, this is something to distinguish oneself from if one wishes to be recognised as a white antiracist.

Postcoloniser subjectivities depend on the maintenance of historical discontinuity with Australia’s colonial past, and most importantly with the assimilation era. Indeed, the very function of the concepts of postcolonisers and postcolonial spaces is to enact a break with the colonial past, a break that must be continually performed in settler-colonies where the invader never left (as I explored in Chapter 2). The proximity of colonial history – both in chronological time and in space, as it sits constantly in the back of the mind – means that postcolonisers must actively distinguish themselves from their discredited predecessors.

The dilemma of historical continuity occurs when postcolonisers are reminded that the process of colonisation which initiated the cascade of Indigenous malaise (Figure 19) has never ended and that the Australian government that (directly or indirectly) pays their wages is a continuation of the state that destroyed culture and stole children. Once historical discontinuity falters, the postcoloniser is left to wonder: Are we any different from our well-meaning but ultimately misguided predecessors?

In order to resist this dilemma, the maintenance of historical discontinuity is built into postcolonial logic. Recall that postcolonial logic is a meld of remedialism and orientalism. While orientalism causes all sorts of problems for postcolonisers (who must show they are anti-orientalist, as we saw in Chapter 6), it performs one important positive function. It proves that postcolonisers are aware of Indigenous cultural distinctiveness, and thus not assimilationist.

Remedialism, in isolation, is assimilationist. It assumes a universal healthy man and works to make others better resemble him. If the Indigenous person that is recognised is the self-

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221 Anthropologists, of course, are also subject to the dilemma of historical continuity (see Huggan 1994).
determined Indigene alone, white antiracists may be accused of forcing Indigenous people to “live like white Australians do” (Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers 2006). When the Indigenous person embodies both the self-determined Indigene and the authentic Indigenous voice simultaneously, the postcoloniser can be assured she is not making them white. She can relax with the knowledge that in the imagined future when Indigenous people have the same health statistics as white people, they will not be white because they will still have their culture. Historical discontinuity is thus achieved through the union of remedialism and orientalism. And though remedialism needs to recognise difference to avoid being assimilationist, it is through this recognition of difference that postcolonial logic is undone.

Understandably, Institute researchers are highly sensitive to assimilationist apparitions. Here a researcher criticises a colleague who gave a talk at the Institute about a project that attempted to deliver culturally-appropriate health education:

When she was talking about it, it was like, ‘that sounds reasonable, that sounds quite interesting’ and then you see the pictures of the health education and [you see] that power imbalance straight away….all the white people had all the information and were standing around, telling people their white perspective about what health is and the other [Indigenous] people were sitting back listening. I mean, how is this anything new? This has happening since, you know, the nurses came with the missionaries and told them [Indigenous people] how to be hygienic. [Transcript 9:7]

The researcher who gave this “reasonable”, “interesting” talk was clearly proficient in the verbal discourse of postcolonial logic. She could effortless reference the ‘Indigenist methodologies’, the ‘cultural protocols’, the ‘two-way learning’ that showed her project enacted a break with the colonial past. It was only when she showed photographs of her project in action that the sheen of historical discontinuity wore off, revealing a discomforting imprint of the past. To the researcher listening and recounting this narrative, it was ultimately the visual register that was the most compelling. His colleague sounded okay, but the look of a circle of black bodies around a white person who is telling them

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222 See Kowal 2006 for an exploration of the various discourses of culture in Indigenous health and their function. The field of development studies has interrogated other terms such as ‘community’, ‘custom’ and ‘participation’ in a similar way (see Carney & Watts 1990; Moore 1999; Mosse 2001).
something (even via a culturally-appropriate flipchart) is distasteful. He tells me that a visibly Aboriginal person in place of the white one would have been “more appropriate” [Transcript 9:7], avoiding the look of colonialism.

The researcher below is talking about informed consent. She complains that the remote Indigenous people she approaches to be involved in her research project too readily agree to take part. She fears that they agree straight away, shunning the speech she has prepared judiciously outlining the risks and benefits of their participation, simply because they trust her.223

I find it really difficult to engage people to hear it out, people are generally preoccupied with a million and one other things and it’s a not a priority for them. …I find they tend to hang on the first couple of words you say, so if you’re talking about finding ways to stop kids from getting sick, well that’s it, [you’re] cut off, [they] sign the piece of paper…If I was the person, if it was someone coming to my home and asking me to be involved in research I would be a lot more enquiring, you know? I feel that there’s a huge amount of trust in it and it leaves people very vulnerable to being manipulated. And I would hate someone to come away and say, ‘Oh, they didn’t really understand your research.’ And you think [to yourself], ‘Oh well, you know I really tried to explain to people’. [Transcript 3:6-7]

In this narrative, Indigenous people are unconcerned with protecting themselves from prying researchers, apparently happy to trust a virtual stranger after minimal interaction. In this way they are radically different from the white researcher who would be “a lot more enquiring”. The researcher is understandably concerned that Indigenous people are vulnerable to manipulation. But she is also concerned that people might think she is doing the manipulation. She worries that an observer might assume that the cursory explanation of the research indicated that the Indigenous subject was coerced into signing a form. Again, it is the look of colonialism, manifested through the apparent absence of the self-determined Indigene, that produces discomfort. Perhaps they acquiesced to rid themselves of the uninvited white visitor; perhaps they agreed in the hope of employment, or a small

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223 This problem, of too-willing research subjects, contrasts with the story in Chapter 4 where people would not sign the form for reasons that were also uncertain. This discomfort with it being ‘too easy’ to enlist research participants may also stem from the expectation that it should be hard for white people to do research with Indigenous people because they deserve to suffer (see Chapter 8). Note that the discourse that predominates in southeastern Indigenous Australia is very much one of resisting research and researchers (see VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit 2000).
loan; perhaps they had formed an affective tie with this researcher during her years working in remote communities; perhaps they liked her face. Whatever the reason, such an experience raises the spectre of colonialism and the concomitant dilemma of historical continuity.

Importantly, this researcher attributes their apparent lack of self-determination to ‘different priorities’. *A million and one other things* are more important than adequately protecting themselves from this white lady asking them to give a blood sample. Note the echo of the previous discussion of work attendance at the end of Chapter 7. It is also ‘competing priorities’ that prevent even educated, motivated remote Indigenous people from regularly attending work. When the self-determined Indigene fails to appear, despite all reasonable efforts, the possibility of radical difference surfaces. And when radical difference makes postcolonial logic visible, its discursive tricks, including historical discontinuity, are rendered inoperative.

It is Indigenous alterity that most often suspends our disbelief in historical continuity and simultaneously casts us in the role of the assimilationist. Radical difference undermines the careful construction of remediable difference that postcolonial logic relies on. The persistence of radical difference, despite decades of empowerment, serves as an unwelcome reminder that white dominance may also be invidiously persistent. If Indigenous people are radically different to white antiracists, then we are simply the latest in a long line of whites extolling the virtues of foreign values.

We have seen how Institute researchers are careful to avoid the look of colonialism. The dilemma of historical continuity – that is, the possibility we resemble our predecessors too closely – also stretches forward in time. Postcolonisers fear that they will be judged as harshly as they judge assimilationists. This is what Povinelli calls “the future perfect” after the grammatical construction: “we will have been wrong” (Povinelli 2002:155). The *dilemma of social improvement* concerns this imagined postcolonial future, when our remedialist labour finally bears fruit. In exploring this dilemma, we revisit one aspect of the *fundamental critique* that unbinds postcolonial logic: *In attempting to equalise Indigenous statistics with those of everyone else, are we just making them white?*
The dilemma of social improvement

The dilemma of historical continuity is the fear that the practices of the self-determination era resemble the assimilation era. The related dilemma of social improvement is the fear that the practices of the self-determination era are assimilation.

We have seen that the failure of remote Indigenous people to adequately participate in the informed consent process creates the uncomfortable appearance that research is an ‘imposition’ – a word that signifies the assimilation era. The possibility that Indigenous people have a radically different approach to protecting their rights threatens the concept of remediable difference. Remediable difference is critical to postcolonisers, as this concept promises that if researchers take adequate care, Indigenous people will not be further oppressed by participating in research, and their health will eventually improve.

While the dilemma of historical continuity threatens remediable difference, it still offers a way out. Perhaps this resemblance to assimilation is misleading, and postcolonial logic is not inherently an imposition. Although it might look as if Indigenous people are unconcerned about their rights when they sign the form too quickly, there are a number of other, more palatable, interpretations. Perhaps knowledge of the project had already spread through the community, and hence potential participants were already sufficiently informed to sign right away (this explanation turns radical difference into remediable difference). Or alternatively, perhaps the researcher was not using appropriate language in her description of the project (this explanation is an inauthenticity critique). These interpretations explain away radical difference and reinstate historical discontinuity, or at least its possibility.

In contrast with the dilemma of historical continuity, which permits reinterpretation, the dilemma of social improvement is final. This dilemma occurs when radical difference has once and for all destroyed the possibility of remediable difference: the possibility of melding remedialism to orientalism. The dilemma of social improvement spells the end of a viable remedialism. Without the tempering effect of orientalism, remedialism becomes a mechanism for making Indigenous people more like white middle-class people.footnote

footnote Folds (2001) makes this argument in relation to the Pintupi.
There are two ways to understand how remedialism and orientalism are decoupled. First, there is the idea that Indigenous people have different conceptions of health from white people. Recall from the section on ‘Sameness and Difference’ in Chapter 6 that the first National Aboriginal Health Strategy defines Aboriginal culture as “the very antithesis of western ideology” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989:ix). An Indigenous researcher at the Institute similarly stressed that Indigenous notions of health “challenge a Western construct of health, it’s holistic, and it’s different and more complex than the holism of Western culture.” [Fieldnotes 30/6/05 4:73]

As I discussed in Chapter 6, the assertion of Indigenous particularity is in tension with the remedialist goal of equalising life expectancy. The postcoloniser contemplates the devastating possibility that if Indigenous people have a radically different conception of health, perhaps our interventions to improve their health are an imposition. It is this possibility that drives a white researcher, explaining her plan for an exercise program in a remote community, to say: “I want to reintroduce it by saying it is an Aboriginal concept; it is not just imposing a Western view of exercise” (McDonald 2003:23). Or as one Institute researcher put it in a more general sense, “we shouldn’t impose a Western idea of length of life on people”. [Fieldnotes 5/11/04 2:46]

Other Institute researchers also worry about this possibility. Some are explicitly aware of the tension between discourses of health improvement and discourses of cultural maintenance:

If you want improved health and eating you need to sacrifice things because you are taking on a capitalistic lifestyle that is more about ‘I’ than ‘us’. Can people on remote communities do that while fulfilling their kinship obligations? More successful families get criticism, people say they don’t get visitors. [Fieldnotes 14/4/05 4:18]

This researcher wonders whether the ability to eat better and be healthier is hampered by kinship obligations which require accommodating large numbers of visiting relatives (and any ‘anti-social’ behaviours they bring with them). He fears that Indigenous culture has to
be “sacrificed” if health is to improve. The researcher below expressed their disillusionment with the whole enterprise of lengthening life expectancy:

It just doesn’t add up. You extend people’s lives so they can live in misery and half-death. I don’t see the point. And then we are trying to impose that on every other culture that we encounter. And wonder why people don’t comply…...who are we to say what’s right and what’s wrong and what’s healthy and what isn’t? [Transcript 9:13]

Note yet another use of word “impose”. Once radical difference has punctured postcolonial logic, unmitigated remedialism is an imposition. That the remedialist effort aims to do things generally considered ‘good’, like improving health or protecting human rights, is irrelevant. Faced with alterity, the postcoloniser loses the certainty of universal good, and is left pondering: who are we to say?

The second way of understanding the dilemma of social improvement is via the statistical archive that generates the remedialist effort. Recall from Chapter 6 that statistical inequality – ‘the gap’ between lines on the graph – is the focus of remedialism (see Figure 13). When the gap is closed, when Indigenous people do not live 17 years less, then postcolonial justice will have been enacted.

But Indigeneity is not the only gap. There are others. There is the income gap, the education gap, the class gap, and the gap between privileged and deprived neighbourhoods (Turrell et al. 2006). Whichever graph you care to look at, those who have the greatest health, those who are always represented on the top line of the graph are white, middle-class, educated people. It is their way of life that is responsible for their good health, everything from exposing young children to books, having only a few people per house, buying and cooking nutritious food, not smoking, experiencing less stress, and regularly accessing high-quality health care (see Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002c). (Note that in 225 People with blue-collar jobs, the less educated, the poor and those in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to smoke, be obese, add salt to their food, and suffer poorer health (Turrell et al. 2006). Note that these income, education and place of residence gaps also apply within the Indigenous population (recall for instance the discussion in the introduction about the different health status of Indigenous people in remote versus non-remote areas) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b). The gaps are substantial; for instance, Indigenous males in New South Wales are more urbanised, richer, and better educated than Indigenous males in the Northern Territory and have a median age of death which nearly 10 years higher (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002a:75).
this list of ‘ways of life’ I am not distinguishing between structural and agential aspects which may contribute to all the elements in this list.) To the extent that statistics construct what we mean by ‘healthy’ (as I explored in Chapter 6, statistics are a powerful way of constructing reality), ‘healthy’ is equivalent to having a good income, a professional job, a high level of education, and living in a privileged area. These are characteristics racialised as white.226

So, although postcolonial logic sees the ‘gap’ as a barometer of colonial oppression, there is another way to look at it. The smaller the ‘gap’, the more closely the ways of life of the lower line resemble that of the upper line. The question that haunts the postcoloniser is whether a culturally-distinct way of life gives you a different line on the graph. And if so, when we eliminate the gap, do we eliminate this distinctiveness? Lea expresses the dilemma this way:

Can the good health that arises out of the historical symbiosis of capitalism, colonialism and neoliberal democracy in the modern era be generalised across colonised spaces without imposing its own structuring (indigenous-culture-destroying) social and historical inheritance? (Lea 2002:12)

Postcolonial logic avoids this quandary by associating the gap exclusively with unsanitised alterity. Indigenous people are less healthy because of oppression. Therefore, when oppression is lifted, they will lose their unsanitised alterity (the substance use, the gambling, the truancy, the violence) and become healthy subjects. As postcolonial logic divorces unsanitised alterity from the sanitised (cosmology, hunting, art, kinship), sanitised alterity can be quarantined from this transition from unhealthy to healthy,227 to remain once the transition is complete and ensure that these newly-healthy subjects are identifiably Indigenous. While this reasoning provided by postcolonial logic is highly effective in Indigenous health discourse, it ceases to protect postcolonisers from the dilemma of social

226 It is difficult to identify the ‘white’ population in Australia as ‘white’ is not an ethnic identifier in statistical collections, as it is in the U.S. For a long time we have only identified the country of birth, with a question on ‘ancestry’ included in the 2001 census. Nevertheless, the culture of the educated middle-class is a predominantly a white culture in Australia as in other English-speaking countries. The success of migrants from south-east and south Asia and their descendents in recent decades does not necessarily threaten the racialisation of privilege as white (see Wu 2002; Zhou 2004).

227 In some Indigenous health discourse, sanitised culture is not only depicted as unaffected by the substantial societal change required for remote Indigenous people to share the same statistics as other Australians, but is considered to be the therapy that will improve health (see Brady 2004; Kowal 2006; Sutton 2001).
improvement once the distinction between sanitised and unsanitised alterity has been erased (see Chapter 7).

In essence, the dilemma of social improvement is a commentary on the imagined future of liberal multiculturalism (Povinelli 2002). This is a time when Indigenous Australians share the same health and social statistics as non-Indigenous Australians, yet retain full enjoyment of their cultural distinctiveness, which in turn enriches us all. Because Indigenous people will retain their ‘culture’ in the imagined future time where the life-expectancy gap has yielded to reasoned intervention, we are not imposing our culture, erasing their difference or making them white.

As a prominent Indigenous researcher commented in an Institute seminar, “we [Indigenous people] might one day have the same health statistics as everyone else but not at the cost of being indistinguishable from non-Aboriginal Australia” [Fieldnotes 3/6/05 4:57]. Historically, ‘indistinguishability’ – incorporation into the white majority – has been the destiny of minority groups that are socioeconomically successful (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Zhou 2004). But unlike other ethnic minorities, Indigenous Australians are defined in opposition to white settlers. Being indistinguishable is thus tantamount to social death, and remedialism becomes cultural genocide.

The dilemma of social improvement, like the dilemma of historical continuity, is a pervasive but unacknowledged force at the Institute. Postcolonisers do not openly discuss these dilemmas for fear of appearing to support assimilation on the one hand (by suggesting that improving Indigenous health is making them white), or appearing to naturalise Indigenous ill-health on the other (by suggesting that Indigenous ill-health is related to Indigenous cultural distinctiveness). Nevertheless, postcolonisers at the Institute must deal with these aporias every day. The final section of this chapter examines the different ways that white antiracists make this postcolonial condition livable.

**Living with the postcolonial condition**
I have shown how the breakdown of postcolonial logic compromises postcoloniser subjectivities. The already-narrow space in which white antiracist agency can ethically exist is obliterated, and the postcoloniser cannot avoid imposing themselves on the other, perhaps making them white. This is what I call the postcolonial condition. It is the normal state of affairs on the postcolonial frontier (the spaces where white antiracists encounter alterior Indigenous lifeworlds). Postcolonisers who inhabit the postcolonial frontier must then face the task of making the postcolonial condition livable.

The postcolonial condition is either temporarily or permanently resolved by postcolonisers in a number of ways. The first strategy is avoidance. Postcolonisers can retreat into postcolonial logic, holding fast to its precepts of overstructuration and the inauthenticity critique (see Chapter 6). If the shadow of assimilation is cast over them, they banish it by asserting that white intervention is not assimilation because Indigenous people themselves desire it and are in charge of it, and if they aren’t, they should be. If the dilemma of social improvement threatens, they highlight the structural barriers that stop Indigenous people from addressing problems of smoking, gambling, and nutrition.

However, for some postcolonisers, the twin dilemmas of the postcolonial condition cannot be so easily contained. There are two further discursive strategies that are useful. The first is what I call the fantasy of white withdrawal. Some researchers at the Institute have pondered the possibility that white people could vacate the postcolonial frontier, removing their imposing presence. This is a fantasy of decolonisation, of not just inverting colonial power relations (the goal of postcolonial spaces) but reversing them.

Recall in the previous chapter how one researcher referred to white people as ‘contaminants’. She believes in leaving Indigenous people to formulate their own health priorities and not interfering. But this principle cannot work in practice because of the possibility of contamination:

[T]here’s so many other contaminants and this is where my anxiety comes from because I think, ‘Well I’ve got to say something because some other non-Indigenous prick’s going to come along [laughs] and could really contaminate that whole situation’. [Transcript 15:14]
In this account, white agency will inevitably infect the purity of Indigenous processes and lead them astray, necessitating her intervention. She is not happy to intervene. Her agency is “fraught” and “problematic”, but the “least of other evils”, better than other whites who are unconcerned with the long-term wellbeing of communities [Transcript 15:14].

Her ‘anxiety’ reveals an attachment to the fantasy of decolonisation. *If only our contaminating presence never was.* It points to a longing for a reversion of history, erasing the COLONISATION that leads to the cascade of Indigenous ill-health and social malaise (see Figure 19). While turning back time is the extreme of this fantasy, it has a marginally more realistic version in the form of withdrawal from the postcolonial frontier. If we cannot erase history, perhaps we can at least vacate. Here one researcher draws on this discourse:

*I hope you don’t show this to Ian Anderson but I honestly believe, like Noel Pearson,\(^\text{228}\) I think that we have to be really critically hard. Otherwise, really, we all pull out. Like I’m now starting to hear at research sites, ‘You Whitefellas shouldn’t be here’. Right, okay, well let’s pull out. Let’s research projects pull out, let’s the store owners pull out, let’s pull all the welfare monies, ‘Okay, you’re on your own now’. That would make people **have** to become really self-sufficient. [Transcript 17:20]

Some would read this quote as revealing the true racist nature of someone claiming to be ‘antiracist’. They would argue that only a racist could advocate this complete abdication of state responsibility, both denying Indigenous people their human rights and denying the duty of the government to repair the social destruction that colonisation has wrought. The speaker clearly knew that her words could be taken this way, and made a point of asking me not to disclose these comments to a prominent Indigenous health researcher who is also my supervisor.

Alternatively, we can read the quote another way: as a fantasy. The researcher has spent years working on empowerment projects in remote communities, and feels that things are getting worse rather than better. Her fantasy of white withdrawal is an expression of hopelessness: “I never thought I’d say things like that. I’m still empathetic, but unless we

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\(^{228}\) Noel Pearson is an Indigenous lawyer and social entrepreneur who has launched a trenchant critique of self-determination policies and encourages Indigenous communities to ‘take responsibility’ for their problems in partnership with government (see Pearson 2000 and http://www.cyi.org.au/).
do something, unless something really radical is done, they’re on the road to implosion.” [Transcript 17:21]. If remedialism has proven unable to make Indigenous people ‘self-sufficient’, and has instead disempowered and angered them (“you whitefellas shouldn’t be here”), this postcoloniser wonders whether removing white agency is the solution.

Caught between the dilemmas of historical continuity and of social improvement, there is no avenue for the postcoloniser to safely proceed. There is the hopeful fantasy of escape: maybe, if we leave them entirely alone, we can stop inflicting injuries on them. Or there is the final strategy of acceptance. The postcoloniser who chooses acceptance is one who is aware of their tainted subject position, and who keeps on working anyway. In a sense this group typifies the postcolonial frontier. They are not just aware of the underlying dilemmas of the postcolony, but consciously inhabit them.

Once the remedialist project has been sullied, a new basis for postcoloniser subjectivities must be found, or avoidance and withdrawal are the only options. Thus in accounts of acceptance, we see postcolonisers re-locating an acceptable form of white agency. This is white agency that is pointedly divorced from the task of improving Indigenous health. Consider this example:

I don't have any great illusions about you know, what I might achieve working in Aboriginal health compared to somebody else. But, you know, I would prefer to be doing that, I would prefer to have this sort of complexity. [Transcript 6:17]

The great illusions this postcoloniser might have once had – to empower Indigenous people, to create opportunities for self-determination – are now abandoned. What is left is a personal preference for ‘complexity’. The retreat from postcolonial logic is clear here:

I don't think I ever will make a difference ever. I can put that down straight...Why am I doing it? Because, I guess it challenges me as much as it frustrates me. For me, it's more finding that conduit between the two different world views. [Transcript 12:17]

“Make a difference” is a key phrase in Indigenous health (and many other remedialist endeavours). As well as other researchers quoted in this thesis, both Deb and Hamish in
Chapter 5 used this phrase to express what white people are trying to do in Indigenous health. To “make a difference” is shorthand for the goal of white agency in postcolonial logic. We all strive to make a positive impact on Indigenous health, at least partly to counter the privileges we have derived from Indigenous dispossession.

This researcher distances herself from this goal. The discourse of acceptance is thus also a form of withdrawal. Rather than a withdrawal of white agency altogether, it is a withdrawal from remedialism and the worthy goals of postcolonial justice. It is a retreat into a more modest form of white agency that simply enjoys the challenge and complexity of the postcolonial frontier.

This modest desire is still vulnerable to disapproval. To ‘enjoy’ the other can be criticised as orientalist, and morally reprehensible when the ‘enjoyed’ minority is experiencing so much suffering. These postcolonisers would probably be aware of this criticism (most are sensitive to orientalism, as I explored in Chapter 6), and be prepared to live with it. For these whites who choose to inhabit the postcolonial frontier, their disillusionment with postcolonial logic has led to a retreat into the only thing they know for sure: standing at the junction of “two different world views” offers stimulation and challenge. Below, in the conclusion, I consider a further allegory for encounters on the postcolonial frontier: that of friendship.

I have shown how the twin dilemmas of postcolonial logic inevitably disturb the project of postcolonial justice. Through the eyes of postcolonisers at the Institute, we have seen the possibility of radical difference unraveling the elegance of postcolonial logic. In the conclusion, I briefly consider the implications of the argument I have made for Australian Indigenous policy, for the project of liberal multiculturalism, and for the possibility of loving the other.
Conclusion

This thesis has described a group of white people committed to the liberal project of postcolonial justice, and the frustrations they experience in implementing this project (what I have called the postcolonial condition). I have argued that postcolonial logic fails because remediably different cannot be reconciled with the experiences of postcolonisers who spend any length of time in remote communities. Let’s assume that I have convinced the reader that this represents the situation of many researchers at the Institute, and possibly many other types of white antiracists engaged in comparable projects of postcolonial justice (in education, law, community development, and so on). What then? What does this mean for Australia, for Indigenous people, and for the capacity of liberal democracies to both treat their subjects equitably and overcome their colonial pasts? There are many possible implications of my argument, of which I will consider just a crucial few: the current Australian political context; the project of liberal multiculturalism; and the broader problem of power and difference.

In the Introduction I touched on the current moment in Australian Indigenous policy, which appears to be in the midst of a paradigm shift. Although the self-determination era thrives in some pockets, in the main it is under attack. While the ‘history wars’ and government apologies monopolised public debate in the 1990s (Macintyre & Clark 2003), since 2000 the ‘problem’ of ‘Aboriginal separatism’ has become a major subject of conservative discourse (Johns 2001). Media stories increasingly proclaim that “Indigenous self-determination has failed” (Om 2006), and argue that land rights, access to welfare benefits, and culturally-appropriate services have not improved the lives of Indigenous people. Jordan’s Balanda (2005), the account of remote community life I cited in Chapter 8, join other critical accounts of the politics and practice of the self-determination era (see Neill 2002; Sandall 2001; Sutton 2001). Common to these accounts (which differ enormously in

Note though that self-determination remains alive and well in Indigenous health research. For example, in 2003 the National Health and Medical Research Council, the peak funding body in health research, elevated its Indigenous health committee (consistently exclusively of Indigenous members) to report directly to the CEO and the peak Council, and committed to spending 5% of its total budget on Indigenous health (National Health and Medical Research Council 2003b). To complement its new Indigenous research guidelines, it has just released a guide to help communities control research more effectively (National Health and Medical Research Council 2006).
their intent and their audience) is the perception that the desire of a non-Indigenous elite to preserve Indigenous culture has led to permissive practices (such as letting children abstain from school, and not pursuing violent offenders) that ironically have further damaged Indigenous societies.

After a decade in office, the federal government is now pursuing policies that deliberately counter the principles of the self-determination era. The most obvious example is the dismantling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2004. Since then, the government has begun bypassing national and regional Indigenous representatives to make service agreements with individual communities; amending the Aboriginal Land Rights Act of the Northern Territory to allow home ownership and encourage economic development on communally-owned land; and encouraging greater police presence on remote communities. The federal health minister has outlined the logic underpinning his government’s policies. They believe that self-determination failed to improve Indigenous lives because of misplaced tact and fear of imposing what are now seen as outside standards, rather than universal ones. Australians' sense of guilt about the past and naive idealisation of communal life may now be the biggest obstacle to the betterment of Aborigines. (Abbott 2006)

Skepticism about self-determination has always been generated from the conservative side of politics, but in the last few years this has spread across much of the political spectrum. Indigenous advocates have understandably labeled this as a “return to the bad old assimilation days” (Lewis 2004), but some liberal whites are aligning themselves with Indigenous leader Noel Pearson’s arguments that self-determination has allowed the government to abdicate its responsibility to poorly-functioning Indigenous organisations (see Cowlishaw 2003a).

Taken together, these various developments indicate a movement away from orientalism and alterity, and toward unmitigated remedialism. The fear of assimilation is labeled as the problem, while assimilation itself is downgraded to ‘inevitable cultural change’. The logic of Indigenous improvement becomes thus: Like it or not, Indigenous people are part of modernity and we must help them as best we can, and resist disabling our efforts with the
fear of damaging culture. And presumably, once our rose-coloured glasses are removed and our “naïve idealisation” ceases, we will see that a good part of Indigenous culture is not worth preserving anyway. If the ‘difference’ of Indigenous people declines in importance, postcolonisers no longer need to maintain a concept of remediable difference. If Indigenous people are no longer remediably different, but just remediable, this relieves much of the effort of charting a course between remedialism and orientalism.

Is what I have described in this thesis a reflection of this paradigm shift? Are the postcolonisers I have depicted simply suffering from “misplaced tact”, and will the postcolonial condition be relieved by the guilt-free universalism of the new era? Let’s assume for a moment that this critique of self-determination is taken up by those whites who identify as antiracist, and the self-determination era is supplanted by another era, perhaps one of “mutual responsibility”. Postcolonial logic, as I have described it, is specific to the self-determination era. If the backlash against white guilt is pervasive enough to change what it means to be a white antiracist, it is likely the twin dilemmas of postcolonial logic would be assuaged.

However, I suspect that those schooled in such a ‘new paradigm’ will still be discomforted by the remedialist project when they see it up close on the postcolonial frontier. Removing white guilt about the past will address the dilemma of historical continuity, but will not necessarily solve the dilemma of social improvement. Even if postcolonisers cease to abhor the idea of imposing ‘white’ ways of life on Indigenous people, the possibility of radical difference may not be so readily banished.

Important here is Rowse’s argument that the government’s “new arrangements” in Indigenous affairs are not a ‘return to assimilation’ (Rowse 2006). He identifies two major features of the self-determination era that will continue to have a major influence: Aboriginal incorporated organisations, which number in the thousands and perform important state functions; and the archive of Aboriginal statistics (that have been a feature of my argument). These two phenomena will ensure that Indigenous difference continues to

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230 In my research, elements of the critique of self-determination are popular among some postcolonisers, seen for instance in support for Noel Pearson and concern about the “enslaving” effect of “welfare passivity”, for instance: We've been so irresponsible with how we've put these people on welfare with no obligations to work with them and support them like [teaching them] this is how you manage money. [Transcript 17:6-7]
be visible and prominent. At the interpersonal level, experiences of the postcolonial frontier will continue to unsettle the remedialist project. Even the greatest confidence in universalism may be shaken in the midst of a ceremony, a funeral, or a hunting trip, and the ensuing suspicion that these aspects of Indigenous lifeworlds cannot easily be packaged into the weekends of an otherwise Western lifestyle.

If and when postcolonisers are taught to control their fear of resembling the past, they may still be haunted by the future. They may still fear a future that might judge their universalism as false. The judgment of their predecessors as at best, misguided and at worse, racist (judgment that may soon include the practitioners of self-determination) makes their own future judgment a constant fear (see Povinelli 2002:115).

The postcolonial condition I have described in this thesis can be seen as but one instance of the contradictions of liberal multiculturalism. At various points I have discussed the body of work that tries to reconcile the liberal state with a culturally-diverse polity (Goldberg 1994; Kymlicka & Cohen-Almagor 2000; Parekh 2000; Taylor 1994). At base, the contradictions this work grapples with reflect the crisis of universalism. Much has been written on the collapse of universal reason in the second half of the twentieth century. Theoretically, this has been encapsulated in the project of postmodernism (see Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984). Practically, it has played out in a variety of social movements, including Indigenous rights movements (Niezen 2003).  

Anthropologist James Boggs connects the collapse of universalism to the rise of culturalisms. He proposes that a major paradigm shift is underway, no less momentous than when heliocentrism replaced geocentrism. The old order is classical liberal theory of the seventeenth century that sought to overcome religious understandings of humanity and discover scientific principles that could explain society. From this the science of human nature was established, whereby individual reason and individual need could explain all aspects of social order. Naturally, it was within European societies that pure reason resided.

231 This collapse of universalism is also related to the “crisis of whiteness” that Winant identifies. He argues (from a U.S. perspective) that since the civil rights era, increasing awareness of racism and the shrinking of the white ‘majority’ have led to a “crisis” of whiteness. “[W]hite identities have been displaced and refigured: They are now contradictory, as well as confused and anxiety-ridden, to an unprecedented extent.” (Winant 2004:4)
In the second half of the twentieth century, the social sciences rejected the idea of a universal human nature, and contended that human nature could only be understood in its particular cultural context. Modernity itself is revealed as just one of many contexts in which societies flourish. Liberal theory that posits an essential human nature is thus replaced with culture theory which recognises multiple ways of being human. Boggs argues that this shift is all but accomplished in social theory, but that the practice of politics, law and economics lag behind. Western individualism posing as the “essence of universal humanness” clashes against “a new kind of human subject whose nature is inescapably cultural and therefore unavoidably situated”, and quandaries such as relativism and human rights flourish in the interstices of disjunction (Boggs 2002:602).

Liberal multicultural theory and practice would be at the epicentre of this transition. As Gray puts it, the task of liberalism after universalism is “to seek terms of coexistence among different cultural forms without the benefit – dubious as it proved to be – of the universalist perspective and the conception of rational choice” (Gray 1995:96). Of all the variety of cultural forms that liberal multicultural theorists attempt to accommodate, it is Indigeneity that generates some of the most complex problems.\textsuperscript{232}

Drawing on Boggs’ argument of a shift from liberal theory to culture theory, we could understand the postcolonial condition as the birth pangs of the new cultural paradigm, rather than the death knell of self-determination. Taking this point of view, self-determination is not the failure of cultural theory (as critics of self-determination might argue), but merely an early instantiation. Postcolonial logic becomes a naïve attempt to “seek terms of coexistence” that will be superseded with more nuanced models of coexistence. Attempts by the current Australian government to resurrect universalism may thus be a brief aberration as we slowly move toward the formal recognition of Indigenous law and knowledge.

\textsuperscript{232} The most obvious example is native title, which gives Indigenous people with traditional links to land the right to undertake traditional activities on this land and to be consulted about proposed land developments. The state’s recognition of native title must be buttressed with a non-recognition of Indigenous customary law, as such a recognition of an alterior system of law would “shatter the skeletal structure” of the common law (Langton & Palmer 2004; Patton 2001; Povinelli 2002:176).
How would the continuing rise of culturalism affect postcolonial logic? It would have the opposite effect to the reinstatement of universalism. Rather than the triumph of remedialism over orientalism, the universalism inherent to remedialism may eventually fade. The ‘healthy’ universal subject of the top line of the graph would cease to be the implicit reference point. It is difficult to imagine what this world without remedialism might be like. Perhaps we may develop localised, culturally-specific ways to measure Indigenous wellbeing that will replace the practice of comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous statistics. The goal of postcolonial justice may shift away from statistical equality and remedialism altogether as we mature into more imaginative culturalisms, and look back onto the crude ‘self-determination era’ that was so closely tied to Western aims.

By taking a longer view than Boggs, David Scott (2003) offers us another way of understanding the postcolonial condition. He draws on Bernard McGrane’s thesis that Western societies have always ordered and explained difference, but that the taxonomy of difference has changed throughout history. In Renaissance Europe, the ‘other’ were those which lacked Christianity. In the Enlightenment, the other became those who lacked reason. Nineteenth century science created a gulf of evolutionary time between Europe and non-Europeans in the form of advanced and primitive races. In the twentieth century, the dominant mode of explaining difference shifted again. The other that once ‘lacked Christianity’, and then ‘lacked reason’, and then ‘belonged to a primitive race’, is now the other which ‘has culture’ (McGrane 1989).

But this latest way to discern the self from the other has one distinctive feature. While previous marks of otherness are clearly negative, this value judgment is not meant to apply to those that merely have a different culture. Political theorists (like many other social scientists) are embracing the concept of culture because it is “a cosmopolitan idiom in which the otherness of the West’s Others, once a source of defensive anxiety and the object of truth-determining investigations, could now be understood…as mere difference” (Scott 2003:111). Through culture, political philosophy can liberate itself from its oppressing and oppressive past. Culture performs the ironic task of meeting “an ideological demand for a postideological concept of difference” (Scott 2003:109). The project of liberal

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233 See Burgess et al. 2005 for an example focusing on Indigenous people’s relationship to their land.
multiculturalism, like the related project of postcolonial justice, requires a conception of
difference that contains the possibility of nonoppressive power relations.\textsuperscript{234} This relates to a
central concern of this thesis. When a group of relatively intelligent, well-meaning people,
more or less supported by the state, attempt to enact a mode of difference that is
nonoppressive, does this, in fact, make any difference?

Political philosopher Wendy Brown is one of the scholars who argues that a politics of
difference cannot transcend the conditions of oppression that produced those differences.\textsuperscript{235} Through their emergence as a protest against marginalisation or subordination, politicised
identities (like queer, refugee or Indigenous) become dependent on their own exclusion to
remain salient. Acts of reparation can only potentiate suffering, in that they “ceaselessly
reenact even as they redistribute the injuries of marginalization and subordination” within
liberal society. Liberal multiculturalism is thus a sham because the universalism of
liberalism can only recognise difference through “an economy of inclusion and exclusion”
(see Brown 1995:70; Mehta 1999). Inevitably, “the language of recognition becomes the
language of unfreedom” even as it strives toward liberation (Brown 1995:66). For Brown,
an identity rooted in past and present oppressions can only reinforce its own
marginalisation. Rather than sourcing identity from the wounds of the past and seeking
revenge in a lame multiculturalism, an emancipatory identity must be grounded in a vision
of an alternative future where liberal universalism is effectively overcome.

Perhaps, then, the ultimate problem with our current model of postcolonial justice is that
Indigeneity, as it is recognised by postcolonial logic, is founded in oppression. The melding
of the authentic Indigenous voice to the self-determined Indigene irrevocably and fatally
ties Indigenous futures to the past. If that is indeed the case, what is to be done about it?
Paul Gilroy offers us one vision of the future beyond difference. Like this thesis, his
argument centres on liberal multiculturalism and its attempts to address racial disadvantage.
He argues that race-based affirmative action (like the model of postcolonial justice outlined
here) cannot deliver positive social change because of its reliance on racial categories. In a

\textsuperscript{234} Culture thus performs the task of enacting historical discontinuity (see Kowal 2006). Scott shows that one
does not have to delve very far to find that the ‘egalitarian’ model of cultural pluralism was deployed in the
immediate post-war era to show that American individualism was superior to Soviet totalitarianism (Scott
2003). Similarly disquieting, we find in Australia the idea of cultural difference employed in the 1950s
science of ‘integration’ that is now remembered as the assimilation era (Rowse 2005c).
\textsuperscript{235} For an important related argument, see Stephan 1998; and for an ethnographic illustration see Nelson 1999.
move similar to Brown, he argues that ‘raciology’, defined as that which “brings the virtual realities of ‘race’ to dismal and destructive life”, is too embedded in colonial oppression to offer any emancipatory potential (Gilroy 2000:1). His utopian political project of “planetary humanism”, where skin color will be of no more consequence than eye color, is predicated on overcoming the role of race in the liberal ontology of difference. He traces this project from Fanon, who argues in *Black Skin White Masks*: “In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly recognised Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future” (Fanon 1967:226). For Gilroy, freedom from the encasement of colour is offered by a “strategically universal” humanity.

This humanist vision relies on forgetting the past and abandoning the memories that produce wounded identities. Gilroy argues that this project of forgetting is in any case inevitable as the passage of time means the “ebbing away of the brutal colonial relations that gave such a distinctive meaning to ‘race’” (Gilroy 2000:335). Brown similarly prescribes a future-oriented politics as the antidote for wounded attachments, arguing that the ontological claims of identity politics of “I am” should be replaced with the political claim, “I want this for us” (Brown 1995:75). The central question should not be *what has happened to us*, but instead, *what kind of a future do we want?*

By this logic, Indigeneity is a troubled identity indeed. On the one hand, it is defined through ties to precolonial societies and in opposition to the European invaders, such that “‘Indigenous modern’ sounds like an oxymoron” (Muecke 2004:138). On the other hand, it is defined through the collective wound of colonisation and through its continuing exclusion from the (post)colonising state. But as much as Gilroy sees the horizon of colonial brutality receding, Indigenous people continue to actively pursue compensation for the crimes of the past.236 Brown concedes that although forgetting is a way forward, it aggravates the wounds of those for whom “erased histories and historical invisibility are themselves such integral elements of the pain inscribed” (Brown 1995:74). Leaving the past

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236 With the most prominent campaigns seeking compensation for the Stolen Generations and for “stolen wages” (wages withheld and underpaid to Indigenous people who worked on Queensland reserves for much of the twentieth century), see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997 and Kidd 2006.
behind may make sense in theory, but as a political strategy it is currently neither politically viable nor humane.

Nonetheless, recent work by some Indigenous scholars questions the utility of a concept of Indigeneity anchored in the past. While acknowledging that it has led to some success within the nation-state, Paradies argues against the instrumental myth of a pure pan-Indigeneity which has the cost of essentialising Indigenous people in multiple ways (Paradies 2006). He argues that these “fantasies of Indigeneity” (which coincide with my concept of the authentic Indigenous voice) act to exclude most Indigenous people from authentic Indigeneity and amount to “internalised racism”. To escape essentialised Indigeneity, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people “must decouple Indigeneity from disadvantage and marginality, from cultural and physical alterity and from callow moral dichotomies” (Paradies 2006:363). By loosening the definition of Indigeneity to include the white-skinned, middle-class Indigene, and for non-Indigenous people adopted by or married to Indigenous people, Indigeneity is radically redefined in a way that frees it both from its opposition to whiteness and from its anchor to the past.237

I have argued in this thesis that the politics of recognition can be extended to understand how dominant subjectivities are formed through mutual recognition with subalterns. In that light, Brown’s (1995:66) observation that “the language of recognition becomes the language of unfreedom” has implications for white antiracists who recognise Indigenous people. Just as Indigenous subjectivities that are founded in opposition paradoxically limit the possibilities for emancipation, white identities founded in opposition to Indigenous people may be impotent at driving change, even where the white identity in question is that of the shamed and sorry settler.

An alternative politics would explore non-settler identities that white Australians can look to.238 The aim of this would not be to let white people off the hook, but to create a society that did not curtail its own emancipatory possibility. An achievable goal may be a plurality

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237 Pearson (2006:7) similarly argues against the view that Indigenous educational and economic success “automatically pose challenges for the preservation of identity….Indigenous Australian identity… is often said to be so intimately connected with the organisation of our traditional society that it will cease to exist if we embrace modernity”.

of identity – settler-and rather than settler-or. The political possibilities for non-oppositional identities might seem slim to some, and morally bereft to others, but this thesis has suggested the status quo – in the form of postcolonial logic – may have exhausted its usefulness.

Cowlishaw is among those who advocate surmounting oppositional identities. She argues that the task of intellectual engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars is hampered by the many forms of “discursive respect” displayed by whites such as refusing to contradict an Indigenous person, or declining to speak about Indigenous issues for fear of being revealed as a racist (elements that recall the ‘performance’ of white antiracism I outlined in Chapter 4). She argues that discursive respect should be replaced with being “engaged with, rather than concerned about, others” (Cowlishaw 2004b:67, original emphasis).

The postcolonial frontier is a site where such engagements might occur. As Bird Rose and Davis argue, the frontier is “a site of productive assertions of dilemmas, and of unexpected engagements toward change” (Bird Rose & Davis 2005:iii). While postcolonial logic is the script that shapes the mutual recognition of white antiracists and Indigenous people, the encounter often exceeds the script, and leads to its undoing. We have seen how encounters with difference on the postcolonial frontier disrupt a postcoloniser subjectivity. While this is an uncomfortable space that postcolonisers strive to avoid, it nevertheless contains the seeds of change.

Fabian offers a way to think through the complexity of encounters with alterity. He identifies three forms of the word ‘recognise’ from his native German: “Erkennen…as in “I know these persons or objects when I see them” (an act of cognition); Wiedererkennen, as in “I know these persons or objects because I remember them” (an act of memory); and Anerkennen, as in “I give these persons or objects the recognition they ask for and deserve” (an act of acknowledgement)” (Fabian 1999:53). Drawing on narratives of late nineteenth century European explorers of Africa, he shows how these three modes of encountering the other occur together.
As these three modes of recognition are blurred, it becomes impossible to tell orientalist projections from more genuine forms of recognition (Fabian 1999:59). This is the point I pressed in Chapter 7. Encounters on the postcolonial frontier can be interpreted as always already oppressive and contaminated by the colonising presence of the European. Or we can look beyond oppositional identities and discern an engagement between two people who seek to forge a relationship across their differences.

Regardless of the interpretation one makes, recognition “is achieved through exchanges that have startling, upsetting, sometimes profoundly disturbing consequences for all participants” (Fabian 1999:66). Fabian argues that identity is necessarily disrupted in these exchanges: “Identity must be maintained because action needs an agent; it must be abandoned because no action, certainly not the kind of action intended in exploration and ethnography, could take place if identity were rigidly maintained” (Fabian 1999:67-8).

We can now see the dissipation of postcoloniser subjectivities (threatened by the failure of postcolonial logic) in a different light. Although postcolonisers expend much cognitive energy and performative aptitude trying to preserve a viable subject position, perhaps they, like explorers and ethnographers, must abandon a part of their identity in their encounters with other.\(^{239}\) Perhaps it is precisely these identity-disrupting experiences that inevitably occur in the course of enacting postcolonial justice which contain the seeds of non-settler white identities, and thus an alternative future. Thus the “new lines” of change that von Sturmer hoped would replace remedialism are created even as the “great circularity” of remedialism goes on and on (von Sturmer 1995:113).

In Chapter 8 I described the intimacy and suffering of encounters that occur outside the script of postcolonial logic, when both postcolonisers and Indigenous people transgress the boundaries of their respective spaces of recognition. Indigenous people refuse to resemble the self-determined Indigene, and refuse to contain their alterity to that which is sanitised: postcolonisers refuse to hide their love for the other. What is left, once the certainty of postcolonial logic has been lost, are affective ties between white antiracists and Indigenous

\(^{239}\) Muecke (2005:3) believes that this deformation is constitutive of white Australian identity, only that “[p]resent-day non-Indigenous Australians still do not know the extent to which they have been formed by Aboriginal discourses”.

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people. I discussed various troubling metaphors for these liaisons: postcoloniser as missionary/father, as mother, and as child. But there is another, more hopeful trope for understanding these ties: friendship.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how some Institute researchers resolve the dilemmas of postcolonial logic by accepting both the limitations of postcolonial justice and their personal enjoyment of the postcolonial frontier. They profess to enjoy the complexities and challenges of working in Indigenous health, but also the friendship:

You realise you’re not going to make a lot of difference. I came to a place [an understanding] where I was happy to alleviate suffering in the short term, and journeying with people, and seeing the common humanity, the normal aspects of friendship. They [Indigenous people] always respond to friendship. [Fieldnotes 6/4/05 4:11]

Friendship can be a powerful device that transcends the temporal and spatial discourses of difference, if only provisionally. The close of Black Skin White Masks suggests this may be the path to effective recognition, what Fanon calls “authentic communication”: “Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?” (Fanon 1967:231). As I have shown, the postcolonial frontier is saturated with racialised performances of Indigeneity and antiracism. Amongst all the theatre, is there room for ‘normal friendship’ on the postcolonial frontier?

I began this inquiry with a deliberate methodological agnosticism, and I end it equally agnostic. I no longer do this instrumentally. I simply do not know whether the micropolitics of the postcolonial frontier reveal a genuine deformation of what it means to be white or Indigenous. I do not know whether practices of friendship will lead to a different or better conception of postcolonial justice. I do not know whether postcolonial logic can be rehabilitated, or even if it needs to be. The colonial frontier was a site of violent conflict. While white antiracism is complex and fraught, the willingness of postcolonisers to encounter the other and be “profoundly disturbed” provides hope that the proximity of the postcolonial frontier could be, instead, a place where peaceful coexistence might bloom.


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