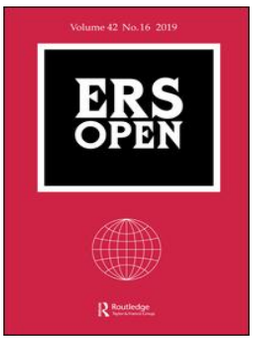

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To be or not to be Indigenous? Understanding the rise of Australia's Indigenous population since 1971

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ABSTRACT

In the past half century, the Indigenous Australian population has grown at a far faster rate than can be explained by births alone, and has come to include more western-educated people living in the south-east of the country. Demographers attribute much of this growth to people identifying as Indigenous later in life. Social research has examined the phenomenon of "New Identifiers" in the United States and Canada, where similar shifts in indigenous populations have been observed. This paper is the first to examine the issue in an Australian context. We analyse 33 interviews with people who have come to believe they have Indigenous Australian ancestry later in life, and identify factors that encourage members of this group to subsequently identify as Indigenous, or discourage them from doing so.

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Since the 1970s, demographers across English-speaking settler-colonial countries have all observed something similar. The Native American, Metis and Aboriginal populations of United States, Canada and Australia, all greatly diminished in the wake of European expansion, have grown rapidly in the past 50 years – at a far faster rate than can be accounted for by births or migration alone (Caron-Malenfant et al. 2014; Eschbach 1993; Gray and Smith 1983; Guimond 1999; Kinfu and Taylor 2002; Liebler and Ortyl 2014; Passel 1976). In all three countries, this growth has been strongest in Anglo-dominated towns and cities in Canada's east, America's eastern seaboard and lower Midwest states and Australia's south-east. This has changed the demographic and geographic distribution of the indigenous populations, shifting it away from traditional Indian, Metis or Aboriginal-dominated territories (Leroux and Gaudry 2017; Taylor and Bell 2012; Thornton 1996).

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To explain these parallel trends, a common narrative has emerged. It appears that the descendants of Indigenous people of mixed ancestry,[1] who had ostensibly assimilated into settler colonial society, have increasingly reconnected with their indigenous ancestors – either discovering unknown ancestors, or forging connections with known ones. Many have subsequently changed their racial identification later in life, and this group have become known to researchers as "New Identifiers" (Biddle and Markham 2018), "race shifters" (Sturm 2011), "New Indians" (Thornton 1996), "reclaimers" (Fitzgerald 2007) or people engaged in "ethnic switching" (Liebler 2001; Nagel 1997) and "ethnic mobility" (Caron-Malenfant et al. 2014). We use the term New Identifiers in this article. While some claim only "symbolic" identity (Gans 1979), others have tried to establish community, culture and rights (Hitt 2005).

In North America, these New Identifiers have faced enormous legal and social barriers. Established members of recognized Metis and Native American organisations have dismissed them as "gold diggers" trying to access indigenous resources, as well as "ethnic frauds", "culture vultures", "pretendians", "New Age poseurs", "cultists" and "wannabes" appropriating Native American culture (Hamilton 2017; Keeler 2015; Leroux and Gaudry 2017). In turn, these critiques have prompted researchers to explore the factors prompting the increase in identification. Their research suggested that a first wave began in the 1970s, when the racial pride and civil rights movements encouraged urban Native Americans of mixed ancestry to rejoin tribes and reclaim their indigenous identity (Cornell 1994; Nagel 1997). A second wave has followed in more recent decades, as an increasingly number of Americans began claiming more distant Native American ancestors who offered them a naturalistic spirituality, a morally justifiable family history and a sense of community with other New Identifiers (Garroutte 2003; Sturm 2011).

In Australia, the New Identifiers have received a relatively warm welcome from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community. Widespread awareness of the "Stolen Generations" – Indigenous people removed from their families as part of the government's assimilation scheme, who received a formal government apology in 2007 – has made Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians generally sympathetic to those trying to forge connections with previously unknown Indigenous ancestors and relatives. This sympathy helps explain the inclusive model of pan-Indigenous identity in Australia, which offers all people of Indigenous descent the potential for gaining recognition (Kowal 2016). It also sheds light on why, to date, there has been no Australian scholarship examining the motivations of New Identifiers and the complexity of this identity. Government reports are focused on encouraging people of Indigenous descent to identify (ABS 2012; Kelahar et al. 2010), and existing sociological research is more concerned with politically defending identification changes than sociologically analyzing them (Bennett 2015; Carlson 2016; Robinson 1997).

As the numbers of New Identifiers have continued to swell in recent decades, this inclusive Australian consensus has begun to unravel. In Tasmania, where the population has skyrocketed from 671 in 1971 to 19,625 in 2016, recognized members of the Indigenous community have argued they are being "overrun" by New Identifiers making questionable genealogical claims (Denholm 2015). Indigenous people from New South Wales have also voiced misgivings about New Identifiers taking up Indigenous-identified positions in government-funded organisations (Morgan 2011; Yamanouchi 2010), and warned that the addition of better-educated, healthier New Identifiers to the national Indigenous population is masking the ongoing, extreme disadvantage of those living in discrete Indigenous communities scattered across Australia's tropical north and arid centre (Dillon 2011). Representatives from remote communities have also argued that this population redistribution, which is factored into the equations used to calculate tax redistribution between states, is "drawing money away from those in desperate need" in the Northern Territory (Bowden 2017). Other Indigenous representatives claims these complaints are evidence of "lateral violence": attempts by more recognizably Indigenous people to discredit those that they consider less "authentic" because of their mixed ancestry, pale skin and/or unfamiliarity with the Indigenous community (Bennett 2015; Dodson 2017).

Our aim is not to adjudicate these highly sensitive intra-Indigenous debates, or judge the legitimacy of those who've come identify as Indigenous relatively recently. Rather, we see these emerging debates as evidence that rising Indigenous identification is a phenomenon with significant social, political and demographic consequences. By relaying the results of our qualitative research into the factors prompting new identification, we hope to constructively inform these debates and related social policy. Here we analyse thirty-three extended interviews with people who were raised with a "White" identity, but who came to believe they had Indigenous ancestry later in life. Unlike previous Australian research, which has focused exclusively on people of this profile who subsequently came to identify as Indigenous, these interviewees fell across a spectrum of identification. While the majority were "New Identifiers", who now consistently and publicly identified as Indigenous, others had chosen not to identify as Indigenous.

Our inclusion of these statistically invisible "Non-identifiers" alongside the New Identifiers allows new insights into Indigenous identification in Australia. Drawing on research into parallel trends in the United States and Canada, as well as broader studies of settler colonial societies, we explain the rise in Indigenous identification in relationship to two seemingly contradictory cultural trends – the rise of individualism, expressivism and authenticity on the one hand, and "demodernising impulses" such as the New Age and genealogical movement on the other.[2] We argue that these trends have created an environment where people are encouraged to both "choose" their own

ethnic identity and to experience this chosen identity as given, essential and fixed. Our research also affirms North American findings that, for those making this choice, White identities have lost appeal relative to Indigenous identities because of wider awareness of colonial injustice, an increased emphasis on autochthony, and the rise of environmentalism and holistic spiritualism.

Before proceeding further, it is important that we position ourselves in relation to the research. Both authors are female anthropologists who identify as White Australians (the first is of Scottish and German origin, and the second of Polish-Jewish), but whose research has focused on Indigenous issues. The first author has worked and done fieldwork for over a decade in remote communities in Far North Queensland, and the second author has worked and done fieldwork mainly in the Northern Territory and with national Indigenous leaders for two decades. Some may take the view that, as non-indigenous people, we should not pursue research on the sensitive topic of Indigenous identification – or, for that matter, any topic relating to Indigenous people (Aveling 2013). However, we believe that empirically-informed discussions about this subject will be useful to Indigenous communities that are currently dealing with its implications. We also intend to address the vacuum in Australia's broader public debate surrounding this issue: a vacuum that has been readily filled with the polemical voices of right-wing commentators (Bolt 2017a, 2017b; Hanson 1997). Finally, our account will illustrate aspects of Indigenous identification later in life that have broad significance for understanding the present and future of indigeneity in settler colonies, as well as the cultural trajectories of advanced modern states.

Methodology

Our data is derived from both primary and secondary sources. Eleven of the 33 interviews come from 124 pages of raw data contained in Fiona Noble's unpublished Master's thesis, *Who Do We Think We Are? People Who are Learning About their Aboriginality* (1996). Noble came at this subject as an "insider", in the sense that she had also come to believe she had Indigenous ancestry late in life. She recruited many of her informants through what she describes as her own "Brisbane inner city 'alternative' and feminist communities" (1996, 9). Her questions revolved around the discovery of Indigenous ancestry, responses to it and current attitudes towards Indigenous ancestry and identity. Based on these interviews, she categorized four of her participants as New Identifiers and three as Non-identifiers. The remaining four were what we've described as "In-betweeners", who often aspired to identify as Indigenous, but refrained from doing so publicly because they feared that this new identification would not be accepted by others – particularly established members of the Indigenous community.[3]

The first author conducted a further 23 interviews with members of this demographic between December 2016 and July 2017 with the approval of

the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee.[4] Of these people, we considered 14 to be New Identifiers, four to be Non-identifiers and four to be In-betweeners. Most informants were contacted through public Internet forums, having volunteered information about their ancestry on National Indigenous Television online, the Wiradjuri News Facebook page, or the genealogical forum Rootsweb. We were independently contacted by another interviewee, and contacted another four who had previously spoken about their Indigenous ancestry in the media. This process enabled us to recruit interviewees from across the southeast states of Australia where the phenomenon of new identification is concentrated: seven of our interviewees were from New South Wales, seven from Tasmania, four from Queensland, three from the Australian Capital Territory and three from Victoria.

The vast majority of those recruited via these public methods were New Identifiers, reflecting their relative eagerness to discuss their ancestral discoveries publicly. As will become clear in this paper, people in this group tended to take deep pride and joy in their new identities. In contrast, three out of four Non-identifiers, and only one New Identifier, were recruited through personal university networks. This reflects not only that Non-identifiers are less compelled to share information about their ancestry publicly, but that social constructivism had become the most acceptable explanation for human difference among Australia academics (Bond, Brough, and Cox 2014; Thomson 2004). As will become clear in the first section of this paper, which explains how twentieth century sociopolitical changes have produced diverging ideas about the differences between human groups, social constructivist thinking challenges the very possibility of ethnic shifts.

In the second section we show that these fundamental differences of opinion are compounded by diverging "identity aspirations" (Roth and Ivemark 2018), meaning that some of our interviewees are comfortable with their settler colonial identities, while others yearn to be biologically and socially part of Australia's much longer, Indigenous history. Like Roth and Ivemark, we found that these "identity aspirations" are the most important factor in determining whether an individual changed their ethnic identification late in life, but "social appraisals" – an individual's assessment of whether or not their new identity is acceptable to others – are also important (differentiating the New Identifiers from the In-betweeners). Space precludes extensive discussion of these social appraisals, and other variables such as age, gender, location and life experience, however we hope to turn to these aspects in future work.

Understanding human difference: inborn and learned indigeneity

To understand the factors behind the growth in self-identification since 1971, we first need to consider how understandings of the relationship between

culture, biology and identity have changed in that time. As is well known, the post-war "baby boom" generation came of age in the 1970s and began challenging the defining social institutions of the Christian church, colonial state, traditional political parties and nuclear family. This counter-cultural movement heralded a new era of individualism, expressivism and authenticity, scholars have noted, leading to a "massive subjective turn in modern culture" (Taylor 1991, 26). As a result of this turn, ethnic identity – among other things – became "increasingly psychologized", 48). For Anglo settlers in particular, ethnicity became less about how a person was acculturated to during childhood, and more about their fluid, subjective feelings of affinity with particular ancestors (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1990).

While this process of choosing ethnic affiliation is recognized as a distinctly modern one, scholars have observed that it has been inflected by "de-modernizing impulses" (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973, 154). With the release from ascriptive religions and abstraction from close-knit communities, modern individuals have incidentally had their ontological security blanket ripped away – losing their stable, collective, intergenerational sense of self (Giddens 1991). This destabilizing process has prompted many to search for new ways to anchor their identity in time and space. One popular way of doing so is by "root seeking" (Nelson 2016): forging meaningful connections with one's ancestors and their "homelands". Based on research with "roots tourists" travelling from former British colonies to the Scottish Highlands, Basu points out that many of these amateur genealogists "effectively *choose* to reject choice", by viewing their selective ethnic affiliations as driven by these ancestors rather than their own agency (2007, 223).

Such beliefs about the power of one's ancestors, often articulated as "blood memory" or "genetic memory", have revived some older ideas about inborn ethnicity. The embrace of "holistic spiritualism" or "self-spirituality" in the New Age movement (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) has also contributed to this reframing of identity by some unsettled modern citizens. In direct opposition to Judaeo-Christian "dualism" (which distinguishes the Creator/man/mind/spirit from created/nature/body/matter) and Enlightenment "reductionism" (which reduces everything to measurable material phenomena), holistic spiritualists believe that divinity is dispersed throughout the world – in the natural environment and the human body (Hanegraaff 1999). This "sacralization of the self" further encourages beliefs in "blood memory", because New Age believers are taught not take their "socialized" self at face value, but to look inwards for something "true", "authentic", "natural" or "spiritual" (Heelas 1999).

While this concept of "blood memory" echoes the biological essentialism historically used to justified Indigenous people's exclusion from settler-colonial societies, recent research shows this thinking appeals to Indigenous people who have not been socialized into traditional belief systems. Bonita Lawrence, who has done research among fellow urban, Aboriginal Canadians

of mixed ancestry, suggests that the idea of blood memory is "incredibly seductive" because it suggests "a direct link to the lives of our ancestors, made manifest in the flesh of their descendants" (2004, 200). It promises that "we can claim our ancestors' experience as our own, that we can recreate our cultures based on what we carry in our genes" (2004, 201). Similarly, Hume has observed that urban Indigenous Australians who have not been educated into the highly locative, knowledge-heavy religious system of their ancestors are drawn to modern philosophies which are also earth-based but emphasize "corporal 'gut feelings' over learned knowledge" (2000, 130). These philosophies are compatible with "a kind of intuitive, or genetic transmission of spiritual knowledge" (Hume 2000, 130).

Given the increasing prevalence of this language of blood memory and genetic memory among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in settler colonial countries, it is unsurprising that New Identifiers have also been inspired by this thinking. Sturm observed that Cherokee "racial shifters" believed that "their ancestors are literally embodied within them – as an essential, biogenetic, cultural and racial substance – and, if listened to, will guide them towards their true path and identity" (2011, 41). Our New Identifier interviewees espoused similar views. Some, such a Queensland woman who deduced that she was of Indigenous ancestry based on her own appearance and that of her mother, explicitly described her Indigeneity as an embodied, biological phenomenon, stating: "We're talking about what's the oldest culture on this planet. We still have genetic memory" (Noble 1996, lxxxvi). Another interviewee from New South Wales, who believed she was a product of her grandmother's affair with an Indigenous man, used similar language: "heritage is something that runs in your blood. It's not necessarily how your skin comes out all the time either, how you look. It's in your DNA down deep in there somewhere". A third spoke of their Indigenous ancestry as a "spark" or "consciousness" within their body, stressing: "You can't get it out of your system. If you're an Aboriginal, you're an Aboriginal."(Noble 1996, lxvi).

In addition to direct references such as these, Golbeck and Roth (2012) observed that beliefs about blood memory were also implicit in the way that their interviewees, who had uncovered Native American ancestry through DNA tests, spoke about their lifelong feelings of being "different" from the ethnic group they were raised in. Feelings of difference, in particular feeling more "spiritual" and "closer to nature", were interpreted as evidence that their recently-established connection to the Native American community was given, natural and life-long. Many of the New Identifiers we interviewed voiced similar beliefs about their "buried indigeneity" (Golbeck and Roth 2012, 421), explaining their choice to identify as Indigenous through the fact that they'd "always felt different" from White Australians. One interviewee, who was told her great grandmother was an Indigenous woman when she was 15, described how she grew up in a "sort of glorified shack in the bush" in

semi-rural area of Brisbane with her six olive-skinned, brown haired siblings, and never felt at home among the "blond, blue eyed girls" who lived "in a brick house, with carpet and a carport" and were "sleek and shiny" (Noble 1996, viii). Another also reflected on their childhood, noting:

> I was just different, really different, in that all the animals were my friends and I used to spend hours in the chook yard talking to my chooks, because like they were the only ones who understood anything that I was feeling or that I was thinking, but I felt very isolated and lonely growing up and always in my whole life just searching and wondering who I was (Noble 1996, xxxi).

Others also cited similar life-long connections to animals, "the land", "country" or the "bush", which are often perceived as embodying their ancestors. For example, an interviewee from Tasmania, who found her family listed in a book of Indigenous genealogies, explained:

> I've always felt a connection with land and place. And more so than people around me. People around me, they lived where they were, but they didn't have a feeling of where they were. Of the actual land beneath their feet … . The building spoke to me. The land spoke to me … . And that part, that connection with the land underneath my feet finally made sense with that Tasmanian Aboriginal part of me.

Another interviewee from Victoria, who came to believe his father was of Indigenous descent, spoke about the ease that he and his children have in the Australian bush. When asked directly if he believed this ease was inherited, he explained:

> Well, it's certainly not from my mother, let me tell you! My mother doesn't cope with the bush. Dad married her and took her up the bush, and she'd always struggled with that. Always … I can go out, even my kids, we can just wander out in the bush and we don't feel uncomfortable with anything. It's just how we are.

Others referred to apparently inexplicable interests in Indigenous culture or people. One interviewee from Queensland highlighted that her mother "was always really attracted or interested in Indigenous culture like from a really small child for no reason", describing this as strange because – at the time – her mother "had never met any Indigenous people in her life". Another noted:

> I have always identified with Aboriginal people and always been interested in the history. I have been drawn to the stories and art of the Aboriginal people since I was a small child. Now I know why … . Whenever I hear about the atrocities of the past I really hurt deep inside. I never had that feeling when hearing about the European atrocities and death.

Two of our interviewees from Sydney spoke of an uncanny childhood fascination with the suburb of La Perouse, a former Aboriginal reserve which had a

large Indigenous population at the time. One woman described a "magnet dragging me to La Perouse", and a man explained how "strange" it was that "I used to pester my father, my parents, on a weekend to go for a drive over to La Perouse".

The extent to which our New and Potential Identifiers thought of their Indigeneity as an enduring, internal phenomenon was also evident in the way that they spoke of Non-identifiers. Often, people of this description were said to be "in denial"; implying that these individuals' Indigeneity was an undisputable, inborn reality that they refused to accept because of internal or societal racism. One interviewee made a direct link between this denial of Aboriginality and the denial of one's sexual orientation, which is now widely accepted as innate:

> I think it is who you are and you don't really have a choice in that … Like, you can deny but it's still there. It's still part of who you are … .It's virtually like someone who's homosexual who says to themselves, "No, I'm not. I'm not, and I'll be with women and I'll have children," and all this, but knowing deep down inside that they are.

While undoubtedly there are many people of Indigenous ancestry who would actively deny it due to shame and stigma, our interviewees show that there are many who accepted – and are even proud of – this ancestry, but choose not to identify in part because they hold the view that ethnicity is socialized rather than inborn. One of our interviewees from New South Wales, who came to believe his grandmother was of Wiradjuri descent, captured this sentiment when asked if he would identify as Indigenous, responding:

> Well, only to the extent that I ever identified with Aborigines all around Australia. As political allies and friends … . [Identifying as an Indigenous person] has that danger of suggesting that blood links you, and I don't accept that. My upbringing has been totally European.

Another interviewee originally from Western Australia, who came to believe he had Noongar ancestry after the results of his mitochondrial DNA test were corroborated by archival research[5], gave a similar explanation for why he had chosen not to identify:

> I didn't grow up in Aboriginal culture. I know about as much about Minang and Noongar culture and language as any non-Aboriginal person who grew up in rural southwest Australia. I know a few Noongar words but everyone in southwest Western Australia knows those same words. There's nothing special about the knowledge I have. My life experience has been quite different. I've not experienced any ill effects or maltreatment because of my background.

Noble's interviewees also highlighted the role of discrimination in forging contemporary Indigenous identity. One describes late identification as a

"big farce", explaining "I couldn't possibly say that I was Aboriginal, because I haven't suffered anything that Aboriginal people have". Another claimed, "to stand up now and say, 'Look I'm Aboriginal', to me is like a little bit rude almost, because you've never been treated in the world as Aboriginal" (1996, lxxviii). A third, who discovered she had Indigenous ancestry after reconnecting with her biological mother, qualified these remarks by explaining that she thought it was fine for people to celebrate their Indigenous ancestry. "Everyone celebrates their Irish ancestry", she pointed out, "They have Saint Paddy's [Patrick's] Day you get all these fourth and fifth generation Irish people going along." However, like other Non-identifiers, she made it clear that she saw this celebration as being very distinct from identifying, remarking:

> My only problem with it is that there are some people who do it who identify as Aboriginal, who have been brought up as White people all their life. They've never experienced any discrimination an Aboriginal person would feel … They've been identified by White people and then they turn around and say, "I'm an Aboriginal I know how Aboriginal people feel". That really pisses me off, and I am sure that's a real insult to Aboriginal people who have to try and struggle for their rights. I don't know if this is wrong or right, but that's my opinion. (Noble 1996, lxxix)

This "circumstantialist" conceptualisation of ethnicity (Cornell and Hartmann 2007), which equates Indigeneity with the experience of "living black" (Phillips 2016), offers little scope for people to shift identities later in life. In contrast, many New Identifiers have embraced both the modern opportunity to choose their own ethnic identities, and the impulse to believe they have made a discovery of something "primordial" (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Yet, while the tension between modernising and de-modernising impulses helps explain how New Identifiers have come to believe their ancestors play a powerful role in defining their identity, it doesn't explain why they believe that, among all their possible ancestors to identify with, it is their Indigenous ancestors that are the most compelling.

In the Native American context, Sturm observed that it was "almost as if there is a type of racial homeopathy at work here. A tiny fraction of blood, or better yet, Cherokee ancestral substance, has the power to remake one's entire racial, cultural and social body" (42). Similarly, our interviewees spoke about their Indigenous ancestry using a simile commonly heard in urban Indigenous communities: "Aboriginality is like a cup of coffee. It doesn't matter how much milk you add, it's still coffee." Expanding on the accounts of counter-cultural movements and de-modernising effects described above, the following section will attempt to explain why *Indigenous* ancestors have become particularly alluring to believers in blood memory.

Identity aspirations: the allure of indigeneity and the rejection of "Western" culture

The rise of social movements since the 1970s have changed common conceptualizations of ethnicity in general, but have also changed attitudes towards particular ethnicities. Notwithstanding the continued operation of White privilege and racial inequality, "Whiteness" – the ethnicity historically associated with "progress" and "modernity" (Weinstein 2015) – has lost significant cultural value following the rise of pluralism, anti-colonialism and holistic spiritualism. White is now commonly seen as "dull, empty, lacking, and incomplete"(Hughey 2012), scholars note, associated with "white bread and mayonnaise" (Frankenberg 1993), "guilt, loneliness, isolation" (Sturm 2011), either "bland nothingness" or "racial hatred" (Painter 2011).

White settler identities have been particularly affected by this re-evaluation. As Curthoys notes, Anglo-Australians have historically thought of themselves as "battlers" who escaped or were expelled from the Old World, and who struggled against the hostile environment to carve out a secure place for themselves in the New (1999). But since the 1970s this national-building narrative has been challenged, as the spotlight of history has swung towards the people these pioneers dispossessed, shedding light on their far longer and deeply intricate connection to the continent. This reckoning has left many White Australians feeling "morally dispossessed", "doomed to wander, ethically homeless, without history" (Curthoys 1999).

As Basu notes, this post-colonial unsettling of settler identities has prompted White Australians and North Americans to search for a more "meaningful and morally defensible family history" (2007, 188). Often, this has meant reconnecting with their more "interesting" (Waters 1990), typically non-Anglo-Saxon, ancestors. Irish ancestry became popular in settler-colonial countries, Nash observes, because it offered a "guilt-free ethnicity dissociated with the power of whiteness" (2008, 59). Highland Scottish ancestors also became appealing, Basu notes, because they could conceivably have been "pushed" from their homelands by English-allied aristocrats during the Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, rather than "pulled" to the colonies by economic opportunities (2007).

For many Australians, these other ethnicities are far less powerful than Indigenous ancestry, which offers a potent underdog narrative and a sense of "ontological belonging" (Moreton-Robinson 2003). "Once a source of shame for some", Mulcock notes, Indigenous ancestry " … is now a source of pride for many of those who can claim it, a sign of resilience and embeddedness, a sign of *deep belonging*, desired more than discouraged, proclaimed more than disguised" (2007, 63). Her ethnographic research with settler Australians, along with Muir's (2011), suggests that many long to be part of the 60,000-year Indigenous history of Australia. This yearning is exacerbated by the

tendency of their interviewees, who could be described as holistic or "eco-spiritualists" (Jacobs 1994), to see Indigenous people through a Rousseauian lens: as representatives of the pan-human, pre-industrial societies presumed to exist before people became alienated from nature (Deloria 1998; Kehoe 1990; Torgovnick 1997).

One of the ways that settler Australians have accessed this romanticized version of Indigeneity is through the "indigenization of the landscape" (St John 1997). By believing the "land, nature and Aboriginality are rendered as an inextricable whole", Muir notes, White Australians of a certain inclination can embark on "solo-dreaming" (Grossman and Cuthbert 1998) – engaging with the land and evoking the spirits seen to lie within it (2011). Yet this process is complicated for "White anti-racists" (Kowal 2015), because of their sensitivity to claims of appropriation and abuse of Indigenous culture (Kowal 2011; Muir 2011; Mulcock 2007). This tension has prompted many to search for Indigenous ancestors in their family tree, Mulcock observes, hoping this discovery would explain and validate their existing feelings of connection to Indigenous people and their culture (2007).

Most of our New Identifier interviewees fitted into this category of "seekers" who have actively sought evidence of Indigenous ancestors. Many held tightly to anecdotal or circumstantial pieces of information suggesting Indigenous ancestry, such as the discovery of a family bible that appeared to be from an Indigenous mission, a comment made about their appearance, a family rumour and a reference to "Hawaiian ancestry" or a "dark" relative, and subsequently began searching their family tree. These searches were often fruitless, but many interviewees continued to identify as Indigenous regardless. Like Roth and Ivemark's interviewee, who dismissed the results of a DNA test which suggested they had no Indigenous ancestry (2018), these New Identifiers' attachment to their Indigenous identity was sufficiently high, and their conceptualisations of ethnicity sufficiently subjective, to overcome the lack of material evidence.

These aspirations strongly reflected the re-evaluations of settler and Indigenous identities described earlier. Some interviewees spoke directly about the deficiencies of Whiteness in general.[6] For example, one woman from Queensland explained why she feels drawn to Indigenous culture:

> I think, it's not as isolated … I think that the sense of community is stronger, and there is more belonging … Yeah, I think being a White person, it is very much you're on your own. My opinion is that, yeah you have your family unit and that's all you've got to turn to and rely on.

One interviewee from Sydney elaborated on this description of the contrast between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, explaining:

> I have an Indigenous worldview in all things. Every way I look at the world from politics both global and national to banking to nature and the environment to

> 'White mentality', as I call it, it all stems from an Indigenous standpoint or perspective. I see straight through materialism and don't adhere to forced social conventions such as Christmas. I believe in sharing, community and compassion for the earth and human kind at its best. In other words, there is enough for everybody on this planet and no place for greed … . Living simply, looking after family, and caring for our Mother Earth for me is what defines my Aboriginality.

Others alluded to these presumed deficiencies indirectly, by speaking about their dissatisfaction with the dominant, organised religions of Australia. For example, one Tasmanian New Identifier described the Christians she was raised amongst as "hypocrites". Another from the same area described the Catholicism of her childhood as shallow, explaining: "you read the books of the saints, and they have that deeper religion in them, but it's not evident in the everyday church goers and church." In contrast, this woman explained that Indigenous religion offered an "open view of the world and that deeper level of spirituality", explaining that the "core of that spirituality is everything is one, whether it's animate or inanimate."

In line with New Age thinking, it was clear that many of our New Identifiers saw Indigenous peoples' holistic spiritualism as representative of a universal, primal condition. For example, one interviewee from New South Wales, who believed his Indigenous heritage had given him super-natural powers that explained his retro-cognition, extra-sensory perception and an ability to read the stars, explained: "We are all from an Indigenous heritage. We all started somewhere. That worship was around before punitive religions were invented. We all have that in us." Another interviewee from Melbourne explained how he felt that all his ancestors – "Scottish, English, German and Irish" – were part of his "Dreamtime story", stating: "I believe that all of those ancestors had their own tribal ways that have been lost due to industrialism and whatnot. I see that industrialism is the biggest killer of culture".

In addition to this primal spirituality, our interviewees demonstrated the extent to which Indigenous ancestry offered a family history of resilience in the face of oppression. "We were forbidden to use our own language, we were punished if we practiced any sort of ceremonies", one New Identifier from Tasmania reported. "But that loss also makes us who we are." Another from Melbourne explained, "I see myself as a survivor of a race that have been downtrodden on, and even tried to be exterminated". New Identifier interviewees also emphasised their relationship to the Australian continent. "The part that I seriously love was the fact that I truly belong. I truly am Australian", one Tasmanian explained, going on to claim that this knowledge had helped her counter her German-Italian ex-husband's claim that Australian history was shallow: "after many years of this European snobbery, I could stand there and say, and that's fine, but I belong here". Another New Identifier from Queensland made a similar claim, explaining: "I guess, when you ask me

why I'm happy to wear the badge of an Aboriginal, I think it's probably pride of place. It's pride in knowing that you've got roots that go back, with this incredible race of people over this incredible amount of time in this one spot."

As quotes like these highlight, Indigenous identity offers an alternative to the White Australia mainstream, a sense of being on the morally right side of history and a holistic spirituality. The allure of these offerings helps explain why our New Identifiers held so tightly to information indicating Indigenous ancestry. In contrast, our Non-identifiers did not have the same motivations to search for Indigenous ancestry. Even if they did believe that identity transitions were possible (which most didn't, because they subscribed to the view that identities were forged during childhood), members of this group did not have the desire to shift because they seemed more at ease with their current identity. For example, one Non-identifier explained:

> I'm quite comfortable knowing that I've got a mosaic ancestry and I think that's quite interesting. I don't think that's the same thing as my identity. I identify as a secular Australian person. My values are shaped very much by the sociopolitical landscape of Australia and that's the context I live in. It's a cosmopolitan context. I don't really feel the need to be this or that.

Because our Non-identifiers weren't searching for evidence of Indigeneity, most only came to believe they were Indigenous because they stumbled across relatively "strong" evidence. These differing motivations help explain why we observed an inverse relationship between the strength of evidence and strength of identification: those with the weakest evidence tended to have the strongest convictions, and vice versa (data available on request).

Conclusions

Recent reviews of longitudinal census data has confirmed what demographers had long assumed: that an increasing number of Australians are identifying as Indigenous later in life (Markham and Biddle 2017). This Australian trend parallels those seen in other English-speaking settler colonial nations, North America and Canada, and yet the sociological research on the subject lags far behind in this country. Currently, commentary on changes in Indigenous demography tend to be confined to dry demographic analyses on the one hand, and provocative conservative commentary on the other.

The reluctance of researchers to contribute to this debate is understandable. Figures such as Andrew Bolt, the preeminent Australian conservative commentator, have devoted significant column inches to questioning the authenticity of prominent light skinned Indigenous people who have identified as Indigenous all of their lives – claiming they have "chosen" this identity (Bolt 2009a, 2009b). Right-wing supporters have eagerly filled the comments sections of his webpages with explicitly racist sentiments, or at best, mean-spirited snipes. Some of the stories told in this article of those who have

adopted an Indigenous identity later in life would no doubt provide fodder for Bolt and his followers. While taking this risk seriously, however, we strongly feel that the fear of conservative co-option should not deter research conducted with respect, quality scholarship and in good faith.

This paper is the first published attempt to understand why people are increasingly coming to identify with Indigenous ancestors and to declare this affiliation on government forms and in public forums. By comparing "New Identifiers" with other groups who came to believe they had Indigenous ancestry late in life – those who we described (following Noble) as "Non-identifiers" and "In-betweeners" – we revealed important differences in these groups' understandings of human difference, identity aspirations and social appraisals. While Non-identifiers tended to articulate a social constructionist view, seeing Indigeneity as something learned rather than inborn, New Identifiers and In-betweeners were more likely to believe their ancestors – known and unknown – played an active role in defining their identity. Both these groups were particularly drawn to Indigenous ancestors, it would appear, because they seemed to offer them a sense of deep belonging to the Australia continent, a holistic spiritualism, and a meaningful family history.

We hope that these conclusions will help Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous advocates develop nuanced approaches to understanding the changing practices of Indigenous identification, not least to effectively counter the arguments made by conservatives. They may also be useful to researchers seeking to understand the changing Indigenous population in Australia and beyond. Most importantly, however, we hope these insights are useful to Indigenous leaders, organisations and communities, many of whom are already debating the implications of changing identification practices.

Notes

1. We have capitalised "Indigenous" when referring to Indigenous Australians, and used a lower case when talking about indigenous people internationally. We have chosen "Indigenous" rather than "Aboriginal", because the former is seen to be more inclusive of the Torres Strait Islander people, however many of our interviewees use the alternate term.
2. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, another British settler colony, changing ethnic identification has made a much smaller contribution to Maori population growth (Stats 2000).The reasons for this distinctiveness are worthy of further inquiry, but beyond the scope of this paper.
3. The terms we use to describe and compare different responses to (known or presumed) Indigenous ancestry – New Identifiers, Non-identifiers and "Half Steps" – are provisional, and we hope their use will prompt broader debate about the nature and impact of shifting Indigenous identification in Australia.
4. Noble's and our own interviews were conducted twenty years apart, but these data sets are still remarkably similar. We believe this is because prevailing public attitudes towards Aboriginality and Whiteness, which changed

dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, have remained relatively consistent in the decades since. We have therefore synthesized these datasets to make a general argument about changes in Australia society since the 1970s.

5. For discussion of the emerging phenomenon of Indigenous Australian genetic ancestry testing, see Watt, Kowal, and Lehman 2018.
6. In a recent article that looks at a similar social group to this one, but from a different perspective, Kowal and Paradies (2017) analyse the social practices of light-skinned Indigenous people who are physically indistinguishable from Anglo-European white Australians but who reject ascription as "white".

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