Whitefellas at the Margins: The politics of going native in post-colonial Australia

Presented at the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA) bi-annual conference, Bordeaux 3 University (France), 4th – 7th September 2013.

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Abstract

Within the context of the Australian higher education sector and the organisational interactions facilitated by a university, the politics of Anglo-Australian identity continues to limit the ability of 'whitefella' Australians to engage with Indigenous people in a way that might be said to be truly ethical and self-transformative. Instead, the identity politics of Anglo-Australia, a politics that originates in the old colonial stories of the 19th century, continues to function in a way that marginalises those individuals who choose to engage in a way that goes beyond the organisational rhetoric of government and civil institutions in promoting causes such as reconciliation and 'closing the gap'.

The history of Australian colonialism teaches us that, when a deep and productive engagement between settler and native has occurred, the stability of Anglo-Australian identity is destabilised as the colonial establishment is reminded of Indigenous dispossession and the moral and legal legitimacy of the contemporary Australian state become subject to problematic questions that arise from this fact of Australian history.

Framing the contemporary context of change and resistance, the authors discuss the importance of inclusive institutional practice, in the quest for a democratic modelling that points to a pathway for a truer recognition, acceptance and inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the 'mainstream' of Australian university life.

Key Words

Indigenous higher education, reconciliation, cross-cultural ethics, Australian race relations.

Introduction

Despite popularist attempts to represent contemporary Australia as a post-colonial, modern and progressive society that values equality and celebrates cultural diversity and inclusivity, as indicated by the nation's 'strong' commitment to multiculturalism in the post-World War II era (Soutphommasane 2009, 2012a, 2012b, Australian Multicultural Council 2013), Australia continues to have highly problematic race relations with its Indigenous population. Unlike other 'new world' possessions of the former British Empire, colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples on the Australian continent was carried out in a way that provided no recognition of their cultural traditions, laws, languages and connections to country (Attwood 2009, Reynolds 1981, 1987, 1989, 1998, 2000, 2003). Founded on the myth of *terra nullius*, post-colonial Australia has not inherited a treaty-making tradition, such as those of Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America. The inheritance

of the *terra nullius* myth created what Bill Stanner (1968) once referred to as "the great Australian silence" and what Marcia Langton (in Pilger 1985) believes to be a "national psychosis", in which the continued presence of Indigenous peoples in Australia is largely forgotten in the thoughts of non-Indigenous people, government and organisations. The mindset, deeply entrenched in the discursive power of white, non-indigenous Australians has characterised race relations with Indigenous people in terms of a persistent and ongoing attempt to ignore, disremember and disengage. The past policy agendas of Aboriginal protection, assimilation and integration are enduring testament to the strength and durability of Australia's national psychosis (Haebich 2000, 2008, Anderson 2005).

In the 1990s, progressive elements within non-Indigenous Australia attempted to reconstitute the polemic relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia through the frame of Aboriginal reconciliation (Gunstone 2009, Gratten 2000). The term 'reconcile' infers, by default, pre-existing conflicts of difference, in this instance resulting from and sustained by the pervasiveness of settler privilege and indigenous disenfranchisement. Reconciliation, as a national process, was designed to reshape the way that non-Indigenous Australia undertook engagements with Indigenous peoples. Attempting to redress the mindset that characterised earlier periods, reconciliation emphasised the need for non-Indigenous people to understand the cultures and histories of Indigenous people and to acknowledge the destructive impacts that colonialism visited upon them during the colonial era. Reconciliation agendas sought to acknowledge Indigenous people as being the most socially and economically disadvantaged and marginalised group within Australian society. These ideas continue to shape race relations in Australia through campaigns or policies such as 'Closing the Gap' (Council of Australian Governments 2014) and 'Stronger Futures' (Australian Government 2012).

In seeking to reshape relations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia, the policy discourse of Aboriginal reconciliation (Gunstone 2009) articulated new notions of ethical practice to guide and encourage engagements with Indigenous people and their representative organisations. The new ethics of engagement adopted the language of 'equal partnership', 'community consultation', 'meaningful outcomes', 'statistical equality' and 'closing the gap'. In other words, reconciliation came to articulate a politics of morality (Murphy 2010). Within an educational context, a growing number of Australian universities have adopted Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), which outline the contribution higher education can make to this national political agenda. The RAP adopted by the University of Melbourne provides a good example of how the rhetoric of reconciliation now directs progressive institutional engagements with Indigenous peoples.

The University of Melbourne's vision for reconciliation.

> To use the expertise and resources of its teaching and learning, research and knowledge transfer activities to make a sustained contribution to lifting the health, education and living standards of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We aim to develop knowledge and knowledge processes that support Indigenous development.

> Our vision includes producing the highest quality outcomes in all aspects of our academic endeavour – from recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to building our cohort of Indigenous Australia and academic and professional staff. (University of Melbourne 2011)

The practice of ethical engagement, therefore, has been characterised by the development of complex policy frameworks within the university that publicly proclaim a

commitment to advancing 'Indigenous issues'. In addition, the RAPs public proclamations of positive engagements with Indigenous Australia include Indigenous employment strategies and Indigenous education statements (RMIT University 2011a, 2012), as well as trade union investigations of Indigenous participation and racism in the sector (NTEU 2011). In practice, the ethics of engagement engendered by reconciliation has also given rise to symbolic acts of acknowledgement, such as the display of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, the purchase of Indigenous art and the installation of Indigenous gardens.

In the two decades since being introduced, the political agenda of Aboriginal reconciliation has become well established in the policies and administrative discourses that state the commitment of the Australian Government and civil institutions, such as universities, to the development and maintenance of ethical relationships with Indigenous peoples (Australian Government, 2013).

Purpose

In this paper, we argue that, despite the advent of Aboriginal reconciliation and its new ethics of positive engagements with Indigenous peoples, a significant gap exists between a formal adherence to the rhetoric of ethical engagement and its achievement in the core business of Australian university operational practice. While the university sector strives to improve its processes of diversity management to be inclusive of Indigenous contribution, we argue that, at times, the old mindset persists in the psychological makeup of non-Indigenous peers. This happens in a way that seems to work actively against the possibility that individual, ethical 'whitefellas' might commit to and achieve substantive engagements with Indigenous people. Therefore, we argue that significant social sanction continues to operate within non-Indigenous Australian society. This ensures that 'whitefellas', who take the ethics of reconciliation to mean the achievement of substantive outcomes, are subject to marginalisation, silencing and negative portrayals of their personal character. Such 'whitefellas' who chose to take reconciliation seriously become positioned at the periphery of institutional engagements with Indigenous Australia. This would suggest that the rhetoric of reconciliation matters more and takes precedent over the substantive achievement of positive outcomes for Indigenous peoples. We are not claiming such 'whitefellas' to be the unsung heroes of progressive university practice. Rather, we merely seek to draw attention to why such relationships and partnership building matter move beyond "superficial organisational change" (Grimes 2002), within a context in which institutional power and authority overwhelmingly resides with non-Indigenous people.

This paper is grounded in our combined personal experience of work to facilitate Indigenous engagement within the Australian higher education sector. This paper, therefore, is written from the subjective perspectives of two academic colleagues, one of Anglo-Aboriginal-Australian heritage, the other a British 'outsider', now living and working in Australia. Therefore, it is designed to raise concerns about institutional relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by drawing on experience and anecdotal evidence. Due to a conflict of interest, this paper does not provide specific workplace examples to illustrate instances of problematic or ineffectual practices.

The purpose of this paper is not to cast negative portrayals of a higher education environment that is publically committed to Indigenous success, rather, our intention is to consider ways in which processes of engagement may be strengthened, when opposition, resistance and apathy are encountered. As the university sector recruits nationwide, it is

inevitable the Australian condition of unresolved race-centred relations is active in the workplace.

Institutional Context

We both work across Indigenous learning and teaching, and research initiatives at RMIT University, Melbourne.

The University, among the largest by enrolment and the scope of its education programs, is a relative newcomer to adopting formal institutional policies, statements and procedures designed to engage with Indigenous peoples. In recent years, RMIT University has included formal statements of Indigenous engagement at the core of the institution's strategic planning processes, as noted in the 2011 to 2015 strategic planning document, Transforming The Future (RMIT University 2011b). Such statements commit RMIT University to increase the targeted student services available to Indigenous students, as well as create more effective pathways and articulations for Indigenous peoples who wish to undertake tertiary level studies. RMIT is also committed to improving engagements with Indigenous people through the development of inclusive curricula and ethical research practices, and to increase the number of Indigenous people appointed to academic and professional roles across the University. The successful translation of these statements into substantive changes is largely dependent on establishing strong working relations across the organisation, a shared valuing and understanding of goals and objectives, and, of course, economic viability. Ultimately, the translation of formal statements of intent to substantive improvement in the educational experience of Indigenous people relies on the genuine commitment of the overwhelmingly non-Indigenous workforce who staff RMIT University and carry out its operational functions on a daily basis.

However, the formal adoption of institutional commitments to reconciliation and the ethical engagements with Indigenous peoples that this political agenda recommends, and the various stated aims, objectives and targets this entails, are not easily implemented at the operational level. Although the senior leadership group of RMIT University, including the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and Chair of the Academic Board, have advocated the development of ethical engagements with Indigenous Australia within the context of a reconciliation agenda, it seems many of the non-Indigenous workforce have little or no understanding of Indigenous Australia and its relevance to the higher education services that they are responsible for providing in their daily work. At best, formal institutional statements, made by senior leadership, are met with an attitude of indifference. At worst, such statements are met with attitudes of negativity, pessimism, reluctance, scepticism and active resistance. In our experience, such negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples remain prevalent within the Australian higher education sector. They are the most significant reason why the gap between the rhetoric of ethical engagement and its operational practice continues to be substantial and seemingly unbridgeable. On an extreme level, resistance, manifested as silence and, therefore, the absolution of professional responsibility, may be experienced when seeking support for Indigenous appointments, academic programs and incentives, or especially when challenging deficit models of engagement—the status quo.

Institutional Context Reviewed

The anecdotal evidence that we have observed and experienced as academics, tasked with facilitating engagements between formal higher education services and Indigenous Australia, has found confirmation in a number of recent reviews of the sector. Resistance,

absolution of professional responsibility and/or lack of support to include ethical engagement with Indigenous people, as part of the operational practice of 'core business', were identified as significant roadblocks to progress in the '*Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Final Report (2012)*'.

Commissioned by the Commonwealth Government of Australia, and chaired by highly profiled academic, Professor Larissa Behrendt, the review process was instigated in order to "propose measures that address what is a significant gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians higher education outcomes" (Behrendt 2012). To assist the chair, an expert panel was appointed to conduct an extensive consultancy with key stakeholders across the Australian higher education sector. The review found sector-wide shortcomings in the way Australian universities currently engage with Indigenous peoples. The Behrendt Review, as it became commonly known, reported 35 recommendations. The review recommended that a 'whole of institution' approach to Indigenous engagement be adopted by the sector. In making this recommendation, the review found that Indigenous engagements, at present, were heavily reliant on too few individuals; in particular, Indigenous staff and their non-Indigenous co-workers who possess a personal passion, rather than a professional responsibility, to advance ethical practice in the area. To achieve the 'whole of institution' approach that it sought, the Behrendt Review emphasised the need for the sector to accept that the practice of ethical engagement with Indigenous people constitutes 'core business', by ensuring that these activities become a standard component of the strategic planning processes, which are applied by universities to assess and communicate their annual performance. Similarly, the review also noted that the sector faced an urgent need to include Indigenous people in the governance and oversight of institutions. It recommended that the sector act to increase the number of Indigenous people in senior academic and professional leadership positions.

Many of the observations and recommendations contained in the Behrendt Report are directly applicable to our own experiences of work at RMIT University. Indeed, we consider it useful to place our experiences of the workplace within the national context of the higher education sector in Australia.

'On Stony Ground: Governance and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation in Australian Universities' is a report complimentary to the Behrendt Review ranked institutions according to their relative performance in achieving substantive educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2011). Overall, the report ranked RMIT University 28th out of 37 Australian universities that make up the sector. In assessing specific areas of performance, the latter report graded RMIT University in the achievement of Indigenous access to courses 14th out of 40 and the employment of Indigenous people 14th out of 30. Significantly, *'On Stony Ground'* graded the performance of RMIT University, in respect to the inclusion of Indigenous people in governance and decision making processes and the cultural competency of its workforce to engage with Indigenous Australia, as 0 out of 30. When combined, these grades required the report to conclude that RMIT University's substantive performance in the achievement of positive education outcomes for Indigenous people is below average, receiving an aggregate score of just 28 out of 100. Such outcomes emphasise that it is necessary to strengthen and broaden the scope of Indigenous engagement and contribution if it is to succeed in becoming part of core business. The success of such contributions will inevitably require work between identified (Indigenous) and non-identified (non-Indigenous) workers in the sector.

However, both of these recent and important reports imply that those who work to facilitate ethical Indigenous engagements in the context of non-Indigenous Australian institutions, such as universities, are likely to find themselves in a position of relative powerlessness and constant struggle. This is because individuals who strive to achieve ethical practice in this area are often required to engage in ongoing negotiations in order simply to keep the engagement with Indigenous Australia on the organisational agenda. Further, these individuals advocate approaches to necessitate this within the Australian higher education framework, as opposed to working toward the improvement of actual performance outcomes. Unfortunately, the reality of the higher education context means that the ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples, represented in the formal statements of Australian institutions, are rarely, if ever, translated into a substantive and everyday ethical practice. We believe that meaningful progress will not be achieved by reference to the political agenda of reconciliation and other strategic planning documents alone. Instead, we believe ethical practice that is encouraged, embraced and properly resourced and supported by Australian institutions is what progress clearly demands, if Indigenous people are to be full participants in the universities and enjoy all of the benefits associated with higher education success.

We are unsure why the reconciliation agenda adopted by the Australian higher education sector is characterised by a problematic and ongoing struggle to translate rhetoric into positive outcomes. However, we believe that this problem may have its origins in the particular characteristics of Australian colonialism and the marginality that Indigenous people have come to occupy in the national psyche of contemporary non-Indigenous Australia.

Patrick Wolfe (1999) has argued that Australian colonialism can be characterised by a logic of elimination, as Indigenous peoples were violently removed from their country when warfare rolled across the frontier that separated 'settler' from 'native'. We believe that the logic of elimination, which Wolfe frames as an economic process of colonialism, can be reframed to explain the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples discursively from the pages of Australian history and, perhaps, psychologically, as a failure to accept and acknowledge the continued presence of Indigenous people in contemporary Australian society, including in higher education.

More importantly, in the context of this paper, we believe that 'whitefellas' who have supported Indigenous people against the colonial logic of elimination have, themselves, been subject to various kinds of attempted erasure.

Arguing that the problem of ethical engagement is much larger than higher education, we believe that the problems that beset the reconciliation agendas of Australian universities mirrors historical relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. History provides examples that suggest that, while the rhetoric of positive relationships with the 'natives' has seen non-Indigenous people rewarded with individual honours and accolades, those who have pushed beyond mere rhetoric toward the achievement of substantive and positive change, in partnership with Indigenous people, have more often than not found themselves pushed to the edges of collective national remembrance.

History Lessons

Surveying the history of colonial Australia reveals that the relationships between 'whitefellas' who have sought to engage in authentic and productive relationships with Indigenous people have always been fraught with difficulty and often come at a high

personal cost for such individuals. History teaches us all that relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people are more likely to be celebrated and remembered in the imperial histories of Anglo-Australia, when 'whitefellas' in positions of power have used their authority to propagate the rhetoric of conciliation, respectful and good relations with Indigenous Australia, when the substance of their actions, more often than not, must be assessed as detrimental to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and their ways of life.

Searching for cases of ethical engagement with Indigenous people, we found that Arthur Phillip interacted with the 'natives', but his missing front tooth had nothing to do with the Eora ceremonial rites associated with manhood. Watkin Tench interacted with the 'natives', but his detailed observations of their culture had nothing to do with learning from them and everything to do with his own ideas on European enlightenment. George Augustus Robinson interacted with the 'natives', but his detailed observations of their cultures had nothing to do with learning from them and everything to do with his ideas about Christian salvation. Alfred Deakin interacted with the 'natives', but his consideration of their position within the Australian constitution had nothing to do with promoting a sincere, cross-cultural dialogue through their political emancipation. More recently, John Howard interacted with the 'natives', but his statement of sincere regret had nothing to do with sincerity and everything to do with political expediency (Judd 2007).

Looking beyond these celebrated histories of Indigenous engagement, we found far more interesting stories at the edges. Writing about the contemporary singer-songwriter, Neil Murray, the journalist, Martin Flanagan, pointed out that 'whitefellas' such as Murray, who undertake a sincere engagement with Indigenous Australia, end up as largely forgotten, marginal and uncelebrated figures in non-Indigenous Australia. Murray seems to be one of the very few, non-Indigenous Australians to question Australian history and identity through a sincere and ethical practice of engagement with Indigenous Australia. As a result of his time in the Aboriginal band Warumpi, Murray had come to know Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories in a way that few others had. Despite his position as a leading musician and singer-songwriter, Murray remained a relatively obscure figure within the Australian 'mainstream'. This is a situation that Flanagan attributes to his commitment to ethical and ongoing engagement and dialogue with Indigenous people. Comparing the relative obscurity of Murray's outstanding achievements with the public adulation of the Australian footballer Michael Voss, Flanagan sums up the fate of the 'whitefella' who seeks out deep connection with Indigenous Australia:

> He'd seen a world few [Anglo-] Australians knew about, he'd written about it better than any other contemporary whitefella I'd read, in the larger mainstream of Australian culture he was a half-known figure on the edges. Everybody knew Michael Voss because he excelled in the Australian game, but if you pursued Australian culture just as fearlessly you ended up in the margins. Wasn't this why Xavier Herbert, who had trod a roughly similar path to Neil [Murray] a few decades earlier, had despaired so richly about Australians? We never looked into our interior to find ourselves, or never long enough or in enough numbers to make it really matter culturally or politically, instead slipping from one imported notion of self to next when our own stories were so much more revealing. And did anyone really give a fuck anyway? Sometimes, I wasn't sure I did anymore. (Flanagan, 2003)

Pushed to the margins, half-known and only partially remembered, Flanagan's analysis of Murray reverberates with our experiences of being pushed to the edges and being made to feel invisible, silent, powerless and ignored by the non-Indigenous 'mainstream' of Australia. It seems to us that the cost to Neil Murray of engagement with Indigenous

Australia has been the marginalisation of this talented musician from the Australian 'mainstream'.

In the 'mainstream', the fundamentals of Anglo-Australian nationalism and its core narratives of celebrating colonial triumph continue to shape the nation's psychology in ways that disremember an Aboriginal past and pushes from view a dynamic and vibrant Aboriginal present. In the 'mainstream' of non-Indigenous Australia, the prospect that Anglo-Australia has anything of value to learn from Indigenous peoples or that any sane 'whitefella' would chose to 'go native', to borrow the familiar colonial phrase, even now remains an unthinkable, unspeakable impossibility.

The Neil Murray story and the consequence of his marginal status is far from unique. Throughout the history of colonial Australia, many other 'whitefellas' who committed to an ethical practice of engagement with Indigenous peoples have become half-known, vaguely remembered figures of the past. Their achievements in life, often significant, remain largely unknown and certainly uncelebrated by contemporary non-Indigenous Australia.

Such figures include Thomas Wentworth Wills (1835-1880), Australia's first great 'native born' cricketer and the man accredited, with others, with inventing the game of Australian (Rules) Football (Mandle 1976). Wills, who grew up on the colonial frontier with the *Djabwurrung* people of western Victoria, learned their language and dances; he had insight into their cultural knowledge and practices and maintained a lifelong connection with the Aborigines of this region. Despite his father and 18 others being massacred by Aboriginal warriors in western Queensland in 1861, Tom Wills volunteered to coach an all-Aboriginal cricket team in 1866. The men who formed the team from western Victoria spoke a language similar to *Djabwurrung*, allowing Wills to direct the players in their own tongue. When the team toured the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, Wills often drank and shared lodgings with the Aboriginal players. Engagement with the Aboriginal cricketers and the equality expressed in the relationship that emerged between Wills and the men was deemed unacceptable behaviour to the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines (Public Record Office of Victoria, 2005). In 1867, Wills was removed from his position as team captain and coach, and replaced by the evangelical Christian Charles Lawrence, a straight-laced Englishman. History remembers Lawrence, as the Aboriginal team famously became the first Australian team to tour England and to play at the 'home of cricket' Lords. For a century following his death, however, Wills was forgotten in the history of Australian Football, his marginality likely connected to his engagement with Aborigines. In a country that never forgets its sporting heroes, it is curious that Wills, as first class cricketer and co-inventor of Australian Football, now widely regarded as the 'national game', remains a half-known, partly remembered, but largely forgotten, figure in the sporting history of colonial Australia (Judd 2007, 2008, 2012, De Moore 2009, Flanagan 1998, Mulvaney and Harcourt 2005, Mallett 2002).

William Thomas (1793-1867), who became the assistant protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District (later the British Colony of Victoria and now the State of Victoria) in 1839, was the first government official of his generation to engage with the Indigenous people of the region through a sincere and ethical practice. He learned to speak the *Woi wurrung* language and became a trusted friend of the *Wurundjeri* headman *Billibillary* and, later, leaders Simon Wonga and William Barak. Although Thomas succeeded in advocating reserved lands for Indigenous peoples, recorded valuable cultural insights and is well regarded by *Wurundjeri* descendants today, he is largely unknown in Australian history. A marginal figure, the ethical and highly productive relationships Thomas was able to build

with *Wurundjeri* and other Indigenous peoples in central Victoria is work now largely forgotten. Instead, history remembers his superior, George Augustus Robinson, who, as Chief Protector of Aborigines, often frustrated Thomas in his work and often reprimanded him for his staunch defence of Aboriginal interests in the face of greedy 'whitefellas' (Mulvaney 1967).

John Green (unknown-1908), as an employee of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in Victoria and manager of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station from 1863 to 1874, forged an almost unique working relationship with the *Wurundjeri* and *Taungurong* peoples who lived on this reserve. Green, unlike the mangers on other Aboriginal reserves, allowed the Aboriginal people to govern their own affairs by instituting, what might be described as, a council of Elders on a model in keeping with his own Scottish Presbyterianism. Sacked by the board of protection in 1874, Green came to be regarded as being as troublesome by his superiors as the Aborigines he was charged to control. Like Thomas, Green continues to be remembered by Indigenous people in Victoria today. While Indigenous people continue to celebrate his ethical practice of working with their ancestors in a way that seems to have transcended 19th century discourses of racial hierarchy and colonial racism, John Green is another forgotten figure in the history of non-Indigenous Australia (Barwick 1998).

Searching for figures like those outlined above, who are found at the very edges of Australian history, suggests that the obscurity of these 'whitefellas' is an outcome of the nature of their engagement with Indigenous Australia. In our view, this is due to the fact that, when a deep and productive engagement between colonist and Aborigine has occurred, the stability of Anglo-Australian identity is de-stabilised as the colonial (and post-colonial) establishment is reminded of Indigenous dispossession. This is a historical fact that raises difficult and unresolved questions about the moral and legal legitimacy of the contemporary Australian state.

Historical Baggage and Identity Feuds in 'Post-Colonial Australia

Despite the advent of 'Aboriginal' reconciliation, a national political agenda designed to reshape the historic relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in Australia, older ideas about Indigenous people, which express a colonial desire to eliminate them discursively, in history and psychologically, and remove them from considerations of the present, continue to exist as a persuasive force in contemporary Australian society. It has been our experience that 'whitefellas' who possess a genuine commitment to engage with Indigenous people, to achieve substantive improvements in their social, economic and cultural wellbeing, continue to be marginalised, their work discredited and their personal characters open to increased scrutiny and criticism.

The persistent influences of imperial and colonial notions of race and racial differences remain highly influential forces in shaping Australian social norms and attitudes today. The myth of *terra nullius*, the historical silences and national psychosis of forgetting that Aborigines ever existed, are characteristic, not only of Australian colonialism, but also of an Australian nationalism that emerged from it as being a major force in the 1890s and led to the political establishment of a (post) colonial Australian state in 1901. The emergent nationalism during this time defined Australian identity exclusively in terms of race, racial purity, whiteness and Anglo conceptions of a hyper-masculinity. The nationalistic type, who came to embody the national character of the Australians, was invested in the figure of the 'bushman', the 'digger' and the 'surf life saver' (Ward 1958, Hage 1998, Hirst 2001, 2007). Authentic notions of being Australian, and belonging in Australia, inherently

became associated with the requirement that individuals possess and demonstrate whiteness. Around such notions of national identity, the new Australian state spent much of the 20th century establishing itself as a white nation. Indigenous peoples became represented in the discursive construct of 'the Aborigine'. Although racist legislation and administrative practices associated with a white Australia were dismantled in the early 1970s, the discursive nexus between Australian-ness and whiteness, in answering questions about who belongs in Australia, remain fundamental norms in national politics. This disturbing fact is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in ongoing Anglo-Australian debate and reaction to refugees who, like their own ancestors two centuries ago, arrive by boats 'illegally' (Asylum Seekers Resource Centre 2013, Sydney Morning Herald 2013, The Conversation 2013, The Herald Sun 2013).

The implications of a 'post-colonial' Australia, built on notions of a white nation, have had immense consequences for Indigenous peoples. During the period 1901 to 1972, Indigenous people experienced state-sanctioned exclusion from the Australian 'mainstream' and state-sanctioned suppression of their human and civil rights. In so-called 'white-Australia', Indigenous peoples were not only denied the vote at federal elections, but remained subject to highly repressive, 19th century Aborigines' protection acts. These acts also denied the Indigenous Australians their rights to freedom of movement, freedom of employment, freedom of marriage, freedom to parent and freedom of diet (Attwood and Marcus 1999, 2007, Chesterman and Galligan 1997, Davidson 1997).

Yet, beyond the detrimental substantive outcomes that Indigenous peoples have been forced to endure, has been the ongoing, digressive violence of Anglo-Australian nationalism. Providing definition to an Australian national identity as 'Self', whose boundaries relied on construction of the 'Aborigine' as 'Other', Indigenous people became discursively positioned as the inferior antithesis of dominant non-Indigenous representations of Australian-ness. Importantly, the degree to which Indigenous people were considered 'Other' came to be understood in terms of formulas of blood quantum, in which the so-called 'full blooded Aborigine' represented 'Otherness' in its most absolute form. Positioned as foreigners within white Australia, 'the Aborigine' came to be characterised as 'savage', 'stone-age', 'primitive', 'sub-human', 'timeless' and 'out of time'. One of the most influential and enduring nationalist tropes functioned to position 'the Aborigine' as part of the Australian continent's fauna. Like the kangaroo, emu and possum, 'the Aborigine', according to this trope, constituted just another part of the landscape, part of the Australian wilderness that non-Indigenous colonists had found, battled, conquered, tamed and transformed into what they referred to as the 'settled districts' (Attwood and Arnold 1992, Birch 2005, 2006, Russell 1998, 2001, 2005).

We believe that the legacy of this historical trajectory of Australian national identity continues to play itself out in the everyday interactions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, which occur in the workplace and elsewhere in contemporary Australian society. The negativity historically attached to Indigenous identity means that, in higher education today, terms including 'Indigenous education', 'Indigenous programs' and 'Indigenous studies' are associated with deficit, welfare and special measures (Gray and Beresford 2008, Meller and Corrigan 2004). Even in higher education institutions, where the non-Indigenous workforce is highly educated and often engaged in progressive politics, Indigenous people continue to be framed as a 'problem' to be dealt with by the Australian 'mainstream'. Similarly, identity politics inherited from the past impact on the way the non-Indigenous workforce engages with Indigenous employees working within the sector. It is common for Indigenous staff to be treated as 'native informants', whose role is to mediate the absolute 'Otherness' represented by 'the Aborigine' into forms that are

considered acceptable, non-threatening and capable of allowing non-Indigenous engagements with Indigenous Australia to take place. It is also common that the expertise and authority that non-Indigenous colleagues invest in an Indigenous academic often has more to do with their physical appearance, rather than the formal qualifications they possess or the record of teaching and record demonstrated during the course of their careers. The idea of blood quantum is a measure of indigeneity, and authentic knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal 'Otherness', unfortunately, remains a major factor in reconfirming and perpetuating the stereotypes of Australian nationalist-colonial discourse. These ideas, which have currency in Australian higher education today, ensure that tokenism remains endemic and is a significant factor in limiting productive engagements between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people who work in the sector.

While the impacts of tokenism, often recast as an 'Indigenous skill shortage', by the non-Indigenous workforce have gained currency in popular discourse and the stuff of urban myth, the marginalisation of 'whitefellas' who seek to establish ethical engagements with Indigenous people, by moving beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation to achieve substantive positive outcomes, is a characteristic of cross-cultural relationships that is rarely, if ever, recognised and acknowledged.

We believe that, as a result of old, political agendas and narratives of Anglo-Australian national identity, 'whitefellas' who seek deep and ethical engagements with Indigenous people are subject to marginalisation in a way that is detrimental to both their professional careers and personal friendships. The fate of such 'whitefellas' in the past continues to be repeated in the present day, as such individuals are sidelined and overshadowed by those who prefer the rhetoric of reconciliation to the hard work entailed by its everyday enactment in the practice of collaborative work between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people. In our view, such 'whitefellas' remain at risk of being pushed to the margins, their personal characters and professional abilities undermined because the possibility that a non-Indigenous Australian might 'go-native' remains an unspeakable, unthinkable, impossibility within Anglo-Australia. It remains such because ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples serves to undermine the dominant narratives of the Australian nation and Australian 'Self' by disrupting the oppositional binaries that are implicit in these categories. In the politics of Anglo-Australia, the existence of the 'whitefella' who chooses to 'go native' raises the prospect that Indigenous demands for equality, for land rights, for treaty and for reparations for stolen wealth might actually be met, while troubling the 'mainstream' by reminding it that contemporary Australia is founded on the myth of *terra nullius*.

Conclusion

Despite now being two decades old, the framework of 'Aboriginal' reconciliation in Australia remains largely rhetorical. Few Australian institutions, and the non-Indigenous people who work within them, have either the willingness or the desire to translate rhetoric into a daily practice of ethical engagement with Indigenous Australia. We believe that it is time for the politics of reconciliation to be renewed in a way that emphasises and encourages greater recognition, which 'whitefellas' can and must play in working towards an Australia that is inclusive of Indigenous peoples. Experience of 'working in Indigenous higher education' initiatives at RMIT University has demonstrated to us that adoption of public policy statements in support of Indigenous people is not enough. Translating rhetoric into substantive outcomes requires not the marginalisation of ethical 'whitefellas', but a commitment to support them in their work, through recognising that meaningful reconciliation is hard work and requires skill, patience and dedication to be successful. We

believe that such an outcome will only be achieved when the political leadership of Australia recommits to reframing the historical relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, a process that must start by dismantling old, imperial, colonial and nationalist ideas about Australian history and identity, and that view Indigenous peoples as alien and opposite, and an inferior 'Other' of a comfortable and self-congratulatory Australian 'Self'. At the heart of such a process, non-Indigenous Australia must be prepared to recognise, acknowledge and celebrate that 'whitefellas' have much to learn and value in the many gifts that the generosity and openness of Indigenous people continue to make available to non-Indigenous Australia.

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