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Special Issue: Decolonising Truth Globally: Challenges and Possibilities

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Reckonings with truth: Sovereign truths on Country

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Abstract

This article analyses grassroots truth-telling in Australia, in the light of the 2017 Uluru Statement's call for a Makarrata Commission to oversee truth-telling and treaty. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have long called for truth-telling about the colonial past. Numerous community projects have emerged to engage with these historical truths. However, few of these initiatives have been documented. This article analyses a small sample of these projects, drawing on case study research. It argues that these activities, grounded in Indigenous onto-epistemology, offer unique opportunities to explore the decolonising potential of truth-telling. These truth practices defy the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism, creating spaces for pedagogic encounter that trouble the settler-colonial order by enacting multiple sovereignties on Country. Importantly, they provide insights for formal truth-telling, modelling resurgent, prefigurative praxis that incorporates Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in transformative processes that could help navigate the challenges of transitional justice in the settler-colonial context.

Keywords

truth-telling, transitional justice, sovereignty, Uluru statement, decoloniality, Makarrata

Introduction

In the last 15 years, critical scholarship on the 'promises and pitfalls' of transitional justice and truth in settler colonial contexts has grown (Bowman, 2021; Corntassel et al., 2009; Corntassel & Holder, 2008; Craft & Regan, 2020; Maddison et al., 2023;

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Nagy, 2022; Park, 2020; Regan, 2010). This article builds on this scholarship, which has grappled with the limitations of a liberal transitional justice framework in settler colonies where the illegitimacy to be addressed is the foundation of liberalism in colonial dispossession (Short, 2005) rather than an absence of liberal democracy, as in transitions from authoritarianism. This is exacerbated in Australia because it is the only ex-British colony established without a treaty with its Indigenous inhabitants (O'Sullivan, 2021). Transitional justice's conventional focus on state-building in new democracies has meant that, in settler-colonies, it has struggled to critically engage with the state, arguably legitimating these states as 'postcolonial' in countries such as Canada (see Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2017).

In Australia, scholars have expressed concern about the potential for 'the colonisation of truth' (Maddison et al., 2023, p. 2; see also Balint et al., 2014; Davis, 2022; Henry, 2015; Hobbs, 2016; Maddison & Shephard, 2014). Drawing on critical Canadian scholarship, Maddison et al. highlight the uncertain relationship between 'truth' and 'emancipation' and the tensions between the aspirations of First Nations for self-determination and sovereignty, with the assimilationist logic of many settler-colonial states, which seek 'unity and reconciliation' by drawing 'a line through history' (Maddison et al., 2023, p. 3). They advocate acknowledging the risks that truth processes can be appropriated to re-inscribe settler-colonial power, while remaining open to the 'promise of truth' and suggest both normative and critical perspectives to 'understand the contradictions, opportunities, and tensions that truth-telling implies' (Maddison et al., 2023, p. 1).

These concerns about the appropriation of truth for ideological reconciliation are well founded. In the 1990s, the government responded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' calls for treaty and sovereignty with reconciliation initiatives, without acknowledging colonial violence or their desire for self-determination (Referendum Council, 2017). The Howard Government's 'practical reconciliation' discounted the need to address past injustices (Maddison & Shepherd, 2014). This left Australians paradoxically embracing reconciliation while disputing the historical injustices that necessitated it (Maddison & Shepherd, 2014, p. 190).

In 2020, Teela Reid, Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer and writer, spoke against the state's appropriation of reconciliation for self-legitimation. She called for a 'reckoning with the truth of the past', arguing that the Australian state's legitimacy is inseparable from its relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This reckoning, she said, 'requires disrupting the status quo' and structural change that will challenge all Australians 'to question their own privilege' (Reid, 2020).

It is this reckoning with the truth of the past that I engage here.

I grapple with this reckoning as a white settler migrant from South Africa where I participated as a researcher in the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission's flawed and complex legacy and South Africa's unfinished reckoning with apartheid and colonialism reverberate in my Australian home. This has shaped my interest in the call by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for a more 'truthful' relationship with the colonial past and between citizens. I am deeply indebted to the First Nations scholarship, practices and worldviews I have encountered while on Country in the lands of the Kulin Nation. I am also profoundly indebted to the interviewees in a two-year study with Reconciliation Australia (RA) documenting case studies of community truth-telling, whose contributions made this analysis possible. These

interviewees chose to be named, rather than 'anonymised' as is common research practice, so their voices and those of their communities would be known and heard. The embodied knowledge they shared and the First Nations scholarship I draw on here continually challenges my ways of being, knowing and doing – the western onto-epistemological framework into which I have been socialised.

Methodology

The research I draw on here was initiated by the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) and conducted in collaboration with RA. Both contributed to the study's conceptualisation, execution and funding, and provided project support. In addition, RA facilitated significant access to its community networks. Additional funding and support, including two research assistants, came from ADI and the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, an independent think-tank led by ADI. A small advisory committee of senior First Nations leaders chosen by ADI and RA oversaw the project. The research culminated with a major report and policy brief launched in late 2023. The study used qualitative case studies to analyse a non-representative sample of 25 community truth-telling initiatives, including 10 in-depth case studies with 35 interviewees. It explored various forms of community engagement with colonial violence and more recent violations like the Stolen Generations.[1] The research was informed by the inductive principles of grounded theory, particularly suitable for research with Indigenous communities due to its flexibility, openness and lack of theoretical bias (Denzin, 2010; Evans, 2017).

Case studies were chosen after an extensive process of research, engagement and mapping in collaboration with RA and the communities where truth-telling practices were identified. The investigation began with a desktop mapping of potentially relevant community activities, which found over 400 projects. In consultation with RA and the advisory group, these were grouped into four categories, which included initiatives recognising colonial violation, but also those asserting First Nations sovereignty, resilience and self-determination. Case studies were selected from these groups, as well as prioritising projects led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and characterised by extensive community engagement. Considerable emphasis was placed on ensuring the research process was culturally appropriate and trauma-informed and therefore interviews only took place after significant consultation and engagement, both with the advisory group on the methodology and in communities to ensure informed consent. Prior to interviews, key stakeholders were identified in case study sites through community mapping and were formally approached for support and, where possible, collaboration in identifying interviewees. If organisations or individuals had concerns about participation, or were unresponsive, we did not pursue those case studies to ensure that the research process did not exacerbate community tensions or divert scarce community resources from more pressing needs.

Radicalising transitional justice

Although the primary objective of the study was to understand the relationship between truth-telling and reconciliation, the complexity of these initiatives quickly became clear.

Rather than discursive truth-telling steeped in western onto-epistemology, these initiatives embodied sovereignty on Country, implicitly rejecting the onto-epistemological binaries of knowing, being and doing which recognise either violation or resilience, healing or self-determination that have caused much epistemic and structural violence to First Nations communities globally (Berenstain et al., 2022; Grosfoguel, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Spivak, 1988). These binaries are increasingly refuted by First Nations cosmologies, which recognise their inherent entanglement, as evidenced by the truth-telling documented here. Onto-epistemology draws from the Karen Barad's theory of agential realism, utilising principles of quantum physics, which posits 'the ontological inseparability' of all intra-acting phenomena in the universe to contest the metaphysical individualism of western thought. It asserts a relational conception of existence in which ethics, ontology and epistemology are inseparable aspects of a co-constituted world. In this perspective, '[o]ur debt to those who are already dead and those not yet born cannot be disentangled from who we are' (Barad, 2010, p. 266). Indigenous cosmologies have long understood these intra-actions and the ethical obligations to the human and 'more-than-human' this entails, as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) put it: *As We Have Always Done*.

Instead, these truth practices address multiple aspects of violation and redress through a literal and metaphoric refusal to be dispossessed of land, culture, identity and histories. Some of these activities did build relationships between First Nations and settlers in ways that fostered reconciliation. However, this was not the definitive reconciliation to which settler colonialism aspires. Instead, it is a delicate, contingent reconciliation (Schaap, 2006) conditional on continuing recognition of the past in the present and ongoing maintenance of relationships of respect, reciprocity and sovereignty. Only within these webs of relationality and equality can reconciliation continue.

Park (2020) argues that radicalising transitional justice requires centring local communities and decentring the settler-colonial state, to reject its self-legitimating framing of issues that invariably entrenches its power. Instead, radicalised transitional justice 'internationalizes' the justice relationship by recognising First Nations as sovereign nations, creating 'space for prefigurative justice' – new forms of justice practised at individual, intersubjective and community levels (Park, 2020, p. 17). This radicalised transitional justice 'abandons' a liberal teleology that seeks to leave the past behind and embraces 'indeterminacy' against the settler-colonial state's desire for closure and completion (Park, 2020, p. 18). Crucially, Park (2020, p. 17) argues, 'these practices already exist'.

Park builds on extensive First Nations scholarship to suggest that radicalised transitional justice would draw on the interconnected principles of refusal, resurgence and prefiguration. Refusal involves a refusal to be eliminated either through violent dispossession or assimilation by the settler state (Park, 2020, citing Audra and Leanne Simpson). Audra Simpson (2017) understands this refusal as a 'structure' which responds to the 'structure' of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). It rejects settler colonialism's eliminatory logic and insists on continuing as 'reminders' of 'other orders, other authorities' (A. Simpson, 2017, p. 22). Resurgence requires moving away from the settler-colonial state to revive 'Indigenous customs, and social, legal and political orders' (Park, 2020, p. 16). Prefiguration involves everyday decolonial practices, including Indigenous presence and placed-based resurgence, honouring relationships with land and each other

(Park, 2020, p. 16). This Indigenous resurgence is prefigurative, creating the possibility of ‘a radical alternative present’ (Park, 2020, p. 15, citing L. B. Simpson).

Current Australian truth practices incorporate many of the elements that Park outlines. Although not explicitly conceptualised as transitional justice, they enact a decolonial truth praxis that internationalises the justice relationship by asserting a multiplicity of First Nations sovereignties on Country that is varied, substantive, sacred, political and affective. This practice of sovereignty, encapsulated by the concept of being on Country (Moreton-Robinson, 2007, 2013, 2021), is ‘in and of the earth’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2021, p. 259). It is based on deep place-based ‘*attachment*’ (L. B. Simpson, 2017, p. 43; original emphasis), ‘an emergent system reflective of the relationality of the local landscape’ that is ‘breathing – a rhythm of contraction and release’ (L. B. Simpson, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, there is no expectation of a single sovereignty or a single truth; multiple truths and place-based sovereignties coexist.

These processes are decolonial because they refuse the discursive foundations of settler colonialism and make visible ongoing coloniality by disputing colonial narratives, identifying their effects, and articulating possibilities for future transformation. They create a ‘praxis of truth’, a way of *doing* truth that involves multiple activities to ‘change the order of the world’ (Fanon, 1963, p. 36). This praxis instantiates Indigenous epistemology (ways of knowing), ontologies (ways of being) and axiology (ways of doing) (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 337) within the process of truth-telling. These embodiments of the ‘truth of sovereignty’ contest the imaginary of a hegemonic, singular sovereignty on which settler colonialism is premised, as well as teaching Indigenous ‘ways of being’ by inviting non-Indigenous Australians to share these spaces. It is profoundly pedagogic, creating contexts where Indigenous and non-Indigenous settler-colonial subjectivities can be troubled through a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) that is cognitive, emotive, experiential and self-reflexive. These practices function as a living critique of the coloniality of modernity (Paradies, 2020), rather than reiterating the western liberal order, as many transitional justice processes have done.

Truth praxes

This truth praxis draws on Indigenous onto-epistemology which eschews binaries between practice and theory. Leanne Simpson documents the embodied ‘intelligence’ in Nishnaabeg practice, highlighting what she and Yellowknives Dene scholar Glenn Coulthard describe as ‘grounded normativity’ (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016), an ethical framework rooted in ‘place-based practices and associated knowledges’ and ‘embodied in daily practices of relationality and reciprocity’ (L. B. Simpson, 2017, p. 22). Grounded normativity ‘creates process-centered modes of living that generate profoundly different conceptualizations of nationhood and governmentality-ones that aren’t based on enclosure, authoritarian power, and hierarchy’ (L. B. Simpson, 2017, p. 22). Australian truth practice draws from a normativity grounded in local place and ontologies that emphasise reciprocity and connection to Country, what Fletcher and colleagues describe as ‘a traditional system of Country management, well-being, healing and reciprocal relationships’ that includes ‘sentient landscapes’ and ‘more-than human agents’ (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 2;

see also Bawaka Country et al., 2020). Transformation occurs through collaboration with the human and more than human, rather through the imposition of human agency on the world. This is a notion of ‘co-becoming’ with Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2013, 2016).

Fletcher et al. (2023, p. 2) describe a framework of Aboriginal law that enables individual self-determination and sovereignty while also binding individuals in networks of relational obligation that extend through a ‘ “deep-time” ontology’ that includes both ancestors and descendants as stakeholders. Non-Indigenous affiliates (‘kolabbers’) are also regulated by these protocols. ‘Transgressions’ are addressed by ‘calling in’ rather than ‘calling out’ (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 2). This pedagogical approach seeks to teach and include through ‘ritual, song and story that highlight the protocol in question’ to ‘stimulate closer bonds and higher-order thinking through “yarns” (an Aboriginal form of discourse)’ (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 2). Fletcher et al. (2023, p. 2) use the metaphor of inviting ‘outsiders’ to sit around a fire to ‘kollaborate’ with ‘our relational sensemaking and inquiry’. These values are evident in the local truth-telling occurring in Australia.

Although First Nations communities maintain sovereignty over community truth-telling, they invite ‘in’ non-Indigenous communities to participate, learn and engage at festivals and other events. Unlike agonistic confrontation, this gentle pedagogical approach exposes non-Indigenous people to an experiential engagement with the truths of Australian history and allows them to learn through immersion in an ontology of relationality and reciprocity with people, the earth, spirit and culture. These experiences introduce non-Indigenous Australians to new forms of agency and sentience, including the human and more than human. This process is political, as it contests the colonial narrative, but is also deeper in that it seeks transformation within the process of truth-telling by inscribing non-Indigenous Australians in First Nations resurgent practices that assert a multiplicity of First Nations ways of being, knowing and doing.

These types of sovereignty on Country create significant anxieties for settler colonialism, which insists on a ‘fictive monistic conception of sovereignty’ (Motha, 2005, p. 108). This anxiety arises because Indigenous sovereignties ‘challenge the philosophical premises’ of western state sovereignty, built on the racial logics of white possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and ‘disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xiii). They are ‘incommensurate with Western ideas that to be human requires possessive and extractive relations with an inert Earth’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2021, p. 259). In invoking the onto-epistemology of Indigenous sovereignties, these praxes of truth on Country are profoundly troubling to settler colonialism.

This praxis creates a different relationship to truth to conventional transitional justice. This is not an abstract, universalist truth rooted in legal precedent, adjudication or western empiricism, but a deeply contextualised truth where belief ‘is given more credibility and priority’ than what can be proven or understood through western constructions of fact (Moreton-Robinson, 2021, p. 263). This truth is informed by the fundamental laws and principles of the Mooka or Dreaming (Moreton-Robinson, 2021, p. 262) and is emergent and co-constituted in and through Country. Sovereignty over truth is retained and is exercised locally by ‘truth-tellers’ as embodied sovereignty on Country, rather than becoming the alienated property of transitional justice institutions. It is learnt and taught through stories that embed relationships to people and place. First Nations scholars

Corntassel et al. (2009, p. 137) refer to these as 'teaching stories' and 'sacred living histories that solidify ancestral and contemporary connections to place'.

In this praxis of truth, truth is enfolded in a circular relationship to time. These processes do not attempt to locate truth within a linear timeline so that history can be 'ended' (Fukuyama, 1989). They refute the teleology of transitional justice that aims to close off engagement with the past by repeatedly reviving, rearticulating and commemorating the 'past' in the present in new ways through activities that are held year after year. Instead, they draw on Indigenous onto-epistemologies that have a much more fluid relationship to time (Bawaka Country et al., 2020; Streng, 2015). It is understood that the truth-telling that is required to decolonise relationships of power is messy, ongoing work. Instead, truth needs to be reiterated in each time, creating enduring opportunities to learn and re-learn, to deepen knowledge, to teach it again to future generations, to revisit it anew. This contrasts sharply with the conception of temporality in formal transitional justice institutions where 'the truth' is officially elicited, documented and 'concluded' within a brief formal mandate. After this a society, and more particularly the violated, are expected to move 'past' the past, whether wrongs have been meaningfully recognised, much less redressed.

Sovereign truths on Country

Park advocates refusal as one of the principles that can help decolonise transitional justice. At the heart of the five truth-telling initiatives documented here is a refusal of First Nations communities to 'disappear' – materially, ontologically or epistemologically. 'Truth' in this context is about a reassertion and reclamation of this heterogeneity of presence on Country. These practices refuse the triumphant memorialisation of settler sovereignty and its fictitious permanence, inscribed in monuments as unchanging testament to the past (see Carlson & Farelly, 2023). Instead, they are living, breathing assertions of sovereignty that reclaim Country through the creative invocation of relationships to land, sky, waters and people across time.

The theory of prefigurative politics helps elucidate the potential power of these local processes. Boggs (1977) defined prefigurative politics as 'the *deliberate experimental* implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now' (p. 10; original emphasis). Prefigurative politics does not simply imagine an alternative world, but 'seeks to sustain those social connections and institutions that can bring the new world that activists desire into being' (Westwell, 2020, p. 560). Many of these community processes are fundamentally centred around such prefigurative relational work. Nevertheless, the impact of these practices on emerging national and state treaty and truth processes is uncertain. The defeat of the national Referendum on a Constitutional Voice to Parliament in October 2023, which failed to deliver constitutional recognition for Australian First Nations peoples, underlines the dangers of formulating a national truth process dependent on liberal recognition from the settler-state or electorate.

Recent scholarship 'imagining' a Makarrata Commission envisages it as a legislative and institutional mechanism supervising treaty and truth-telling between the national government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Morris & Hobbes, 2023). However, regional dialogue participants consulted prior to the release of the

Uluru Statement, like the community initiatives documented here, view truth-telling as an emergent, embodied and place-based affirmation of sovereignty (see Barolsky, 2023) that may involve institutional agreements with government, but is not dependent on or defined by the settler-colonial state. Appleby and Davis (2018, p. 508), discussing the call for truth-telling at the regional dialogues, emphasise that 'locality is key' to avoid the appropriation of truth-telling for ideological reconciliation. They underline that a Makarrata Commission should not 'step into the space' (Appleby & Davis, 2018, p. 509) of local processes but must provide them with support and resources. Like the 'last makarrata', from which the contemporary concept of Makarrata draws inspiration, concluded 'on the sand' at Birany Birany in East Arnhem Land by men who 'walked to an outcome that was uncertain' and still 'held close as a place of beauty and memory' (Yunupingu, 2016), the most significant 'promise of truth-telling' lies in its ability to lead to 'local understandings within communities of a shared history' (Appleby & Davis, 2018, p. 508). The first formal state-based truth-telling process in the country, the Yoorrook Justice Commission (2022) in Victoria, was established legislatively as a Royal Commission but has adopted a methodology embedded in self-determination and First Nations onto-epistemology, symbolised by the three pelts of a possum-skin cloak representing Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2022, p. 8). Although the outcomes of this process are still unfolding, these prefigurative principles, already enacted in many community settings, will be critically important for a national Makarrata process.

Convincing Ground massacre, Victoria

In Portland, Victoria, near the site of the 'Convincing Ground massacre', stands a towering sculpture of intertwined gum leaves, *Mayapa Weeya* (meaning 'make fire'). The Convincing Ground massacre, in which between 20 and 200 members of the Kilcarer Gunditj clan were killed (Ryan et al., 2017–2022a), marked the beginning of the Eumeralla Wars that continued until the 1860s. By the end of this period, the Aboriginal population in Victoria had been reduced from thousands to a few hundred (Clark, 2011). Although the exact number of people who died in the massacre remains disputed, the memory of this violation has endured across generations. This monument not only commemorates those murdered during the 1834 massacre by British whalers, but also asserts a heterogeneity of Gundjitmara presence that colonial violence and the eliminatory logics of the Native Title Act have tried to extinguish.

The steel gum-leaf sculpture was erected in 2018 as part of a public art project to honour the Cart Gunditj and all 59 Gunditjmara clans. It recalls the signal fires lit by clans when whales beached (Farrington, 2018). Walter Saunders, a descendant of the Kilcarer Gunditj and Cart Gunditj clans who participated in the sculpture's design, emphasises the importance of recognising the disappeared clans: 'It's my intention … to build various sculptures … and to recognise them because they just disappeared. And because the massacres aren't counted, well then, they don't matter. They don't count. And that's so wrong' (personal interview, 8 March 2022).

Walter Saunders also challenges the epistemological erasure created by the Native Title Act, which recognizes only 15 apical ancestors instead of 52. He explains: 'So,

we're being forced to participate in the disappearing' (personal interview, W. Saunders, 15 March 2022). Saunders spent two years building *Mayapa Weeya*, using the project to engage with local residents through informal truth-telling. 'Every second week I came and stood there, and I'd give a talk about what the story is', he recalls. This process modelled a different type of relationship between Gunditjmara peoples and the non-Indigenous community: 'All of those people involved in that process knew about the story and said congratulations. They said, "It's about time the story was told" ' (personal interview, W. Saunders, 8 March 2022).

Chris Saunders, another Gunditjmara descendant, conducts two smoking ceremonies on Australia Day, which refute the eliminatory logics of settler colonialism. The first is a ceremony held at the Convincing Ground massacre site, attended by over 300 residents by 2021. Here, Chris Saunders shares the sacred story of this historical violence, while standing in the sea pointing to where the Gunditjmara believe spirits leave the universe (personal interview, T. Wright, 25 March 2022). The second site, the 'Ploughed Ground' in Portland, commemorates the 'introduction' of farming to Victoria by the Henty family in the 19th century. This is despite evidence of Aboriginal fish and eel farming dating back at least 6800 years at the Budj Bim landscape, near Portland, now recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site (Wright, 2021). The two smoking ceremonies refute the heroic colonial narrative of Portland's founding. A local resident, Tony Wright, observed that these ceremonies challenge settler myths: 'A lot of white people attend that too, giving a way to understanding of what's happened down here … the Hentys weren't … heroic figures who came and settled the land and ploughed it and gave it a meaning' (personal interview, 25 March 2022). Resistance to these truths of sovereignty remain, but '[p]eople are now willing to talk openly about this' (personal interview, T. Wright, 25 March 2022). This reclamation of Gundjitmara identity contrasts sharply with the monumentalisation of colonial presence in Western Victoria that Birch (2005, p. 188) calls 'historical facadism', which seeks to conjure a sense of colonial perpetuity through the 'invention of history' inscribed in tombstones, restoration schemes and visits to colonial ruins.

Mannalargenna Day, Tasmania

Mannalargenna Day festival in north-east Tasmania contests the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism, which declared Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples 'extinct' by the 19th century (Berk, 2015). The festival symbolically reclaims a history of resistance, as well as negotiation and compromise, by commemorating Mannalargenna, leader of the Pairrebeenne/Trawlwoolway clan, who navigated the challenges of colonial violence to protect Aboriginal Tasmanians decimated by the Black War during the 1830s. This conflict nearly obliterated the island's Aboriginal population, leaving barely 200 survivors, who were forcibly relocated to Flinders Island (Clements, 2014; Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, n.d.; Ryan, 2012). Mannalargenna negotiated with the colonial official Robinson to save his people by agreeing to temporary exile on Flinders Island; however, he died of pneumonia shortly after arriving in 1835 and only 47 of his people returned to the mainland.

Initiated by Melythina Tiakana Warrana Aboriginal Corporation (MTWAC) in 2015 on the 170th anniversary of Mannalargenna's death, the festival now attracts

approximately 600 people annually (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, n.d.; Vinall, 2019). The festival asserts a resurgent cultural praxis, shared experientially with First Nations and non-Indigenous participants invited to participate in an immersive experience on Country. Nick Cameron, MTWAC chair, explains the significance of the site where the event is held: 'It was the last bit of country he [Mannalargenna] saw, as he left by ship four weeks before he died – from that exact spot. So that piece of Country is enormously important for us' (personal interview, 22 March 2022). The event 'tells truth' by reclaiming connection to history *on* Country. Patsy Cameron explains it was 'about telling the history of that place and for our people to understand … what connection to Country means to us, on the land of our ancestors' (personal interview, 21 April 2022). This reconnection to County recovers the heterogeneity of Tasmanian Aboriginal identity against attempted colonial erasure: 'there's not one community. We're many communities … we had 8 to 13 languages being spoken at the time of the invasion' (personal interview, P. Cameron, 21 April 2022).

Truth-telling at the festival is deeply pedagogical. Knowledge is shared through teaching stories:

We talk to them about why we do this … about the clans that lived on the lands we're meeting on. We explain their story. … [W]e celebrate Mannalargenna by opening up to people … that's how we do truth-telling. (Personal interview, N. Cameron, 22 March 2022)

Teaching is not only discursive but is profoundly embodied: 'we allow people to wear our ochre … it's about tangibly having part of Country on you and understanding that' (personal interview, Jo Cameron, 2 May 2022).

Therefore, the festival is an opportunity to share the 'significance of Country, understanding how Aboriginal people relate to Country, how Country speaks to us, many things that I think non-Aboriginal people find difficult to understand' (personal interview, P. Cameron, 21 April 2022). This is sharing the onto-epistemology of being on Country. It is not simply a *telling of* truth *about* history but is an instantiation of what colonialism attempted to extinguish and an invitation to non-Indigenous participants to ground themselves in the truth of the continuing sovereignty and heterogeneity of Aboriginal Tasmanians.

Appin massacre memorial

The annual Appin massacre memorial in New South Wales started as a small gathering of descendants and community members in the 1990s. It commemorates the Appin massacre, as well as reasserting the continued presence of Dharawal and other nations on this land. The massacre, on 17 April 1816, occurred when soldiers of the 46th Regiment of the British army, led by Captain James Wallis, attacked a Dharawal camp at Appin at 1 a.m., killing at least 14 people and driving men, women and children off the cliffs of Cataract Gorge. Official counts recorded 14 bodies, but many more likely died (Neath, 2017; Ryan et al. , 2017–2022b). Only two women and three children reportedly survived (Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group & Wollondilly Shire Council, 2016).

After the massacre, Captain Wallis hung the bodies of Dharawal leader Kanabygal, warrior Durelle and an unidentified woman from a tree to 'strike terror into the survivors' (Allas & Muller, 2021). Their skulls were sent to the University of Edinburgh and remained there until repatriated to the National Museum of Australia in 1991, where they remain (Allas & Muller, 2021). This massacre has been described as 'foundational to the expansion and consolidation of the Australian settler-colonial state' (Pugliese, 2019, p. 257) and inaugurated a period of systemic military aggression against the Dharawal, Dharug, Muringong and Gundungurra nations. Within 25 years of British occupation, most of the area's local Aboriginal people had died (Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group & Wollondilly Shire Council, 2016).

Aunty Glenda Chalker, a Dharawal woman of the Cubbitch Barta Clan, emphasises how Governor Macquarie 'declared war on the Aboriginal people of the Sydney region' (Fuller, 2022). However, the memory of the massacre was suppressed for generations, even among Dharawal descendants like Elder Gavin Andrews who recalls an unspoken sense of loss and tragedy: 'There was a darkness, there was something really sad that wasn't spoken about' (personal interview, 8 December 2022).

Efforts to recover this memory began in the late 1990s when the Winga Myamly ('sit down and talk') Reconciliation Group began an annual commemoration at Cataract Dam near the massacre site. Starting as a small gathering, the memorial grew over time, with the 200th anniversary in 2016 drawing thousands, including the state governor. The event's ethos is deeply rooted in community ownership, relationship-building and the pedagogical impact of experiential learning on Country. Founding member Sister Kerry Macdermott emphasised that the event's impact relies on relationships: 'It works because of your connection and your relationship with people. It's built on that' (personal interview, 7 November 2022). Elder Gavin Andrews highlights the role of community support and connection: 'The event itself is secondary to the ground support that comes together to have the event' (personal interview, 8 December 2022).

The commemoration reaffirms Dharawal presence on Country. 'To hear the Dharawal language echo through the bush is very moving … Dharawal culture is alive', said long-time Winga Myamly member Ann Madsen (2016). Madsen (2016) explained the power of experiential learning where 'Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people physically walk together' and listen to stories 'never told in history books … stories of people whose spirit survives'.

The memorial also brings together descendants of perpetrators and victims. Elder Aunty Glenda Chalker, descended from girl survivor Giribunger, met Sandy Hamilton, a descendant of a 46th Regiment member, at the 2019 commemoration. Hamilton, unaware of her ancestor's role, expressed her disillusionment: 'I was taught to be proud of my history … We deserve to know the truth of how we came to be who we are' (Allam & Earl, 2019).

Despite the memorial's importance, the state has not formally acknowledged the massacre. During the 200th anniversary, the state governor declined to speak, nor has there been a state apology. Sister Kerry criticises this lack of recognition: 'There's a big statue of Governor Macquarie who ordered the massacre and you don't acknowledge the people that were massacred?' (personal interview, 7 November 2022).

Coota Girls and Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporations

Survivors of the Stolen Generations have resisted settler colonialism's attempt to assimilate them through forced removal from their families. Coota Girls Aboriginal Corporation (established in 2013) and the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation (established in 2003) support the survivors and descendants of the Cootamundra Girls Home and Kinchela Boys Home where young people suffered brutality, violence and erasure – their names replaced with numbers and their languages silenced. Through these corporations, survivors and descendants seek to address this legacy with truth-telling and recovery of their place on Country at the sites of their violation. Both integrate educational practices to inform future generations about the Stolen Generations.

These truths about the Stolen Generations have already been recounted in detail to the Commission of Inquiry that produced the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). However, the promise of fundamental change was 'sidelined' by 'the politics of apology' (personal interview, Tiffany McComsey, KBHAC chief executive officer [CEO], 21 February 2022). Despite these disappointments, survivors have persisted in telling their truths through multiple generations (personal interview, T. McComsey, 21 February 2022). KBHAC chair and survivor Uncle Michael Welsh stresses that only *co-constituted* truth can facilitate reconciliation: 'it needs to be brought out together' because 'there was no conciling in the first place' (personal interview, 21 February 2022).

In 2020, the KBHAC launched a Mobile Education Centre, a refurbished bus that tours New South Wales to engage in truth-telling, facilitate healing and preserve survivors' memories (KBHAC et al., 2022, p. 185). Structured as a 'yarning circle experience', the bus employs various media for truth-telling – from oral testimonials to interactive materials (KBHAC, 2022, p. 187). Survivors, through their storytelling, provide irrefutable testament to this violence. Uncle Roger Jarett explains: 'We're here as living proof to tell the truth about what we went through' (Wellauer, 2020).

The CGAC has fostered truth-telling that emphasises the truth-teller's agency. Using digital story archiving, it envisages a resurgent practice honouring the oral narratives and traditions of survivors that brings back 'how people told stories and how we would've learnt from our Elders' (personal interview, Alicia Bairle, CGAC CEO, 17 October 2022). The digital platform allows survivors to choose how much they share (personal interview, A. Bairle, 17 October 2022) and enables them to record oral history, 'in a way in which suits them' with 'familiar, trusted people' (personal interview, A. Bairle, 17 October 2022), 'who are really connected to that story' (personal interview, Alex McWhirter, CGAC project officer, 1 August 2022). This approach respects the complexity and sensitivity of truth-telling, allowing narratives to be shared *within* families and communities of Stolen Generation survivors before being publicly shared, because 'a lot of people didn't have the chance to hear those stories from their ancestors' (personal interview, A. McWhirter, CGAC project officer, 1 August 2022).

A central principle of these corporations is facilitating reconnection to address multifaceted disconnections from identity, family, community, place, language and culture as a result of forced child removal. Paradoxically, reclaiming the sites of violation at the homes to which they were removed helps recover connection to Country. Former

Kinchela Boys Home (KBH) resident Roger Jarret explains: 'If we can march back in there as [free people], we'd conquer our pain and hate that was in there … because it becomes ours' (Rubbo et al., 2020). The recovery of the sites makes the history of the Stolen Generations visible on Country, 'and the healing that comes from that is incredible' (personal interview, T. McComsey, 21 February 2022).

Former residents of both homes have returned to these sites to reclaim them as places of remembrance and healing. KBH survivors return to gather at a giant fig tree where they were once chained overnight. The tree has slowly reclaimed this chain. Uncle Michael Welsh hopes 'to see the last link of the chain disappear, swallowed up by the tree: "That tree is our power" ' (Browning, 2017).

In 2022, 200 volunteers returned to the Cootamundra Girls Home to create a healing space, including a memorial garden, and yarning circle for four generations of Coota survivors and descendants (CGAC website). The weather shed where 'the girls used to tap dance and have precious moments of happiness together' was also restored (personal interview, A. Bairle, 17 October 2022). These activities were about 'taking back that control' (Hayter, 2022) and performing previously forbidden cultural practices. The potential that these practices could be passed on to future generations was deeply meaningful to survivors: 'to have children running free, playing, laughing, and then practising culture on the Country, with them able to sit there and witness that, that was really powerful' (personal interview, A Bairle, 17 October 2022). These practices on Country are an intergenerational promise of recovery and resurgence: 'these are the tangible things that they're able to see before they pass on to the Dreaming and to know that … their story is still being told and that we will continue to work towards their aspirations' (personal interview, Megan Gerrard, CGAC project and communications manager and descendant, 1 August 2022).

Conclusion

This article documents just five examples of the extraordinary diversity of truth-practice across Australia. An initial mapping of these activities revealed several hundred similar initiatives. Although localised and dispersed, these projects have begun to shift the national narrative about Australia's colonial history, insisting on a recognition of the founding and ongoing violences of settler colonialism. These truth practices embody the principles of refusal, resurgence and prefiguration that Park (2020) argues are critical to the radicalisation of transitional justice and repeatedly refuse the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism. They insist on *instantiating* a rich heterogeneity of presence on Country in a resurgent praxis that refuses the metaphysical claims to universality and truth of settler-colonial onto-epistemology.

First Nations communities invite non-Indigenous Australians into these spaces of grounded reciprocity to learn through pedagogical practices and immersion in multiple First Nations onto-epistemologies. This allows them to participate in Australian nationhood on radically new terms of equality and fellowship, recalibrating the relationship of all Australians to people and place, and unsettling the settler-colonial order and its sense of uncontested futurity.

These practices are not instrumental or time-bound. Unlike many transitional justice processes, they do not expect an outcome of reconciliation but embrace indeterminacy

and anticipate transformation through a continual deepening of process, relationships and reciprocity – an ongoing praxis of revisiting trauma, violation and redress. The outcome of these processes is the consequence of contingent political interaction rather than a definitive, and ultimately impossible, restoration of a pre-existing moral or political community.

These processes provide important insights for formal truth-telling, making it clear that a reckoning with the truths of the past has already been ongoing for some time. Arguably, their collective weight has helped prefigure possibilities for structural change, as envisaged in treaty processes taking place in some states, which seek to inaugurate meaningful political settlement with the original inhabitants of the country. Truth-telling is seen as critical to this process of 're-setting' the relationship between citizens on more equal terms (Appleby & Davis, 2018). Local truth practices documented here model principles of truth-praxis as an ongoing process of collective becoming (Kent et al., in press), that will not end with the mandate of formal truth-telling institutions, but which can significantly enrich them.

Nevertheless, this praxis has potential limitations. The impact of these local reckonings with truth on a fundamental disruption of the settler-colonial status quo, as envisaged by Teela Reid, remains uncertain. The disappointments of truth that several interviewees highlight reflect ongoing resistance to structural change. Additionally, the significant investment of time and resources needed to maintain these practices – physical, emotional, material, cognitive and relational – underscores the effort required to challenge settler-colonial sovereignty and promote resurgent and prefigurative possibilities for life. Systematic support for this labour is crucial. Despite these challenges, these truth praxes are seen by many First Nations communities as part of an intergenerational project of decoloniality that must be carried on through time. Ultimately, there is much that could be learnt for continuing struggles of decolonisation, as many do, indeed, prefigure ways of being and doing that could help bring into being a transformed world.

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Note

1. 'Stolen Generations' refers to the thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from their homes due to government policies of assimilation. This issue was only officially recognised with the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which documented testimonies from hundreds of affected individuals. The Commission found that between 1910 and 1970, 10% to 30% of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 31).

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