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Learning the past to participate in the future: Regional discourses of Australian colonial history

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Abstract

Indigenous curricula content, including particular narratives of Australian colonial history are highly contested in contemporary Australia. How do white Australians understand Australia's colonial past and its relevance today? An empirical study was conducted with 29 rural Australians who self-identified as white. Critical race and whiteness studies provided the framework for analysis of the interviews. I argue that they revealed a delimited understanding of colonial history and a general inability to link this to the present, which limited their capacity to think cross-culturally in their everyday living - activities considered crucial in the contemporary move to Reconciliation in Australia. The normative discourse of white settler Australians to be 'Australian' is invested in the denial of Indigenous sovereignty to protect white settler Australian claims to national sovereignty. The findings support arguments for a national curriculum that incorporates Indigenous history as well as an Indigenous presence throughout all subject areas.

Introduction

There has been rigorous debate in Australia and other settler societies over the manner in which school curricula deal with colonial history. Especially contentious are debates concerning the need for Indigenous content. Should a critical approach to colonial history be taught in schools? Whose knowledge and whose history should inform the content? This paper contributes to the debates through a qualitative research project with rural self-identified white Australians to examine their understanding of colonial history in Australia and its contemporary relevance for a more equitable future.

The term 'settler society' asserts hegemony of white settler power. It extends the initial lie of *terra nullius* (or, land belonging to no one) and resultant dispossession of Indigenous peoples. This paper applies critical race and whiteness studies as the analytical framework. This body of literature understands whiteness as a system of power that privileges white norms, values, and systems of knowledge. These are kept protected through white discourses and practices that tell the story of how Australia was formed as a nation, who belongs to the nation, and, finally, who is imagined to be sovereign. The paper is also premised on the illegality of the assumption that Australia was *terra nullius* upon the arrival of Europeans in 1770. This means that British claims to sovereignty of what is now called Australia constitute an invasion and subjugation of Indigenous sovereignty that was not ceded, and continues not to be ceded. Thus, this paper uses the term 'invader colonial society' to refer to the society built upon colonial violence.

Irene Watson asks:

So who should take responsibility? Should non-Aboriginal Australia take responsibility for its inherited history of colonialism? They are quick to take benefits from the inherited wealth of colonialism...Is a future itself dependent upon Aboriginal ways, but an impossibility when an Aboriginal presence is being disappeared before our eyes? Without Aboriginal living connections is the future of humanity impossible? Are these impossible spaces where we should begin, rather than avoid? In the event of turning away, where is there even to turn? (2007, 42).

Rather than remaining in paralysis when asking the question who should take responsibility for the inherited history of colonialism, Watson argues that this impossible space could lead one to make a decision and to take responsibility. The inherited history of colonialism is the place to start. Indigenous people continue to keep race, land, sovereignty, and social justice on a national agenda that has turned away from these issues. The decision by the majority of white Australians has been to avoid the impossible space of inherited privilege gained from colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. At every turn, however, is the continuing Indigenous presence. Watson calls on Australians to be present in the impossible spaces of inherited colonialism.

Contemporary Australian social relations play out in the space of inherited colonialism in the form of 'relations of ruling' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, xxi). The denial of hegemony protects the privileged position granted to white Australians. It maintains colonizing relationships between white Australians and Indigenous people. Watson requires non-Indigenous Australians, who thus benefit from the wealth that colonialism brought, to take responsibility. The way forward depends on taking responsibility for the inherited history of colonialism. This is the site of decisions and possibilities. What does this site look like at present for those who identify as white Australians? Can a non-colonial dialogue emerge?

Migrant and settler Australians are in the impossible space that is the space of inherited colonialism. Non-Indigenous Australian identity is shaped by race and the colonial history. Drawing upon Sandoval (2000), this paper comments on the position of power white Australian subjectivity grants to migrants. It will deconstruct the privilege that white Australian subjectivity bestows. At the same time, the analysis seeks to understand the complexities and incongruence within white Australian identities. In order to deconstruct white hegemony white Australians must acknowledge the relations-of-ruling in the context of Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2000). It is not possible for racialisation, and the consequent power relations of race, to be anything but 'invisibilising', as Jackie Huggins (1998) describes it. Racialised discourse and subjectivity is made visible in the space of inherited colonialism. Is this impossibility the ground upon which the future of Australia must be negotiated? Is this the crucible of possibilities of which Irene Watson speaks?

I argue that taking responsibility for inherited colonialism makes visible the relations of ruling between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. To do this, I use Frankenberg (1993) who focuses on the racialised lives of women in the United States. This project extends her work to ground the analysis of white Australian identities in relation to Indigenous sovereignty, a crucial effort that is missing from Frankenberg's project. In my research some respondents speak of being confused about their knowledge that Indigenous peoples were historically dispossessed from their lands and their views on contemporary Indigenous land rights (Koerner 2011). I argue that the liberal capitalist concept of land ownership and possession makes it difficult for some interviewees to reconcile it with the knowledge of Aboriginal dispossession. Thus some of the respondents express ambiguity, which reveals the complex relationship that non-

Indigenous Australians have with Indigenous people and Indigenous sovereignty. This ambiguity delimits the respondents ability to participate in a transformative contemporary debate towards equitable future Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations.

There is a large collection of literature on the colonial history of Australia that places the contemporary configurations of Australian identity in its socio-political context (see especially Altman and Hinkson 2007; Curthoys, Genovese, and Reilly 2008; Elder 2007; Elder, Ellis, and Pratt 2004; Hollinsworth 2003; Lake and Reynolds 2008; Manne 2004; Riggs 2004). In the field of history that engages with these questions of the nation, critical theorists rigorously debate what is known as the 'history wars'. Henry Reynolds (2001), for example, argues for recognition of the frontier wars; and Keith Windschuttle (2000), for example, contests Reynolds findings. Those who deny Indigenous experiences of frontier conflict through to contemporary policy such as the Stolen Generations being represented in Australian history accused the movement to do so of a 'black armband' approach, with too much emphasis on negative past events.

The terms 'frontier' and 'settlement' are contested terms in much of the critical literature, particularly Indigenous epistemologies. Rather, the terms invasion and colonisation are used to locate Australian contemporary society in its context of colonialism. The terms 'white settler identities' and 'white Australian identities' refer to the dominant cultural identity that is constructed upon the narratives of settlement, which deny Indigenous peoples' everyday reality of invasion (see Pratt 2003). The use of this term is to bring attention to the privilege associated with whiteness in Australia at the expense of Indigenous people. The use of these terms in education curriculum (from primary through to tertiary) is crucial to equip Australians with the language and the concepts they convey to take responsibility for inherited colonialism.

The historical developments of policy approaches are indicative of the social construction of race in Australia as an invader society (Gale 2005). The historical and policy literature underpins the small field of empirical inquiry that employs in-depth interviews with Australians to investigate the social construction of race and white settler identities in Australia within which this paper is (Dewhirst 2008; Hage 2002; Imtoul 2007; James 2004; Koerner 2010; Mansouri 2009; Moran 2009; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Riggs & Augoustinos 2004; Schech and Haggis 2004; Tascon 2008; Wadham 2004).

The Study

The data in this paper is from my doctoral study (Koerner 2010). It analysed how whiteness, as the hegemonic norm, prevents post-colonising⁴ social relations in the everyday lives of white Australians. The fieldwork for the study was conducted in 2003 in three rural locations in South Australia, all with minority migrant and Indigenous populations. Respondent confidentiality is preserved by the use of aliases for locations and respondents. Both women and men were interviewed with no discernible difference between genders. Women and men covered a spectrum of discursive locations. This paper uses the interviews of seven women and three men but not to reflect a gender factor emerging from the study as a whole.

Using a combination of purposeful sampling strategies (Patton 1990) and the snowball method of extending the number of participants in the study, 29 interviews were conducted in each location. Drawing on Frankenberg (1993), the interviews were semi-structured, focusing on biography, social geography, and a range of thematic topics to structure

⁴ 'Postcolonising' is a term used by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) to distinguish between the post-colonial: a condition in which colonialism no longer pertains as an immediate relation of dominance, and the contemporary Australian circumstance in which, she argues, non-Indigenous Australians remain in a colonising relationship to Indigenous Australians because of the refusal of the nation-state to recognise Indigenous sovereignty.

respondent narratives of Australia's colonial history and Indigenous peoples experiences of colonisation. What are the national tropes about Australian history? What are the meta-narratives about Native Title? What is the respondent's vision for the future of Australia and does it include Indigenous people? What are the inconsistencies in the narratives? The following section analyses the key discourses of Australian history in these interviews.

Findings and discussion: Awareness of Australia's colonial history

This section will discuss the interviewees' awareness of Australian history, including the content and its source. The respondents hold a varied level of formal and informal education. It indicates their view on Indigenous people's position in Australia. Gender and age seemed not to have any impact. For example, David, Collin (both male), and Johnny (female) were all of a similar age group (within 8 years of each other). Of these interviewees, Collin left school at 14 years of age, and so did not have exposure to a secondary level of formal education. However, he sustained both personal and working relationships with Indigenous people. Collin learnt informally through observing the impact of racist policy and practice around him on cattle stations and in rural towns. Indigenous friends and colleagues impart to him the impacts of racist practice. Collin witnessed the impacts of racist practice through a 48-year relationship with an Indigenous woman, until her death. David also did not learn about Australian history at school, which focused on British history, but in the late 1960s returned to do a degree at university which included a major in Australian history. Like Collin and David, Johnny learnt about British Imperial history in her schooling. Her exposure to Indigenous history came through her work in the media and she maintains a hegemonic view of Indigenous presence in Australia.

The interviewees share a limited knowledge of the first settlers, the formation of the colonies, and the federation of the colonies into a nation state. Most of the interviewees had limited (if any) knowledge of the history of their local district, regardless of their level of education. Bryan, Patch, Tyrone, Optus, and Louise had limited memories of the history they had learned at school. Mary, Johnny, Collin, David, and Dominico had a sound knowledge of both local and national history. Mary, David, and Dominico hold university degrees that included subjects on Australian history. Johnny had completed secondary school. David, Collin, and Dominico held significant knowledge of Indigenous people's history.

Bryan, in his 20s, stated that he was not particularly interested in school:

Interviewer: Where did your understanding of Australian history come from?

Bryan: Society and environment. Year 10, 11. Our teacher was a fruit loop. Basically he gave us a book and we studied very, very lightly skimming the surface of Aboriginal culture and the fact that they drew hand paintings and that we conquered them. That's about it. We sailed here in a boat and it took us eight months or something like that and we brought rabbits and foxes (Bryan).

Bryan's school-education was the most recent, within the past five years at the time of his interview. He says that he gained his understanding through studying 'Society and the Environment' in years 10 and 11. While Bryan has a diverse network of friends from varied cultural backgrounds, he has had no exposure to an Indigenous standpoint – whether that be through reading, watching films (such as *Rabbit Proof Fence*), or through personal communication. He states that his education was superficial, thus suggesting that there is much more depth to Aboriginal culture. Further, he locates himself with the dominant 'we' in his statement about 'we conquered them' and 'we sailed here', which could be an indication that he is aware of different levels of power relations and the history of migration. His remark of 'lightly skimming the surface of Aboriginal culture...we conquered

them' suggests a continuing lack of critical Indigenous history content delivered in contemporary classrooms despite the availability of such content. Bryan remains inactive with his awareness 'we conquered them', thus he holds a position of indifference to hegemony which, in turn, maintains the position of privilege granted by white Australian subjectivity (see Sandoval 2000). The consequent power relations of race remain invisibilising (Huggins 1998) of contemporary racialisation and does not precipitate responsibility for inherited colonialism (Watson 2007).

Patch and Tyrone were interviewed together with Joan. Travelling provided them with learning experiences about history:

Interviewer: What's your awareness of Australian history?

Patch: Probably through travelling, when you travel in Australia, especially to Tasmania, you learn a lot there and there is more to read there I think it's more important, too.

Tyrone: You're more interested.

Patch: You are not just 'God Save The Queen'. I mean, that's how you were brought up but I'd have to say I'm not a monarchist now.

Tyrone: If you went to Tasmania as a child and went to Port Arthur and you went to the Island and all those other places you just think you are on holiday. But to go there as an adult, as an Australian, you read it and you think "oh God"... I think we are more interested in our past now.

Patch: Well, we want to have a past don't we?

Tyrone: We don't want someone else's history (Patch, Tyrone in Patch, Tyrone and Joan).

In the statement about 'God Save The Queen', Patch refers to British history. When Patch and Tyrone travel around Australia, they visit places such as Port Arthur in Tasmania and read about the colonial history at that site. Patch and Tyrone do not elaborate from where they access information about history, however, many Australians attend institutions such as museums, ANZAC memorials, and Information Centres, which are often staffed by volunteers (Elder 2007). At school many respondents learned about British history, which they view as someone else's (British) history. This commentary reflects a commonly held position in asserting a separate Australian identity from the previous British colonial identity. Patch and Tyrone do this through the presentation of Australian history in Patch's words, 'we want to have a past don't we?' and Tyrone's response, 'we don't want someone else's history'. Patch and Tyrone do not specify whose past is included in their understanding of national history. Because they refer to Port Arthur, which is a significant site of Australian colonial history, it implies the dominant story of Australia's discovery by Captain Cook and subsequent penal colonies as the founding story of Australia. This story does not include Indigenous history, nor the possibility of Indigenous history as Australian history (Elder 2007; Nicoll 2001). The result is an Indigenous presence continues to be excluded from white Australian imaginings of national history. This precludes productive discourses that begin the national story with Indigenous narratives. It also does not incorporate a critical history of Australian colonisation. Such an approach would enable white Australian subjects to produce more just narratives of Australian history.

The majority of interviewees completed their formal schooling prior to the introduction of Australian history into the curriculum in the late 1950s. Some of the interviewees have done further self-education to increase their knowledge about Australian history. For example, Louise is a primary school teacher:

Interviewer: What is your awareness of Australian history?

Louise: Well, I learnt a little at school...a broad outline of what the 'first settlers', who came where, South Australia were 'free settlers'. I read a few books but I read more fiction than anything. Even as a school teacher I find that I have to study up myself even to teach junior primary children because when we did a whole lot on Federation, I knew very little about the origin of the States and how they came together, and so I did a little bit of study for that specific purpose (Louise).

According to Louise, she did not gain enough information on her teacher training she had to brief herself about federation before teaching the subject. She does not mention reading any literature from an Indigenous standpoint. This impacts on whether Louise can include Indigenous content on federation or presents the narrative of the 'free settlers' forming a new nation. Like Louise, Optus has read up about the settlers' experiences to learn more about that part of Australian history. She had learned about British history at school: 'My awareness of Australian history would be governed by the few books that I've read' (Optus). The lack of Indigenous presence within Louise and Optus's self-education about Australian history reflects the issues discussed above in relation to the interview with Patch and Tyrone (9-10). One important difference is that both Louise and Optus work in institutions (Louise a primary school teacher and Optus a Librarian), where their training has not equipped them to produce national narratives that relate with Indigenous people and their experiences of Australian colonial history. Instead, they replicate the normative national narratives that protect white norms and privilege within the white founding stories of the nation.

Like Louise and Optus, Johnny did her own reading about the federation of Australia. She was motivated to do so in 1988 for the Australian bicentenary:

Johnny: 1988 that is when people started to realise, 'hey, we've got history'. You know, you talk about history in Australia to the Poms, for instance, and they say, 'what history?' Theirs goes back century upon century. But Australians are starting to realise that genealogy has come into it and they're starting to now find out how their great, great, great grandparents lived and what conditions were like. They're doing the research and history has taken a big learning curve among the general public (Johnny).

Johnny's knowledge is in the context of the history of the British Empire. She views Australian history as independent of British history, despite her focus on the 'discovery' of Australia by Captain Cook, through her reference to 1988 being the bicentenary. Apart from Bryan, (who attended school in the 1990s well after the introduction of Australian history into the curriculum), the interviewees do not have knowledge of the Indigenous history. Thus, as an initial response, the interviewees above think about Australian history as the national narrative about settlers and the process of settling and building Australia. This maintains the dominant tropes of whiteness at the core of the interviewees understanding of Australia's past. Further, Johnny's comment that British history 'goes back century upon century' disconnects Indigenous Australian history from her understanding of Australian history. Indigenous history is the oldest continuing cultural history on earth. If Johnny were to consider Indigenous history as a part of her story as an Australian her comment could be reversed because Indigenous history has been calculated back to 60,000 years.

Mary recalls a rare event for her that complicated her understanding of Australian history that includes Indigenous peoples:

Interviewer: What's your awareness of Australia's history?

Mary: Well, I love local history; I'm a local historian. When I was a child we learnt about the past, including Aboriginal people. I remember when I was a little girl we camped at a place by the river and there were little goat paths that went down the cliffs and across the river and a little corrugated iron tin – not even a humpy, just some tin over a sapling and there was a party of Aboriginal living, probably only temporary for the weekend or whatever. I'm sure they didn't live there permanently. But I've always been fascinated by pictures of the Aborigines on the river in canoes. So to see them actually first hand across the river from where we were, it was a bit frightening because – I'm not talking about a family group. I'm talking about a few scrubby old men. I mean, as far as I could tell. I was on the other side of the river but they were living in what was a native, or almost a native, state and I wasn't prepared for that. I didn't know much about missions and I certainly didn't think any of them still lived in the bush. That always stayed with me and I think I was about 10. It was the early 1960s (Mary).

Mary's childhood encounter with Aboriginal men camped by a river raises many complexities and contradictions in her understanding of Australian history. First, she was camping with her family by a river. Her family lived in a house, in the city, and would go camping in the holidays. It was natural for her family to camp on the river, but she was surprised to see Aboriginal men camped there. Mary states that the men were scrubby, and in a 'near Native state', though it is not clear what she means by this. The sight of the Aboriginal men placed an undeniable Indigenous presence before her eyes that she was not expecting. This response does two things. First, that the narratives of Australian history put Aboriginal peoples in the past, and not in the present. Second, these narratives, therefore, made an Aboriginal presence out of place (Moreton-Robinson 2005). The irony is the Indigenous men may have been on their own country, and it is the white Australian family camping, who are out of place and who do not understand Indigenous processes to visit another people's country.

Dominico's knowledge includes the history of race relations between convicts, settlers/invaders, migrants and Aboriginal people. She reflects on the complex ways that Australia was occupied and reveals the contradiction and tension in her own family history of migration:

Interviewer: What is your awareness of Australia's history and from where did that understanding come?

Dominico: History is tied back to how Australia was first discovered, how the convicts came, mutineers, the rough treatment of our Indigenous population, the Stolen Generations, and some of those things there just absolutely make me cringe. So I'm not overly proud of Australian history. I know they have done some great things. I guess it is sad that always the more negative stands out in our minds compared to the better things, so at times when I think of things like the Stolen Generations – and I don't know enough about it, so I'm sure it all has two sides, but you know, at times like that, I'm kind of proud that my ancestors weren't here at that time. We were in a completely another country and I can, in a way wash my hands of it and say, 'well we weren't here'. You know, I'd like to be responsible in any way we can now, but we weren't there, thank goodness for that (Dominico).

Dominico's response considers the different position that many post-war migrants see themselves in compared to the earlier first settler migration (Schech and Haggis 2001). She introduces a variation on the narrative of responsibility with Indigenous Australians. Dominico is aware of the Stolen Generations and refers to the earlier history of invasion as

'rough treatment' that makes her cringe, and she is not proud of that history. Dominico's response is complicated. On one hand, she claims to be able to 'wash her hands' of the history of violence between the State/first settlers and Indigenous peoples. She argues that this is because her parents migrated to Australia after the 'rough treatment' and 'Stolen Generations'. However, Indigenous dispossession from colonialism continues to the present. The stolen generation policy was still enacted at the time of her parents' migration and her own birth in Australia, which undermines her logic to 'wash her hands' of the responsibility due to her family not being present at the time.

The interview then continued to explore her idea of personal responsibility:

Interviewer: So that gets you out of personal responsibility.

Dominico: Well, our future responsibility – I think we are here and we should all be responsible in doing whatever we can to kind of bridge, and create a lot of peace, and bridge any of the hurt that's been done because all the people that were there at the time aren't necessarily here today. So someone has got to take responsibility for that. But not responsibility for what has happened. That responsibility for the future. We can't change the past that we had no part in, especially when my parents immigrated here in 1966 and I was born in 1968 (Dominico).

Dominico then introduces her thoughts of taking responsibility for future relations with Indigenous peoples. What does this mean? Is it possible to take responsibility for the future and to acknowledge the past without taking personal responsibility? Perhaps Dominico is speaking of collective responsibility into the future, though she does not use these words. How does this answer the question that Irene Watson asks of who will take responsibility for the inherited history of colonialism? On the one hand, Dominico 'washes her hands' of the past; on the other hand, she acknowledges responsibility for the future. She advocates for taking responsibility for just future relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Is it possible for Dominico's assertion of not being responsible for the colonial past, but the need to take responsibility for a just future, compatible with the idea of taking responsibility for inherited colonialism? In the least, the idea of joint responsibility for a just future enables Dominico to actively participate in contemporary social movements that take seriously future Indigenous non-Indigenous relations.

Collin, a widower of four years, was born in 1926 and lived in his small house in Rivertown. His deceased wife was a Yorta Yorta woman. They had been together for 20 years before it was legal for a white Australian man to marry an Aboriginal woman. After the consorting laws had changed, they were then married for a further 28 years. He had spent his working life as a 'jack of all trades' as a stockman, cook, laborer and general worker:

Collin: It was pretty terrible. They weren't allowed – the Aborigines – they weren't allowed to touch the food. I had to cut his food off and hand it to him [one of his Aboriginal workmates on a cattle property]. They never got their pay either in Queensland. The station owners had to give it to the Government for them and they never saw it so they were really working for rations. It was meant to go into a trust account for them, or something, but the Governments spent it all. The whites there were a mob of drunks, more or less, you know, that's why they were out there [on the remote cattle routes that ran from Queensland through to New South Wales to South Australia]...but on this other place where I liked working there was no racism with him [the boss], we were all treated the same with food and accommodation. That's why I liked him. Most of the blokes I worked with were partly colored anyway, it just depended how dark they were as to how some people treated them. My family, I wasn't the flavor of the month when [my wife] and I first got together.

But in the end everyone loved her and she was accepted by my family because she was such a lovely person. And her family absolutely treated me marvelous. There is still four of them ring me up. She had her first heart attack in April and then died in August and I waited on her hand and foot. I've had to bite my tongue a bit living here you know because some – especially the older people – are pretty racist if it comes to it – not very tolerant either. It's not going to be any different as long as the Howard government stays in but everyone here votes for the National or Liberal Party (Collin).

Collin clearly articulates the racism that he witnessed while he was growing up and throughout his adult life. He also spoke about the ability for some people to live and work without enacting relations of dominance. Collin places Indigenous people's experience of Australian history as the narrative from which to understand it. This has occurred through his work life, through his personal and familial relationships, and through observing the actions of those around him. He has developed a counter-narrative to the Australian politics of race.

Nicoll (2004) argues that the social practices of white Australians who relegate Indigenous people's experience of Australian colonial history to a mere perspective enables them to maintain their position of white privilege. It disconnects the white Australian individual from their racialised position in Australia. This practice is evident in the observation made by Collin in another section of the interview that the descendants of white settlers involved in massacres did not know about their family's involvement. They separate themselves from that history because they disconnect from their racialised location. The result is a disconnection from colonial history. Further, it enables the continuation of relationships that are built upon a colonial legacy. Collin refuses the invitation to deny the colonial past in a way that suggests non-colonial relationship with Indigenous people.

Like Collin, David identified Indigenous people's experiences of Australian history. Whereas Collin gained his understanding of Aboriginal history through witnessing segregation and racism occur to his work mates, wife, and extended family. David gained his through study of Indigenous history at university. Later he was a secondary school teacher in rural and remote locations in Western Australia and the Northern Territory in the 1960s to late 1980s.

Interviewer: What is your awareness of Australian history?

David: The thing that struck me very strongly was the huge contrast between the politically correct⁵ attitude towards the indigenes in all the official English documents, like the Queen's Instructions to Governors, and the way the Indigenous people were actually treated. Totally different (David).

David raises his concern about the Governors of early colonies different approaches to early contact with Indigenous peoples. The Queen's Instructions were to leave any people found on the land and where possible to negotiate (Reynolds, 1996). David observes that had this occurred, 'Australia could be a very different place today' (David). David's response shows the way that the relations of ruling were embedded into the early Governors' worldview and actions. Collin, David and Dominico were exposed to Australian history from an Indigenous standpoint. They have used that information to develop their understanding of the different power relations held between white Australians and Indigenous Australians.

⁵ David is using the term 'politically correct' in its grammatical sense of being the correct thing to do both legally and morally, rather than the debates about 'political correctness' that emerged in Western societies during the 1990s.

Conclusion

The normative discourse of white settler Australians to be 'Australian' is invested in the denial of Indigenous sovereignty to protect white settler Australian claims to national sovereignty. It asserts hegemony of white settler power. Irene Watson asks: should non-Indigenous Australians take responsibility for their inherited history of colonialism? She asks the challenging question, if a future is dependent on Aboriginal ways; and can there be a future Australia without living Aboriginal connections (2007)? These 'impossible spaces' are the locus from which responsibility can be taken and within which decisions can be made. There is nowhere else to turn. Moreton-Robinson complicates white claims to be 'Australian' through her notion of the 'post-colonising' relations between white settler Australians, Indigenous people, and non-white migrant Others in the context of British imperialism and colonialism. In Australia, ideologies of whiteness, and white identities have a privileged relationship with the nation-state. National identity is raced, white, and Anglo.

Many of the interviewees held limited knowledge of Australian history informed by Indigenous experience. The exceptions were interviewees who had relationships with Indigenous people (such as Collin) and those who had studied colonial history at university since the 1960s (such as David). Even younger participants (such as Bryan) who had attended school after the introduction of Australian history into the curriculum held limited knowledge of Australia's colonial history and they had not addressed this gap through university studies. This deficit understanding by non-Indigenous Australians limits their ability to participate in a non-colonial present. It limits their ability to deconstruct colonising narratives that inform their everyday interactions with Indigenous people, creating a great divide in Australian social relations. It feeds ambivalence towards, even denial of, supremacist narratives. Furthermore, it limits the vocabulary available to critique racialised discourse in everyday speech. The findings refute the claims of a 'black arm band approach' in teaching history with 'too much' focus on Indigenous experiences. Rather, the findings support not only the argument for a national standard of primary and secondary school curriculum that incorporates Indigenous history, but also a stronger Indigenous content across the curriculum. Such innovation can support the development of a critical perspective on racialised discourse. Curriculum embedded with Indigenous content can contribute to Watson's imagined way forward, and would equip non-Indigenous Australians to construct a non-colonial present and future.

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