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## **Non-Indigenous Australians and the ‘responsibility to engage’?**

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### **Introduction**

In settler colonial societies around the world, Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations have struggled to make sense of a violent past in ways that allow them to live together on shared territory. These efforts have variously involved the deployment of elements from the transitional justice ‘toolbox’, in the form of inquiries and truth commissions, apologies, reparations, and other more or less symbolic efforts to ‘reconcile’ both a painful past and the structural inequities of settler colonialism in the present. Invariably, these endeavours have also proved unsatisfying to either party to the engagement, leading to the frustration, antagonism, and low levels of trust that tend to characterize relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples.

This article builds on previous work by the authors in their efforts to understand a key aspect of the non-Indigenous side of these relationships, which we have termed the ‘responsibility to engage’ (see especially Maddison *et al.* 2016). We build on analyses of the Australian context that have focused on the non-Indigenous experience of guilt about historical injustice (Maddison 2011) and the limitations of transitional justice for facilitating this engagement in settler colonial contexts (Maddison and Shepherd 2014), along with comparative Canadian research detailing the attitudes of non-Indigenous populations to the idea of historical and contemporary responsibility (de Costa and Clark 2015).

Although the sociological dynamics of modern, liberal, and variously multicultural settler societies suggest analyses that move beyond an Indigenous/settler framework, these broad categories endure and retain considerable political salience (see also Wolfe 2013). They are held in place by layers of legislation, administration and popular cultures in which the distinction continues to be productive. As Edward Said (1993) noted, a crucial feature of colonialism is its intent to generalize and homogenize the Other, to erase variation or instability in the identities of either Indigenous peoples or settler communities. Settler colonial societies live with this legacy and generic national projects – of reconciliation and recognition especially – are likely to reproduce these elisions of human diversity and possibility. Researching non-Indigenous views about the meaning and stability of a non-Indigenous identity tests the validity of such an “other-than-Other” category.

A consistent finding in research, including our own, is that a significant minority of non-Indigenous people acknowledge an interest in engagement (defined as working towards social justice, or in closer personal ties with Indigenous peoples, through shared projects and activities) but simultaneously report that they do not know how to act on this interest, or that they do not feel that it is their role or right to do so. For example, in the 2008 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, only 19 per cent of people reported that they knew what they could do to help overcome Indigenous disadvantage (Reconciliation Australia 2008). Our focus group research in both Canada and Australia has found similar sentiments. Such discomfort or paralysis might appear to be a necessary corrective to centuries of ethnocentrism and colonialism – in the ways advocated by some scholars who call for “unsettling” settler identities (for example Regan 2010) – but it is not clear what pathways out of or beyond this situation may exist. Our research aspires to reveal clearer directions

towards engagement identified through forms of discourse that seem to enable or disable such practices.

A related dimension of concern relates to the kind of generalized and counterproductive labeling that often accompanies national and top-down reconciliation processes. The ambition of reconstructing Indigenous-settler relations through national effort certainly appears to make sense: the fact that much of what we think of as colonialism was done in the effort to eliminate the indigenous presence (Wolfe 2006, 387) and build a racially normative nation seems to require a similarly nation-transforming register. However, our research suggests much greater critical reflection is required on this point. It may be that it is precisely the undifferentiated approach of national reconciliation projects that have prevented greater impact. Our focus group research reveals existing and potential lines of engagement between Indigenous and other peoples that are premised on local experiences, in particular those that touch on environmental or cultural/recreational projects and concerns.

In what follows, we advance a specifically Australian account of the responsibility to engage, drawing on focus group data with non-Indigenous Australians in various locations and from a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences. This article begins with a discussion of the Australian experience of national ‘reconciliation’ before discussing the methodology of our research and then its results, which we have arranged thematically. An overarching goal of this article is to discuss the cultural and political potential of the category of ‘non-Indigenous’: in the face of its instability, and with attention to the particular contexts and modalities in which it arises, what value does this category retain as an implicit mode of address to Australians thinking about reconciliation?

## **‘Reconciliation’ in Australia**

Over more than two decades, Australia has augmented its social policy for Indigenous peoples with a national reconciliation framework intended to build better relations in Australian society through changing individual and communal attitudes. This nation-wide process has had several iterations, broadly seeking to produce a new national narrative that took seriously the varied impacts of colonialism on the original inhabitants, its contemporary structural manifestations and legacies, and acknowledged the distinctive status and entitlements of Indigenous peoples in contemporary Australia. The formal process supported the elaboration of more critical histories of colonial settlement and national development, foregrounding Indigenous experiences in both. As with other instances of reconciliation, an unproblematic assumption was made between the telling of new national stories and progressive personal actions and values.

Over time, however, it has become clear that national reconciliation in Australia has had minimal success. The period of the ‘history wars’ (Macintyre & Clark 2003), during the 1990s and early 2000s, revealed the scale of resistance to a more critical historical account and a commitment to older and more exclusive historical narratives. In recent surveys conducted as part of the Australian Reconciliation Barometer project, the overall proportion of people indicating an interest in becoming personally involved in Indigenous issues is quite low (no more than a third of respondents) and may be declining (Stolper *et al.* 2010, 65).

The formal Australian reconciliation process developed out of a recommendation made by the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), which had been established in response to public concern over the deaths in police custody and prisons of 99 Aboriginal people between January 1980 and May 1989. The Commission’s final

recommendation argued that, in order to break the pattern of Indigenous exclusion and marginalisation that had contributed to the deaths in custody, ‘reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people are to be avoided’ (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991). In response, the government of the day created the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) and set out the timeline for a formal, decade-long process, to conclude in 2001.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs at this time, Robert Tickner, has since outlined what he saw as the three objectives for reconciliation in Australia. First, the need to educate non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the extent of disadvantage still experienced by Indigenous people. Second, the need for what Tickner – in an attempt to get away from the apparently polarizing language of ‘treaty’ – described as a ‘document of reconciliation.’ Through the formal reconciliation process Tickner hoped there could be some agreement on the terms of such a document and a further agreement on how it might be achieved. Finally, Tickner envisaged that the reconciliation process would build a social movement that would drive the nation to ‘address Indigenous aspirations, human rights and social justice’ (Tickner 2001).

Much of the ambition articulated by Tickner, and subsequently by the CAR, focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations for recognition of their sovereignty through a treaty or other document, and for political control and autonomy. Also prominent in these stated aims, however, was the recognition that non-Indigenous Australians required education about both Australia’s history of injustice towards Indigenous peoples, and the contemporary impacts of these injustices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s lives. This focus

on the need to actively engage non-Indigenous people in the formal reconciliation process was, at least in part, a recognition of the impact of demographic scale on Australia's reconciliatory ambitions. The small number of Indigenous people relative to the wider Australian population (less than three per cent) meant that the majority non-Indigenous population had to be persuaded of the merits of participating through other means. As a result, considerable effort and expenditure on reconciliation in Australia was directed towards strategies designed to educate and engage non-Indigenous people.

After ten years of such effort, however, it was difficult to observe much positive impact from the many hundreds of thousands of dollars that had been spent on the effort to 'engage' non-Indigenous people. The response of the wider Australian public to the reconciliation process was decidedly mixed. On the one hand there is both anecdotal and survey evidence to show that the majority of non-Indigenous Australians supported the process and the aims of the CAR (Halloran 2007: 2). Former co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, Mick Dodson, has suggested that the idea of reconciliation is 'broadly accepted' and that the 'fruits of reconciliation, based on respect and trust, are strongly desired' (Dodson 2009: 4). Focus groups undertaken at the end of 1999 and the start of 2000 also found universal agreement that the position of Aboriginal people in Australia was a 'tragedy', and widespread agreement that Aboriginal people had been 'badly treated by the early white settlers' (Newspoll Market Research *et al.* 2000).

At the same time, however, many people found it 'hard to face up to this,' with the more defensive participants in the research arguing that 'there was bad behavior on both sides.' There were 'few' who were 'inclined to see one side as the invader and the other as the invaded. Nor were there many who wished to accept any responsibility for what happened in

what most saw as far-off days (Newspoll, Saulwick and Muller & Mackay 2000: 37).

Persistent feelings of ‘concern, embarrassment and shame’ about the nation’s failure to solve the challenge of Indigenous disadvantage functioned to temper existing racism, but many non-Indigenous Australians also felt ‘perplexed and confused’ about how to make progress in this area, becoming ‘caught between calling for inspired leadership and compassion and the comforts of racism and cynicism’ (Green and Sonn 2006: 380, 2005: 483). Indeed, as Angela Pratt has argued, while the formal reconciliation process in Australia did introduce a new and broad ‘moral language’ with which to speak about issues of Indigenous social justice, it did not ‘help to resolve any of the questions these issues raised’ (Pratt 2003: 157).

The nature of efforts to engage non-Indigenous people to take some portion of responsibility for the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also caused resentment among the Indigenous population. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were critical of the Australian process for seeming to ask so little of non-Indigenous people.

During the first decade of official reconciliation, many Indigenous people were openly hostile to the concept, conscious that the ten-year process had been offered as compensation for the Australian government’s failure to deliver on their promise of national land rights and a treaty (Gunstone 2009: 45). There had been no significant improvement in socio-economic inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and no treaty or ‘document of reconciliation’ had been produced that might address the political grievances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gunstone 2009: 47). Indeed, the period of the formal Australian reconciliation process (1991-2000) was widely criticised for its ‘intense resistance’ to any decolonising action, meaning that “‘education’ for the non-Indigenous rather than “‘justice’ for the Indigenous emerged as the dominant focus of the process’ (Short 2008: 7, 36).

Critically analysed, resistance to a more decolonising reconciliation process is understood as part of the dynamics of contemporary settler colonialism. As in other settler colonial states, reconciliation in Australia can be seen as a means of justifying colonial sovereignty and domination (Bhandar 2007: 97), rather than transforming the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler state. For many critics, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the process was little more than an exercise in colonial obfuscation of ongoing dispossession, assimilation and the persistence of settler colonial structures (Short 2008: 8). Indeed, the formal Australian reconciliation process was widely criticised for effectively placing a ‘colonial ceiling’ on Indigenous aspirations by emphasising nation-building and national unity above all else (Short 2008:162). Although arguably initiated in an acknowledgment of historic injustice, as in other settler states, reconciliation in Australia focused less on making reparations for colonial harms and more on the restoration of moral and political legitimacy to settler institutions by drawing the Indigenous population into the wider polity (Muldoon and Schaap 2012: 182), providing them with ‘a right to be incorporated into the Australian nation but not a right to refuse’ (Short 2005: 274).

More specifically, the Australian resistance to a more transformative politics of reconciliation is explained as a consequence of government interference and undermining of the process following the 1996 election of John Howard as prime minister. By the mid 1990s public discussion about reconciliation had become dominated by an intense debate about Australian colonial history, with a renewed assertion of the modern day economic, social and political benefits accruing to all Australians as a result of colonisation. A new phrase, the ‘black armband view of history,’ emerged into public discourse, the complaint of those who held there was more in Australia’s colonial history to be celebrated than regretted (MacIntyre and

Clark 2003). This complaint was given enormous currency by John Howard after his election as prime minister in 1996, when he argued that ‘the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement’ and that ‘we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed’ (Howard 1996).

The election of the Howard government also saw a significant change in government attitudes towards the aspirations of the reconciliation process, with the rejection of anything thought to be merely ‘symbolic,’ and a new focus on the need to adopt ‘practical measures’ to address Indigenous disadvantage. Renewed calls for a treaty were met with the prime minister’s contention that ‘an undivided nation does not make a treaty with itself’ (Howard quoted in Sanders 2005: 156). Significantly for this research, Howard emphatically rejected any suggestion that non-Indigenous people were responsible for the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or for the contemporary circumstances of Indigenous lives. He famously articulated this view at the 1997 Reconciliation Convention in an angry speech during which he argued that reconciliation in Australia would not work ‘if it is premised solely on a sense of national guilt and shame.’ As he thumped the lectern, Howard (1997) insisted that it would be wrong to

...join those who would portray Australia’s history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism [...] such an approach will be repudiated by the overwhelming majority of Australians who are proud of what this country has achieved although inevitably acknowledging the blemishes in its past history.

In response, audience members stood and turned their backs to him. This event marked a low point in the Australian reconciliation process, from which many considered that it did not

ever recover (notwithstanding very popular protest actions over the succeeding years, most notably the ‘Walk for Reconciliation’ across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000). Yet, clearly, Howard’s formulation was grounded in broader community discourse and sentiment that still find expression in contemporary formulations, as in this comment from a participant in one of our focus groups in the New South Wales town of Bega—responding to a (wholly inferred) suggestion that Australia Day might be renamed Invasion Day:

**(Dennis)**<sup>1</sup> I don't feel like an invader so if you go with Invasion Day, I didn't invade. I don't know how much should I feel guilt for what my ancestors did without my approval. I don't want to feel guilty.

### **Researching the Australian experience**

Alongside concerns about guilt or innocence, in our work we have encountered numerous questions about the ‘non-Indigenous.’ A tension revealed in focus group research we have conducted in urban settings in Australia and Canada suggests some significant differences towards Indigenous issues appear correlated with differences in cultural background: racialized people often seem to speak and think differently about the causes and realities of Indigenous life. Initially, we heard that there was little intellectual reason to explore the non-Indigenous ‘mainstream’; we should stick to talking to activists. Critical race scholars in settler societies have drawn extensively on the ‘whiteness’ framing (Moreton-Robinson 2004; Carr and Lund, 2007) and, indeed, we have drawn on insights from others who have worked

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<sup>1</sup> In line with the ethics approval for this research, we have used pseudonyms to identify participants in the focus groups throughout this paper.

with this concept. Most fruitful, however, has been an approach that advocates an examination of everyday experiences and practices (for example Brewster 2005), relating these to non-Indigenous understandings of what Indigenous peoples have experienced, lost, suffered, aspire to and deserve and asking how such understandings might require something of settlers and their societies. This type of approach – for example the work of Nicoll (2004) or Rifkin (2013) – informs our methodology and in particular the way in which we read the transcripts of the focus groups.

Understandings of our identities and our responsibility to others, especially to respond to historical injustices from which we may have benefited, are complex matters that can be difficult to research directly. This article takes them to be embedded phenomena in everyday discourse. Not only do they draw their meaning from the quotidian discourses that give them conceptual definition and ideological context, but they are largely also practiced through those discourses. That is a helpful license for qualitative research such as we are reporting here: when we stimulate and record remarks that non-Indigenous people make both about their senses of responsibility to engage with Indigenous people and about Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities, we are not merely obtaining data that will reveal some implicit ideological system. Rather, we are surfacing actual senses (and actual absences) of responsibility among research participants; we are recording real processes of identity-formation and identity-alignment at work.

Within the focus group research we have undertaken, we have been fundamentally interested in broad patterns of value amongst non-Indigenous people in settler societies. This issue has been understudied in a consideration of how we should think about or try to improve Indigenous-settler relations. Broad theorizations of ‘whiteness’ or ‘settler colonialism’ are

instructive but do not invite us into the fissures within dominant structures that may contain more positive modes of reconciled, postcolonial, anti-colonial, or decolonized interaction. These potentials – where they exist – emerge most fruitfully during open conversations amongst groups of individuals. Being value propositions, such potentials are significant for their ‘texture’ as well as for their ‘reference’ (Voloshinov 1973 [1929]), hence it is essential to pay close attention to *discourse form* as much as to *discourse content* when analyzing the conversations that inform our research.

That is in contrast to quantitative approaches such as the survey techniques used in the Australian Reconciliation Barometer or the survey of Canadians done by the Department of Justice in 2008 in relation to Indian Residential Schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is not that those approaches cannot tell us about non-Indigenous commitments, but they are less useful in exploring the ways in which we might begin to think about *non-Indigenous identities* as collaborative and mutually reinforcing. Whether we see the pursuit of justice as a matter of education or redistribution, non-Indigenous peoples must be engaged as conscious, reflective beings in the manner suggested by Habermas (1997).

This analysis of our Australian data builds on previous comparator research undertaken in Canada. In an earlier project research, de Costa and Clark (2015) surveyed findings from three sets of focus groups with non-Indigenous peoples in Canada conducted over a two-year period intersecting with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process that has now concluded there. Some strong but complex themes arose from that research, in particular a mode of ‘delegation’ and another of ‘embodiment,’ both outlined below. These modes were expressed in different rhetorical styles that spoke to variations in the geography, history and

identity of the participants and their communities. A broad conclusion was that, for reconciliation, the politics of the local matter.

In the Canadian focus group conversations, de Costa and Clark saw two modes or ideal types for thinking about the issue of taking responsibility for the injustices of colonial history. One – associated with focus groups held in suburban Toronto – was more distant, displaced, summoning up others to do the work—what they have described as *delegation*. The second – associated with rural respondents – was characterised by the clearing and articulating of a path for the self to take responsibility through their own attachments to and concerns for culture and land—what they have described as *embodiment*. Finally, it was obvious in the Canadian research that communities which adhered more strongly to the embodiment mode were also enjoying greater and more locally specific engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The individuals who inhabited those communities also manifested much clearer and more personally felt accounts of the responsibility to engage.

In a point of departure this article asks how far we may observe a comparable dichotomy in play through the focus group conversations we conducted in Australia during 2014. Our hypothesis as we entered the research was that delegation would be a very common trope in Australia's non-Indigenous discourses of identity and responsibility, but that embodiment might take some active searching to find. We discuss the testing of this hypothesis below.

As previous research has explained (see for example de Costa and Clark 2011), pilot work at York University in June 2010 first drew attention to a form of response that has remained of interest to this program of research throughout all subsequent focus groups. The interest is in participants' uses of personal pronouns, especially the first and third person plural forms

we/us/our and they/them/their. This ‘us and them’ reading of *responsibility* is ubiquitous in both countries. Recognising its potential significance, we consciously avoided leading any particular usage of plural pronouns, or even drawing any particular attention to their uses, in the discussion guides for our focus group facilitators. And yet the participants and facilitators all constantly reverted to this stereotype. The consistency itself is a large part of the importance here: it suggests that, when non-Indigenous Canadians and Australians are brought together and asked to discuss relations with Indigenous people and communities, no matter what their backgrounds and belief systems, the ‘us and them’ frame is a consensus model for discussing whatever other points they may have in common or not. In focus groups this usage also revealed an assumption that all non-Indigenous people have a shared stake in the discussion and in any outcomes from it, by dint of their shared structural relationship towards Indigenous peoples. At the same time, clearly it is a usage that blurs important differences in both camps. The balance between distinction and elision in such usage can prove especially complex for families with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members.

Using a focus group approach to prompt and explore non-Indigenous discourses around the question of a non-Indigenous responsibility to engage, we have also been keen to generate data comparable with the Canadian focus group study summarised above. This meant recruiting Australian residents who identify as neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander people, and expressly recruiting for a balance between native-born and immigrant Australians (we convened one focus group out of each of those two categories at each of the four sites where we conducted this research). It meant conducting the focus groups at a range of sites around Australia, balancing capital cities and rural communities, as well as balancing the established southeastern economies with the newer resource-focused economies of the north and west (the sites selected were Bega, Gladstone, Perth, and Sydney). It also meant

contracting an independent professional to facilitate all the groups on behalf of the research team.<sup>2</sup>

The eight focus groups were conducted within a span of five weeks in June and July 2014. At each site, both groups were facilitated on the same day. Recruitment, assisted by an experienced market research firm, was initiated by telephone cold calls made to randomised local residents. The telephone calls involved a brief survey to gauge personal backgrounds (including family migration history), from which it was possible to finalise eight lists of ten participants from diverse backgrounds, each of whom was offered a small financial incentive as compensation for their time. In the event, each group had at least eight participants present when the facilitator worked through a semi-structured discussion guide prepared by the researchers. The focus group sessions ran for 90-120 minutes each. The conversations were always civil (even where they revealed strong differences of view), and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A member of our research team was present at each group, silently taking observation notes.

The Australian focus group discussions were marked by both commonalities and variances. Some variances between sites were greater than we anticipated, with both of the focus groups in Perth proving much more consistently hostile to questions of non-Indigenous responsibility and Indigenous reconciliation than any at the other three sites. On the other hand, certain thematic lines were in evidence across all Australian sites: for example in expressing their views about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people there was an evident (and fairly

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<sup>2</sup> Funding support from the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects scheme was critical to enable this work.

respectful) ‘I’m not qualified to speak about Aboriginal matters’ trope that may in fact be a more sophisticated form of delegation, as well as a more contemptuous line suggesting that non-Indigenous Australians may be better-qualified to discuss Aboriginal values than the ‘racially diluted’ ‘so-called’ Aboriginal people who allegedly waste tax dollars with specious claims for government support. The second of these themes was entirely absent from any of the Canadian comparator-groups. The pronoun use in the Australian groups was, however, very similar to our observations in Canada, suggesting a comparable mix of the delegation and embodiment motives. The following sections use direct quotation and analysis to explore and illustrate these themes in detail.

### **Responding to Indigeneity**

To discuss questions about a ‘responsibility to engage’ with Aboriginal peoples and cultures in groups of non-Indigenous Australians provokes two characteristic responses about the authority and integrity of the stakeholders. One is the more benign trope outlined above, which can easily shut down conversation, by indicating a fundamental lack of confidence about the topic:

**(Sarah)** I’m just saying I feel very naïve quite sadly that I don't know, and I’m from Canada and I know very little also about First Nations people as they’re called...

Sarah clearly aligns her lack of knowledge about Indigeneity in Australia with a similar lack of knowledge she felt about her earlier life in Canada. The compatibility of those two domains of experience points to the structured nature of such feelings of ignorance. Not-knowing is a leading trope of settler colonial self-awareness. In more engaged contexts, it is a

highly productive trope as well, implicitly calling on others to educate them, to authorise their involvement.

Despite some lack of confidence, however, participants in the Australian focus groups still tended to essentialize Indigeneity and present overarching narratives about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many in the Australian-born groups were notable for an expressed lack of compassion for contemporary Indigenous experience, rooted in three primary concerns: firstly a perceived threat to national identity, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were seen to be ‘creating the divide’ by not choosing to celebrate their Australianness and instead seeking to reinforce their difference, for example through the flying of the Aboriginal flag; secondly, there was a concern with the ‘authenticity’ of many people claiming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, a common enough logic of settler colonialism that has been discussed elsewhere by Maddison (2013); and thirdly there was a frequently expressed, and deeply racialized discourse concerning the perceived ‘primitiveness’ of Indigenous cultures. This latter concern was sometimes framed in what we might describe as ‘faux compassion’ wherein the ‘primitive’ nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures was used to explain contemporary circumstances, as in the following quote:

**(Karen)** These people weren’t even stone age people when we settled on here, they were all hunters and gatherers, and in 200 years we’re expecting them to come right up to white man’s standards in what about 6 or 7 generations.

Such views of the potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to cope with, or even benefit from, colonization contribute to another type of hierarchizing of Indigenous

people as those who 'have come along with us' and 'others [who] have just stayed behind and not accepted it', suggesting that 'you've got the Aborigines that you can really work with and the ones that you can't help'. This view of the possible benefits of colonization to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is used to minimise colonial harms, for example:

**(Nadia)** We have done a lot of disrespectful and harmful things to the Aboriginal people, but we've also provided a platform for a lot of other really successful Aboriginal people and they have also embraced the fact that they were given opportunities that they might not have otherwise been able to receive.

Other participants, went further, advancing a strong defence of colonization in Australia:

**(Karen)** Actually I don't know any other country in the world which has been inhabited or taken over or conquered by another nation where the existing inhabitants are treated as well as our Aborigines. Usually when another country conquers another country they are dominant and the original inhabitants are pushed to one side. I think our Aborigines are given a lot of opportunity considering the circumstances.

Others however, and particularly those in the focus groups comprised of people born outside of Australia, expressed more compassionate views, despite the fact that many of these participants had come to Australia at quite a young age and received the majority of their education in Australian schools. For example, the following description of the Indigenous experience as:

**(Oscar)** Almost like the domestic violence situation where you know someone's hurting someone for so long and the other person never gets a chance to say anything, and then the person who was being violent or had the power in the relationship has finally extended the olive branch, but that person is so sort of downtrodden, they're damaged beyond really helping, and they don't even know who they are anymore and what help they want, or need.

Some also recognised themselves as immigrants to Indigenous lands:

**(Jack)** Well, Aboriginal people have been in this country for thousands of thousands of generations, they rightfully claim, in my opinion, the country for themselves. We are the immigrants if you like in the last 200 years or so.'

There was some degree of recognition of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Molly, for example, understands that like groups of migrants who are 'all from different places', Indigenous people get 'stereotyped too much.' Dina suggested that this stereotyping stems from a fundamental ignorance of Indigeneity, meaning that non-Indigenous people 'don't really understand why something that we think is nothing and not important is so important to them, because we don't know the history, we don't know the cultures, we don't know the values.'

Counterbalancing these attempts at understanding, however, numerous respondents sought to question the credibility of Indigenous people. Occasionally, this involved repudiating the standing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander claims:

**(Jacob)** I've seen the proof that the Aboriginals were not the original inhabitants of Australia, and I've been to the Kimberley, seen rock paintings which were known as the Bradshaw paintings which were completely different, they show head dress on the people in the boats, and prows on the boats which the Aboriginals never have, I also saw Aboriginal paintings that were painted over the Bradshaws, so I strongly believe there were other people here before the Aboriginals, and that was, the Bradshaw paintings were quite famous until he died and then they had the Mabo decision and it all reverted back to the Aboriginals, which I think is a shame because how long do you say sorry for...

More often, questioning Aboriginal credibility involves questioning the standing of that majority of Aboriginal people whose families include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestors. This conflation of racial purity with an idealized claimant authenticity is essentially an argument about *miscegenation*, and it is very widespread among those who feel sceptical about any measure of material support that specifically targets Aboriginal disadvantage:

**(Roy)** I reckon they've proved now that they go back 60,000 years in Australia, supposed to have some of the original DNA of homo sapiens, and then up until white man came to Australia they were still the stone age culture, they hadn't discovered bronze, copper, anything, so they were like isolated group and then we've come in and there's been this massive change from stone age man to modern humans, and then we've tried to integrate with them and it's all a bit much for them, and I guess to me the true Australian Aboriginal is 100% Australian Aboriginal and I get a little bit irritated when people claim to be Australian Aboriginal when in fact they're white, blue eyed and somewhere in the distant past they've had some contact with the Australian Aboriginal...

Our comparative research experience indicates that this particular dimension of non-Indigenous attitudes is much more strongly expressed in Australia than in Canada. We do not argue that Canadians are wont to hold a more sophisticated understanding of Indigenous identity but, rather, that Australian non-Indigeneity manifests this anxiety more openly.

### **Delegation and embodiment in the Australian discourse**

In some respects, the Australian groups revealed variations less pronounced in their attitudes by locality than the earlier research had led us to expect. While it was true that the participants living in and around Gladstone (where Aboriginal people make up a greater proportion of the local population than in the other locations for this research) were somewhat more inclined to mention interactions with Aboriginal people at home and in their working lives, even in the Gladstone conversations this was a less common angle than the distancing-as-delegation alternative. By this we mean the discursive assumptions that locate Aboriginal people and culture *somewhere else*, typically north or west of the discussion — somewhere more remote, in places with less hospitable geography. This is a powerful trope of othering centred on particular experiences of Indigeneity which are then universalised:

**(Ron)** I just see so much waste of money, I worked [...] in the Northern Territory [...] halfway between Alice Springs and Darwin, and just the incredible waste of money that was poured into that place, and it was all just rotting away and getting smashed up and it was the white man trying to do something for the Aboriginals, and it doesn't work.

A second effect of delegation is its location of situations widely seen as unsatisfactory, dysfunctional, even embarrassing to the nation as a whole, as outside or beyond the individual speaker's control or responsibility. Something – nobody claims to be quite sure what – needs to be done, and the people in power need to do it:

**(Jack)** I think the government has to call the shots, I mean they're the government that governs the country, they're the ones that set the rules about the way we live, so if they say right everybody we're going to try and improve the lives of Aboriginal people, so everybody's got to do their own little bit.

It appears there is always a delegation of some sort going on when non-Indigenous Australians consider these topics, whether that be a geographical distancing or a move to outsource the agency to intervene (these two basic forms also characterise the Canadian research, although their presenting details vary widely between the two situations).

Understanding the 'life-cycle' of that delegation is important: how it comes into being so widely across the culture, what sustains it, how it reproduces itself through generations, and how it resists the long and sustained efforts of activists and government agencies to make people aware of Aboriginal people and culture in their local communities. Two tropes in particular stand out as revealing the underlying paradigm: (i) the use of plural pronouns and (ii) the vexed question of non-Indigenous people's 'standing' in the conversation.

A key aspect of the delegation and embodiment evident in the Australian discourse concerned the use of personal plural pronouns. Discourse gives concrete form to motives of alignment and distancing through its patterns of usage. Saliently, everyone shares a *we*; everyone is at a remove from *they*. All participants in all eight focus groups acquiesced in the paradigm that

sees ‘we’ referring to all non-Indigenous Australians, however recently their families may have immigrated, and a concomitant ‘they’ referring to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. That is to say, the focus group conversations emphasise a non-Indigenous ‘we’ that has its own right to history — for example, this Australian-born participant in Sydney:

**(Deirdre)** I think some of them have come along with us and others have just stayed behind and not accepted it, and I think in any community they’ve got people that want to do well and people that don’t want to do well.

Occasionally, this phrasing even comes into explicit focus, but it is never overturned in the grammar that participants use. For example, this Australian-born participant in Bega reinforces the paradigm in the same moment as he criticises it:

**(Adam)** If I could pick up on the treaty part, the one thing that I have concerns about, about treaties, are treaties generally are arrangements between two different groups, and this difference always presents challenges, it’s us and them, and if we can get around that us and them approach.

This ‘us-and-them’ paradigm is consistent with the norms established in the Canadian focus groups, although overall participants gave it rather less critical review and scrutiny in the eight groups reported here than in some of those earlier studies. Importantly, because the participants were aware they were invited as non-Indigenous Australians, it carries the constructive (project-assisting) implication that ‘we’ includes everyone inside the room, while ‘they’ serves as *the group we are talking about*. Doubtless we could find different referential paradigms if we brought the same people together on different terms. However,

rather than merely lay bare the situational bias of the research, the solidity of this finding (combined with its constancy across other studies in Australia and Canada—see de Costa and Clark 2011; Clark *et al.* 2012) demonstrates that bringing people together in their capacity as non-Indigenous informants has some consistent discursive consequences. If ‘we’ are able to discuss and debate our ideas about ‘them,’ about how we relate to them, about how we might negotiate a shared future with them, then we are manifestly able to sustain a shared conversation between non-Indigenous Australians about the responsibility to engage—when so much contemporary political discourse suggests we are failing to achieve that. Responses quoted above show, for instance, a shared basic understanding that Aboriginal reconciliation entails an arbitration on past injustices, to be negotiated with ‘them.’ Innumerable matters that proceed from this understanding are far from agreed, of course, but constructive engagement with the ‘us and them’ paradigm seems a necessary precondition for even commencing to discuss them. Or how else might the two main parties to Australia’s incomplete reconciliation project eventually ‘get around that us and them approach,’ as Adam wonders?

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion of the focus group data has centred on participants’ deployments of two pointedly illustrative tropes: first, the vexed question of non-Indigenous people’s views of Indigeneity and their concomitant ‘standing’ in the conversation; and, second, the ways in which relations of delegation and embodiment are reflected in patterns of distancing, defamiliarization, or estrangement, and in the use of personal plural pronouns. These tropes suggest a high level commitment to a non-Indigenous identity, in Australia as elsewhere. That is to say, participants from a wide range of backgrounds and viewpoints all actively

incorporate non-Indigeneity into their efforts to define their own perspective on the ‘responsibility to engage.’ At the same time, each trope also suggests a strikingly low level of confidence in the credibility or capacities of that identity, which participants typically manage by questioning the credibility and capacities of the alternative (Indigenous) identity.

Non-Indigenous identity exists as a latency, a form of cultural and political resource that expresses itself through language in particular. It is a background with which non-Indigenous peoples in Australia are able to narrate their own experience of Aboriginal and colonial history, their analyses of present Aboriginal circumstances and their causes, and their attitudes to national projects which might alter those Aboriginal circumstances. The research reported here points especially to the value of making this identity explicit: where discussions of non-Indigeneity are more open, less guarded, discussions of Aboriginal peoples and cultures are marked by more patient and reflective considerations of a shared non-Indigenous stake in possibilities for reconciliation. They are also marked by more patient and reflective considerations of the ways that non-Indigenous attitudes and behaviours may affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attitudes and behaviours in return.

Our most practical argument here is for the significance of ‘making this identity explicit.’ Patience and reflection are valuable qualities if *we* are going to sort out *our* position for a negotiation with *them*—quite plausibly, they are necessary preconditions for any lasting reconciliation. The research discussed in this article highlights ways that national, top-down efforts at reconciliation in fact reproduce or consolidate existing social possibilities, rather than creating real grounds for deeper and more imaginative engagements across racial and cultural lines. The exhaustion of reconciliation as a political discourse in Australia derives, at least in part, from its inability to work through (and thus to get beyond) the us-and-them

construction, which entails cultivating a wider sense of ownership of and responsibility both for unfinished business and for contemporary inequalities. As we observed in our Canadian research particularly, this appears most likely in settings where those goals intersect with localised concerns about the meaning of place or protection of the environment.

As a possible (and problematic) constitutional referendum on Indigenous recognition in Australia sits on the political horizon, policy-makers need to make sure that efforts to build campaigns advocating substantive forms of recognition and justice are designed for the greatest effect. Our research suggests such work will have most value when local and personal experiences intersect with broader tropes of history and identity.

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