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# Aboriginal plant foods policy in Australia: a critical discourse analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The Australian continent has over 6500 edible endemic plant species, fourteen of which have been certified for commercial consumption. This paper seeks to critically analyze select Australian Commonwealth Government policy relating to these Aboriginal plant foods. The aim is to purposefully examine the positioning of non-Indigenous people in Aboriginal plant foods policy discourse and reveal tacit settler colonial power relations. This is in response to a call to action from Indigenous scholars to examine how settler colonialism manifests in regulatory mechanisms, such as government policy. This paper offers a theoretically informed critical discourse analysis methodology for examining Australian Commonwealth Government policy relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. Analysis comprised an explanation of the socio-political context of Aboriginal policymaking in Australia, textual analysis of policy texts related to Aboriginal plant foods and an interpretation of discourse practice to reveal how policy discourse tacitly promotes ideological agendas. This analysis revealed that Australian Commonwealth Government Aboriginal plant foods policy is framed according to settler terms and upholds neoliberal interests. Considerable rethinking is required about how power is exercised in Commonwealth Government policy relating to Aboriginal plant foods to ensure it does not replicate and perpetuate unjust settler colonial power relations.

## KEYWORDS

Settler colonialism; critical discourse analysis; food industry; power; policy analysis; neoliberalism

## Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have diverse connections with plants of the Australian continent and sophisticated cultural knowledge of these plants is passed on through generations (Janke 2021). The Australian continent has over 6500 edible endemic plant species (ANFAB 2017) and is one of the 17 countries classified as megadiverse (Convention on Biological Diversity 2022). A commercial industry for some of these plants was established in Australia in the 1980s, driven by commercial and public interest

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in their nutritional and pharmacological properties, their distinctive flavors, and the potential to access export markets (RIRDC 2008). There are approximately fourteen edible endemic plant species certified by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand for food safety and commercial consumption (Read 2012). Throughout this article, the terminology ‘Aboriginal plant foods’ is used, referring to endemic edible plants across the mainland Australian continent and the Torres Strait Islands. The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used to refer to diverse nations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who are the unceded sovereign owners of the lands now referred to as Australia.

Internationally, increasing demand for nutritious ‘superfoods’ has seen edible plant foods from the South American continent (for example quinoa, açai and maca) become global commodities, driving export and consumption of such foods far from their lands and cultures of origin (Loyer and Knight 2018; Magrath, Sanz, and Harris 2020). In some countries subjected to British settler colonization, Federal Governments have supported national food systems policy efforts to protect Indigenous Peoples’ customary rights to their plant foods. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand the Mana Kai Initiative is a national food roadmap grounded in Te Ao Māori wisdom to preserve Māori sustenance from food and harvesting and fair distribution of food, based on the principles of Te Tiriti of Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi which was signed by Māori chiefs and British colonizers in 1840) (The Aotearoa Circle 2022). To this end, the federal-level policy context regarding Aboriginal plant foods in Australia, remains largely un-investigated.

The retail value of the Aboriginal plant foods industry is forecast to double from \$81.5 million (AUD) in 2019/20 to \$160 million (AUD) in 2025 (Laurie 2020). Recent media articles reported an imbalance in profit-share in the burgeoning Aboriginal plant foods industry in Australia in the favor of non-Indigenous people (Mitchell and Becker 2019) suggesting that fewer ventures are owned and managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Janke 2021). This reported imbalance is not unique to this industry; similar patterns of extractive consumption are seen for innumerable other goods and commodities from unceded, sovereign Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands (Veltmeyer 2022; Whyte 2018; Wolfe 2006).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers an analytical framework to examine hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in policy. Whilst there is no single formula for conducting CDA, it generally requires a micro-analysis of texts and a macro-analysis of social and political contexts from which texts are produced (Luke 2002). Through both textual and contextual analysis, CDA can elucidate ways that language reproduces social practices and shapes political norms and values that privilege certain ways of doing, thinking and being over others (Mulderrig 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers have utilized CDA to speak back to deficit and othering discourses in Australian education policy (Hogarth 2017) and Australian maternity care policy (Felton-Busch and Larkins 2019) that relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Non-Indigenous researchers have used CDA to analyze contentious Australian Commonwealth Government policies that directly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples such as the Cashless Debit Card income management scheme (Klein 2020) and the Northern Territory Emergency Response, which suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth<sup>1</sup>)* to introduce alcohol restrictions and health, education and employment initiatives to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Dunne Breen 2015; Proudfoot and Habibis 2013).

To the authors' knowledge, CDA has not previously been used to analyze international or Australian policy discourse relating to Aboriginal plant foods. The aim of this study is to critically examine policy discourse produced by Australian Commonwealth Government that relates to Aboriginal plant foods. The intention is not to evaluate the effectiveness of policy outcomes or conduct an exhaustive textual analysis of all Commonwealth policy documents relating to Aboriginal plant foods. Rather, this study will examine a selected sample of Commonwealth Government policy texts to elucidate the discursive positioning of non-Indigenous people within the broader Aboriginal plant foods policy discourse, whilst contextualizing within the Australian socio-political context to reveal hidden power relations and embedded ideologies. Commonwealth Government policy was chosen for this study, as resource allocation flows from the Commonwealth level, and Commonwealth policy can set the agenda for state/territory policy.

This study is situated within recent attention toward decolonial (and anti-colonial) perspectives in policy research (de Freitas Boullosa, Paul, and Smith-Carrier 2024). This lens can challenge ongoing harmful colonial and imperial knowledge production in existing policy by unveiling 'latent colonial undertones' that reinforce hegemonic structures (Fraschetti 2023, 11). Regarding policy produced on/about/or with Indigenous Peoples, analysts should draw upon Indigenous knowledge holders and scholars to critically examine the governance systems which dominate the policy landscape they're researching, whilst critically examining their positionality in relation to the maintenance of these dominant systems (Ahmed 2022). Meanings and actualizations of decolonizing Critical Policy Studies have been debated in recent years, for example, for being a tokenistic exercise in the Global North, with few examples of real-world policy transformation or meaningful policy change as a result (Zhang 2023). Therefore, together with examining the reproduction of relations of power and control, decolonizing critical policy research should also be a practice of counter-hegemony (disrupting the status quo) (Ahmed 2022).

Specifically, the research questions are framed to address a reported gap in the literature, where non-Indigenous people, ongoing settler colonialism and state bureaucracy over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' lives are rarely questioned by other non-Indigenous people (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Paradies 2020; Strakosch 2016). Therefore, the authors have made a purposeful decision to specifically focus on the discursive positioning of non-Indigenous people and settler colonization within policy discourse relating to Aboriginal plant foods. The research questions are:

**RQ1:** How are non-Indigenous people discursively positioned in Australian Commonwealth Government policy relating to Aboriginal plant foods?

**RQ2:** Is ongoing settler colonization positioned in policy discourse relating to Aboriginal plant foods, and if so, how?

This CDA paper is structured with a critical Indigenous theoretical orientation. The wider socio-political context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policymaking in Australia is explained with a focus on agriculture and food production. Next, textual

analysis is utilized to describe language devices used in Commonwealth Government policy. Then, the interpretation of discourse practice mediates the connection between policy texts and the socio-political context, paying particular attention to non-Indigenous people's actions, investments and the ideological agendas of the Australian Commonwealth Government. To conclude, the implications of this research are discussed within the broader Critical Policy Studies context.

## Methodology

### *Sociocultural positions of the analysts and researcher reflexivity*

Critical methodologies require critique of researcher backgrounds, standpoints and positions within the societal hierarchy of power (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The research team comprises one novice and two experienced academics who work in a university setting. The first author is a non-Indigenous early career researcher with a professional and research background in nutrition and dietetics and public health. The second author is a non-Indigenous Professor with an extensive background in Aboriginal health and who holds an academic public health nutrition leadership position. The senior author is a Wiradjuri (Aboriginal) Professor with a nursing and applied epidemiology background and holds an academic Aboriginal health leadership position. The senior author directed the theoretical orientation toward critical inquiry informed by Indigenous scholars and critical Indigenous theory (see below), which necessitated critique of the normativity of settler colonization as the dominant ideological system in Australia. Whilst the critical discourse analysis was led by the first author, all authors participated in an iterative process to analysis, meeting fortnightly to refine analysis to ensure that it aligned with theoretical orientation (below) and addressed the research questions.

### *Theoretical orientation*

It is impossible to analyze non-Indigenous people's roles in Aboriginal plant foods policy without acknowledging the historical and ongoing power relations of settler colonization (Wolfe 2006). As a system of dispossession and control, settler colonialism has and continues to shape life in the settler state of Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Settler colonization is justified on the presumption of European superiority and works through the normalization of settler occupation and control over Indigenous lands globally, and is therefore critical to the study of food production and food systems (Rotz 2017). British colonization of the Australian continent was established on the illegal claim of *terra nullius* (unowned land) and ownership was declared by the British Government, thus dismissing at least 65,000 years of continuous land custodianship and political structures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Compared with other British settler colonies (Canada, New Zealand and the USA), historic and contemporary Australian Commonwealth Governments have evaded treaty-making negotiations with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples, with no treaty-making processes underway at a federal level (Strakosch 2016; Williams 2014). To this end, Australia remains as the only Commonwealth nation that does not have a treaty with its Indigenous Peoples (Williams 2014).

Critical inquiry informed by Indigenous scholars, particularly critical Indigenous theory, is applicable when studying colonizing power relating to Indigenous issues or Western knowledge production and discourse (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Important to note is the critical Indigenous scholarship and critical Indigenous theory of Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, particularly the focus on white supremacy as ‘hegemony, ideology, epistemology and ontology (which) requires the possession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ lands as its proprietary anchor within capitalist economies’ (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xix). Termed ‘extractivism’ (Veltmeyer 2022), capitalist exploitation of Indigenous lands globally, for example through agriculture and food production, is a signifier of economic productivity in colonized states. Common colonial practices include extraction and appropriation of fragments of Indigenous lands, including minerals, animals, plants and humans, to build the wealth, privilege and appetites of the colonizers (Tuck and Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) also attest the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land is ongoing and reasserted each day of occupation. Settler permanence can be maintained and sustained through what Whyte (2018) terms ‘parasitism’, whereby settlers reengineer and commodify what they perceive as valuable from Indigenous Peoples’ economies, cultures, and ecosystems. Issues of power arising from settler colonization are therefore highly relevant to the topic of Aboriginal plant foods. Critical theory informed by Indigenous scholars therefore offered a suitable theoretical lens through which to examine issues of power arising from settler colonization in policy discourse relating to Aboriginal plant foods.

### ***Analysis procedures***

The CDA methods employed in this study were informed by Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse (Fairclough 2010), as explained by Jacobs (2014). This version of CDA requires an *explanation* of the wider sociocultural and political contexts in which identified texts were produced (sociocultural practice), then a *description* of the language and strategic devices used by text authors to reinforce arguments within chosen texts (text analysis) and *interpretation* of discourse to demonstrate how the processes of text production were shaped by sociocultural practice (discourse practice).

### ***Sociocultural practice***

The analysis of sociocultural practice requires an explanation of the broader political context in which policy discourse is produced and considers how texts are situated in the wider frame of hegemony and power (Jacobs 2014; van Dijk 1993b). CDA was used to detect how language used by those with privilege and power (i.e. government policy actors) can stabilize (or intensify) inequities in society (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Whilst CDA scholars are interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination and exclusion, it is also important to consider how groups discursively resist such domination (van Dijk 2009). The sociocultural practice surrounding the commercial production of Aboriginal plant foods was explored in two stages. Firstly, the settler colonial foundations of Australian land and agricultural policy were examined to explain the political context in operation today. Next, the sociocultural context surrounding the production of Aboriginal plant foods policy was analyzed in relation to Commonwealth legislation and policy, specifically two Commonwealth Acts: the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait*

*Islander Act 2005* and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*; the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) Corporate Plan 2021–22 Strategy to 2025; and the multiple research and technical reports (>50) commissioned between 1999 and 2022 by Commonwealth Department of Agriculture agency AgriFutures Australia (previously named the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation).

Secondly, all authors recognized the importance of identifying alternative orders of discourse (Foucault 1971), namely recognizing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' agency within the Aboriginal plant foods industry and the context through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' resistance to Australian Commonwealth Government policy has occurred. Here, attention is paid to the National Indigenous Bushfood Statement, published in 2019 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led First Nations Bushfood and Botanical Alliance Australia. This was a conscious decision to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' agency within predominant discourse relating to Aboriginal plant foods, rather than over-emphasizing mechanisms of hegemony and domination, which risks an essentialised view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as victims of settler colonization. It is prudent to spotlight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' resistance when examining how power is enacted, maintained and perpetuated, as the contexts for resisting power are often neglected in research (Negm 2015; van Dijk 1993b).

### ***Identifying policy texts for textual analysis***

In this study, textual analysis focused on policy documents produced by Australian Commonwealth Government Departments and their agencies. These policy documents were accessed via the Australian Commonwealth Government Directory website (Australian Government 2022) and identified based on their relevance to the research questions, i.e. the policy document made reference to Aboriginal plant foods (or colloquial terms such as 'native food' or 'bush food'). The search of Commonwealth Government department and agency websites revealed a limited number of policy texts which represented the Commonwealth Government's positioning, compared with a high number of commissioned agricultural research studies and technical reports relating to the Aboriginal plant foods industry (which will be examined as *Sociocultural practice*). To this end, two policy documents were identified by the researchers as representative of the Commonwealth Government's recent positioning in Aboriginal plant foods policy. Chosen for textual analysis were two policy documents of the Commonwealth Government agency, the ILSC, the *National Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy 2021–2023* (ILSC 2021b) and the *ILSC Agribusiness Investment Program* prospectus (ILSC 2019). The *National Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy* (NILSS) was chosen for textual analysis, and the ILSC identifies the NILSS as its 'key policy document' (ILSC 2021c). The *ILSC Agribusiness Investment Program* prospectus (hereafter the prospectus) was chosen for textual analysis as it identifies 'bush foods' (terminology used for Aboriginal plant foods) as one of the four key agribusiness industries forecast to achieve 'Indigenous benefits' along with 'high returns' (p. 8). The authors recognize the limitations in choosing a sample of texts for textual analysis, compared with an exhaustive representative sample of policy documents. We purposefully selected a smaller number to allow for deeper textual analysis, as other analysts posit that a large quantity of material can

compromise the quality and depth of CDA textual analysis (Fairclough 2003; Graham and Dornan 2013). Other policy documents which related to the broader policy context of Aboriginal plant foods were included in the analysis of sociocultural and discourse practice. For this paper, the purpose of textual analysis was to describe examples of 'subtle and indirect' (van Dijk 1997, 36) language in a selection of policy texts, rather than perform textual analysis on all policy documents relating to Aboriginal plant foods.

In relation to the practical processes of textual analysis, each policy document was first read in full by the first author. The first author performed deductive analysis by selecting and highlighting words and passages to identify the formal features of texts, such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure (Fairclough 2010). The first author paid particular attention to word choices and textual devices used to reinforce messages of the Australian Commonwealth Government. The first author added comments to the highlighted words/passages to explain their interpretation of textual devices such as framing (how political messages are controlled), juxtaposition, presuppositions (hidden meanings or taken-for-granted claims), rhetorical contrast, over-lexicalization (repetitious terms), and ambiguity (vague or imprecise terms to deliberately convey multiple meanings) (Fairclough 2010). Analysed documents were then passed onto the second and third author for further analysis. These authors built on the first author's comments by adding their additional interpretations. The three authors then met to discuss how their respective textual analyzes represented the discursive positioning of non-Indigenous people and ongoing settler colonization within the policy texts.

### *Discourse practice*

Discourse practice analysis included an analysis of policy text production, distribution, and interpretation (Fairclough 2010) to highlight the nature of policy production. This process allowed for a deeper examination of the ways in which policy texts promote specific ideological agendas. Considerations within discourse practice included identification of policy silences (what's not being said and why), order of discourse (power relationship between authors and intended consumers of texts), and intertextuality – how policy texts relate to other texts to form political discourse (Leitch and Palmer 2010) and mediate the connection between language and socio-political context (Fairclough 2010). Here, findings from the explanation of sociocultural practice and textual analysis of two ILSC policy documents were interpreted alongside three additional forms of discourse: the Australia New Zealand Food Standards code; the ILSC Annual Report 2019–20 (specifically its response to the National Indigenous Bushfood Statement); and a state-level (Queensland) Traditional Knowledge policy document (to compared the performance of Commonwealth to state Government-level policy related to Aboriginal plant foods).

## **Findings**

### *Sociocultural practice*

As explained previously, the appropriation of land is central to the establishment and survival of a settler colony, with agricultural production key to supporting a settler population to feed itself at the expense of Indigenous lands (Ranta, Colás, and

Monterescu 2022; Wolfe 2006). In 1992, over 200 years since British settlement commenced in the land now known as Australia, the Australian High Court overturned the *terra nullius* doctrine in the case *Mabo vs. Queensland*, recognizing the land rights of the Meriam People, Traditional Owners of Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait (AIATSIS 2022). Twelve months later, the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)* was passed in Parliament.

This decision provoked lobbying from agricultural industry bodies such as the Australian Farmers' Federation, which were seeking certainty of land tenure for farmers, pastoralists and graziers (Moreton-Robinson 1998). During this time, Commonwealth and state government political discourse 'struck at the heart of white commercial interests and private land ownership' (Staines 2022, 13). The subsequent politically conservative Commonwealth government responded, and the resulting *Native Title Amendment Act 1998 (Cth)* provided greater certainty of tenure for pastoral leaseholders. According to Moreton-Robinson (2015, 94), this example highlights that Australian law and policy does not recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as property-owning subjects, explaining that 'Native title is not Indigenous sovereignty because it is nothing more than a bundle of rights to hunt, gather, and negotiate as determined by Australian law'. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples attest that the British never owned the Australian continent, i.e. sovereignty was never ceded, recognizing that there has never been any formal agreement, such as a treaty, to be governed by a settler state.

Neoliberal-era capitalism provides a parallel political context to this study. Neoliberalism was institutionalized in the 1970s-80s with the elections of politically conservative governments in the United Kingdom and United States. A tenet of neoliberalism is that private markets are a more cost-effective and efficient way of generating personal wealth and prosperity than government markets and social policy (Hursh and Henderson 2011). Neoliberal policies involve the enforcement of market capitalism by the state to create a climate favorable to competitive and free enterprise, whilst often simultaneously rolling forward state surveillance and paternalism to 'manage' lower-income populations (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). For example, Strakosch (2016) describes an overlap between the processes of settler colonization and those of neoliberal development. The Australian policy system relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is identified as paternalist, neo-assimilationist and neoliberal – one which espouses individual economic participation, for example through 'workfare' (schemes which require welfare recipients to engage in voluntary work with for-profit organizations or government agencies), whilst simultaneously allowing 'increased coercion by the state where individuals or groups are deemed to lack appropriate capacity' (Strakosch 2016, 6). An example of such market-based 'workfare' is the Community Development Program (CDP) in remote Australia, which disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, who historically, have been largely excluded from the design and implementation of policy pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs (Staines and Smith 2021).

Commonwealth Government attention to Aboriginal plant foods has largely focused on supporting agricultural interests and the growth of an Australian commercial industry. A Commonwealth Department of Agriculture agency, the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC now trading as AgriFutures Australia) has invested multimillion-dollars in funding, for example,

between 1999 and 2012, the RIRDC invested more than \$4 million to support agribusiness research and development in the sector (RIRDC 2013). Research attention has focused on: nutritional properties and health benefits; storing options to optimize quality of commercial harvests; cultivation and post-harvest efficiencies and constraints; industry communication and marketing; and opportunities for market growth, scale-based manufacturing and export (RIRDC 2013). Also in the agricultural space, the ILSC, a statutory authority of the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, manages agribusiness sector investment and aims to ‘support the development and growth of Indigenous agribusiness to create a thriving and sustainable Indigenous agribusiness sector’ (ILSC 2019). ‘Bush foods’ were identified as a key agribusiness industry forecast to ‘achieve high returns and Indigenous benefits.’ The ILSC was formed in 1995 (initially as the Indigenous Land Corporation) to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to acquire land following the High Court of Australia Mabo judgment (ILSC 2021a). The ILSC is now accountable to the Australian Parliament through the Minister for Indigenous Australians, a position which in 2019 was held for the first time by an Aboriginal person, Ken Wyatt AM, the first ever Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives since its establishment in 1901. Since the 2022 Federal election, this position has been held by the Hon Linda Burney MP, the second Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person to hold this portfolio. The ILSC’s seven Board members are appointed by this Minister, and five members must be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.

Whilst Commonwealth Department of Agriculture agencies have largely focused on expanding the Aboriginal plant foods industry through research and development, the statutory mandate and purpose of the ILSC within the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005 (Cth)* are:

- (a) to assist Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders to acquire land and water-related rights; and
- (b) to assist Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders to manage indigenous (sic) held land and indigenous (sic) waters; so as to provide economic, environmental, social or cultural benefits for Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders (Section 191B).

According to its Corporate Plan 2021–22, Strategy 2025, the ILSC contributes to the achievement of the Australian Commonwealth Government’s priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, and its operations ‘directly intersect with the Government priority of economic development on Indigenous-held lands and waters’ (ILSC 2021d, 8).

Another Commonwealth policy arena related to Aboriginal plant foods is regulating access to endemic plant species and genetic resources, also termed ‘biodiscovery’. The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth)* provides a legal framework to protect and manage endemic flora. Those seeking biological resources from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ land for research and development purposes are required to apply for a permit and obtain prior and informed consent from Native Title holders. However, Australia currently lacks specific policy provisions for

protecting Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property rights, rather Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and businesses are expected to protect their knowledge, expressions and products through existing Intellectual Property laws such as trademarks and copyright (Robinson and Raven 2017).

Globally, food production and biodiscovery have played a specific role in the processes of settler colonization, whereby the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their lands and waterways was required for settlers to acquire property and accumulate capital (Rotz 2017). Ongoing colonization has meant that Indigenous Peoples are not seen as owning their plant knowledge (for example, medicinal and nutritional properties), which has led to biopiracy; associated plant knowledge being taken without consent (Janke 2018). Western colonial farming and cropping techniques have rapidly erased Indigenous subsistence and cultivation activity and have damaged lands and waterways (Grey and Patel 2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia, despite the significant power imbalance in favor of settlers, have continued to resist these threats. Just one example of resistance is the Wave Hill Walk Off. In 1966, Gurindji man, Vincent Lingiari, led a strike of 200 Aboriginal workers against work and pay conditions at Wave Hill Cattle Station in the Northern Territory (National Museum of Australia 2021). This station was located on Gurindji land, and the workers were Traditional Owners of that land. After nine years of protest and lobbying, the Australian Commonwealth Government handed the title of the land to the Gurindji People, galvanizing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' land rights movement (National Museum of Australia 2021).

Another more recent example of Aboriginal resistance is the First Nations Bushfood and Botanical Alliance Australia, established in August 2020 and governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board of directors whose membership comprises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and operated Aboriginal plant food businesses. This Alliance formed after Australia's first National Indigenous Bush Food Symposium, held in November 2019 with funding from the ILSC. The aim of the Alliance is to assert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' sovereignty, leadership and self-determination in the industry (First Nations Bushfood & Botanical Alliance Australia 2020). A statement to come out of the symposium included six action items: (1) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples leading a sensitive conversation to identify species, ceremonies and cultural practices; (2) developing protocols to set national standards to protect Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property at every step of the supply chain; (3) provenance and authenticity protocols such as a certification mark/geographical indication to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander producers; (4) creating a national Indigenous-controlled industry body; (5) changes to intellectual property and access and benefit sharing laws including enacting penalties for misappropriation; and, (6) education and awareness campaigns to promote respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' knowledge values and protocols.

### **Textual analysis**

For reasons previously explained, chosen for textual analysis are two policy documents of the ILSC: the *National Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy 2021–2023* (ILSC 2021b) and the *ILSC Agribusiness Investment Program prospectus* (ILSC 2019). In the 'Discourse

*Practice*' section to come, the intertextuality between these policy texts and other Commonwealth policy relating to Aboriginal plant foods will be interpreted and examined. The following passages outline a clear power differential in these texts where non-Indigenous people are (tacitly and overtly) positioned as a superior group with decision-making capacity within Commonwealth Aboriginal plants foods policy.

The ILSC's key position and purpose in the Aboriginal plant foods' arena is summarized in this statement in the NILSS: 'The Indigenous Estate is unlocked and its potential is fully realized'. 'Unlocking' involves 'assisting Indigenous Australians to acquire land and water-related rights, and to manage land and water, so as to provide economic, environmental, social or cultural benefits' (p. 7). The order of benefits, whereby 'building economic capital' is listed first frames the ILSC's predominant position in the economic development and productivity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' land. The economic development framing is present within each of the four long-term outcomes of the NILSS. For example, Outcome Three: 'Indigenous People are preserving and protecting culture through reconnection with country', which ostensibly focuses on cultural preservation, is still framed with an economic lens, i.e. 'economic opportunities with the preservation and intergenerational transfer of culture' (p. 10). This economic framing aligns with the tenets of neoliberalism, where wealth generation is a hallmark of government policy. This discursively presents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' lands as productive if they are building economic capital, and thus are serving the interests of non-Indigenous people and settler society.

A settler colonial orientation is evident in the following excerpts from the NILSS:

- '*... positioning Indigenous people to contribute positively to national action on climate change*' (p. 8)
- '*... resurgence and recognition of Indigenous culture*' (p. 8)
- '*... raise the profile of Indigenous culture and language*' (p. 10)
- '*... offer much to our national identity*' (p. 10)
- '*An international appetite for cultural tourism provides opportunities for Indigenous people to pursue jobs and enterprise underpinned by the protection, practice and sharing of culture. Similarly, opportunities in Indigenous-led carbon, environmental protection*' (p. 10)

In each of these statements, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' 'culture' is oriented to benefit or be appreciated by non-Indigenous people. The terms 'our' and 'national identity' reveal an assimilationist order of discourse with expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples contribute and integrate into colonial society. Additionally, the term 'their' is consistently juxtaposed next to 'Indigenous people', e.g. 'their aspirations' and 'their interests', which signals the narration of the policy is from a settler standpoint and is relaying information to other non-Indigenous people. In contrast, a neutral narration would scribe 'Indigenous' and an Indigenous narration might apply 'our'. This subtly suggests who the policy is written by and for.

Aboriginal plant foods (termed 'bushfoods' in this policy document) are categorized as 'niche Indigenous products' in the NILSS. Whilst the term 'niche' describes a functional role an organism plays in an ecosystem, here it establishes Aboriginal

plant foods as a special category, as ‘exotic’ compared with what is familiar and normal to colonizers, which establishes the status quo (Said 1978). Once again, this signals the narration of the policy from a settler standpoint. This use of ‘Othering’ is common in political discourse relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Aldrich, Zwi, and Short 2007), and functions to maintain and legitimate normativity of settler colonization by marginalizing a group of humans as something different, or ‘Other’ (van Dijk 1997).

A presupposition within the prospectus is that investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ enterprises is fraught and difficult. This is implied both explicitly: ‘provide support to “de-risk” an investment in an Indigenous agribusiness’ (p. 13) and tacitly: ‘work in partnership – not in competition – with Indigenous Australians’ (p. 11). This use of rhetorical contrast (van Dijk 1997) of not working in competition with ‘Indigenous Australians’ establishes investors as non-Indigenous, as a superior group within potential partnerships who possess the power to opt into this. The positioning of non-Indigenous investors as stimulating growth is tacitly implied throughout the prospectus:

- *‘Through the Agribusiness Investment Program the ILSC will work with Indigenous Australians, investors, industry and agricultural producers’ (p.3)*
- *‘... increased appetite from private enterprise to partner with Indigenous Australians’ (p. 4)*
- *‘... positive relationships between industry, investors and Indigenous peoples’ (p. 4)*
- *‘Facilitate commercial arrangements with Indigenous groups, proven operators, investors and other business partners’ (p. 10)*
- *‘The ILSC now invites interested parties (Indigenous groups, investors, agricultural producers and industry) to submit expressions of interest. (p. 11)*

These passages position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples separately to investors and the industry at large, and thus legitimizes non-Indigenous people’s power within this policy document. This textual device is also repeated in Outcome 3 in the NILSS, whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are positioned separately from mainstream investment trends:

Similarly, opportunities in Indigenous-led carbon, environmental protection and bushfood enterprises are growing areas for our investment. Moreover, many of these opportunities are well aligned with the increased emphasis on Environmental, Social and Governance attributes in mainstream investment trends, and capable of attracting complementary commercial capital (p. 10)

This legitimizes the power imbalance of paternalistic deficit framing in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/settler colonial context, whereby non-Indigenous people drive investment and ‘opportunity’ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples need ‘capability support’ to ‘effectively manage and operate Indigenous agribusiness’ (Prospectus p.10). Over-lexicalization of the ambiguous term ‘opportunities’ is another textual device in both policy documents, repeated 46 times in the NILSS and 28 times in the prospectus. This emphasizes the settler standpoint of seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ lands and livelihoods as potential

resource opportunities. Meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' self-determination in defining said opportunities and capabilities is largely absent in both policy documents.

### ***Discourse practice***

The interpretation of discourse practice scrutinized the ways in which the selected policy texts were utilized to promote specific ideological agendas which were not explicitly outlined within the policies.

### ***Neoliberal interests***

In the 1990s, conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard introduced the term 'practical reconciliation', which equated with government policies directed toward improving the socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It was through this policy framework that the neoliberal Australian state focused its attention on creating 'economically productive Indigenous citizens' (Howard-Wagner 2018, 1340). It has been argued that including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the neoliberal agenda has further entrenched rather than dismantle existing settler authority, as policy is framed around perceived socio-economic needs rather than broader political recognition or formal decolonization (Strakosch 2016, 2019). This is reflected in Commonwealth Government policy relating to Aboriginal plant foods, which has largely positioned non-Indigenous investors as essential for growing an Australian commercial industry for plant foods. Textual analysis also revealed an approach to policy where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples were inserted into existing neoliberal structures which privilege non-Indigenous investors and partners without engaging in much deeper and fundamental re-examination and restructuring of policy. Both of these acts uphold settler interests and can compromise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' self-determination.

The textual analysis revealed that policy support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to acquire land and water rights and conserve Country is not without conditions and constraints. Fache (2014) argues that rather than rebalance power, such policies are modeled on the principles and practices of the corporate world, focusing on accountability, performance and return on investment. In an interview study exploring the aspirations and motivations of investors in Australian Indigenous Land and Sea management (17 non-Indigenous staff representing 85% of the market share) a shift away from natural resource management to a focus on employment and training was reported, and most investors (16) suggested that their investments allowed them to obtain and maintain access to areas that hold high economic and/or conservation value (Austin et al. 2019). Other investors noted how partnering on such projects was good for their 'brand' and attracted donors (Austin et al. 2019, 161). Howard-Wagner (2018) terms neoliberal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy as a paternalistic form of 'contemporary colonialism', whereby economic development is the key means of overcoming disadvantage, thus assimilating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as productive participants in the mainstream economy.

### *Reproducing settler colonisation*

Strakosch (2016) identifies policy relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs as a frontline for settler colonization in Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have and continue to be subjected to government intervention and improvement projects. This critical discourse analysis has revealed examples of the Australian Commonwealth Government's neoliberal agenda for Aboriginal plant foods. The ILSC is governed by a Board whose majority comprises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ILSC 2023). Directors are chosen by and report to the Commonwealth Government Minister for Indigenous Australians, who is bound by government ideology that exists within a system of settler colonization. This CDA revealed that Commonwealth Government policy acts to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to acquire land and water rights but sets the terms and conditions of their management. Acts such as this have been described by Indigenous scholars as 'settler moves to innocence' (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9), which do little to redistribute power and may uphold settler colonization rather than disrupt it (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Critical Indigenous scholars highlight the necessity of naming colonization in order to critique and dismantle it (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Paradies 2020). Therefore, there is a call to action for non-Indigenous people and institutions to play a key role in confronting the continuing power-relations of settler colonization (Fredericks and Bradfield 2021). In Australian Commonwealth policy however, the presence of settler colonization is often 'invisible, unmarked and unnamed' and 'its transparency is part of its power' (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 76–77). The logic of reproduction implies that under a system governed by settler institutions, passivity and inaction contributes to the continuity of the settler colonial system (van Dijk 1993a).

### *Intertextuality*

Outside of the agricultural sector, policy discourse concerning Aboriginal plant foods is found wanting. Termed 'Niche Indigenous products' by the ILSC, the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code classifies Aboriginal plant foods as 'Novel foods' within Standard 1.5.1, which are defined as non-traditional foods that 'do not have a history of human consumption in Australia or New Zealand' (Australian Government Federal Register of Legislation 2022). This definition disregards and silences Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' existing relationships to these plants and is another example of how Australian Aboriginal plant foods policy is written from a non-Indigenous standpoint.

Another example is a mismatch between the 'asks' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and what is reported in Commonwealth policy. The ILSC provided funding toward the first ever National Indigenous Bushfood Symposium in 2019 with the arising action items focusing on determining and protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights through law. Whilst the six action items were repeated in the ILSC Annual Report 2019–20 (ILSC 2020), the event summary was framed to suit the Commonwealth's neoliberal agenda: 'The ILSC-funded symposium is an example of the ILSC supporting Indigenous Australians to achieve commercial success in the agribusiness sector' (p. 60).

Another action item from the National Indigenous Bushfood Symposium called for the Commonwealth Government to ratify the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic

Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization (Nagoya Protocol) (United Nations Environmental Programme 2011). This protocol recognizes Indigenous rights and traditional knowledge over genetic resources globally. Australia is currently a signatory to the Nagoya Protocol, but the ratification process has stalled. In the absence of Commonwealth action, some states and territories have stepped up to strengthen their biodiscovery laws. For example, the Queensland Government implemented the *Biodiscovery and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2020 (Qld)* and associated Traditional Knowledge Code of Practice policy document (Queensland Government 2021) to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' traditional knowledge of endemic biological and plant material collected anywhere in Queensland in accordance with the Nagoya Protocol.

## Limitations

This CDA was conducted via the first author's settler standpoint to reveal the positioning of non-Indigenous people and settler colonization in Aboriginal plant foods policy produced by the Commonwealth Government. A limitation of this is that non-Indigenous people were amplified in this textual analysis, which may be criticized as centering dominant culture. This approach, however, responded to an identified research need from Indigenous scholars, that non-Indigenous people should confront and critique the continuing power-relations of settler colonization (Fredericks and Bradfield 2021). Different research findings would be revealed if policy texts were analyzed from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander standpoint and/or if different texts were chosen for textual analysis. The authors also recognize the limitations in choosing two Commonwealth Government policy texts for deep textual analysis, compared with a more exhaustive list of policy texts across all Commonwealth (and/or state/Territory) government departments and agencies. In addition, other forms of political discourse such as mass media and political speeches warrant future inclusion in CDA studies of Aboriginal plant foods policy to potentially reveal other influences and dependencies. Future research could also apply CDA to Aboriginal/Indigenous food policy from other settler colonized states and contexts. Insights from additional CDA studies of these kinds can further contribute to the understanding of how power operates within the policy process.

## Policy implications and conclusion

This paper demonstrates how CDA can reveal unexamined, taken for granted power inequities in policy related to Aboriginal plant foods in settler colonized states such as Australia. This paper also provides a methodological example for other food policy researchers who may wish to apply a critical lens to their analysis. Internationally, the impact of government policies on Indigenous Peoples' access to food has been examined (Damman, Eide, and Kuhnlein 2008), including how existing European Novel Food Regulation policies hinder global trade of 'exotic traditional foods' (Hermann 2009). This study has taken a different critical analytical approach to policy analysis, drilling down to reveal how language use in Aboriginal plant foods policy can ultimately support and uphold settler power and interests.

The Critical Policy Studies literature has been critiqued for lacking appreciation of how to resist harmful research relating to Indigenous Peoples and how to conduct such research in reliable ways (Ahmed 2022). Evidence suggests that traditionally, state bureaucracy over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' lives is rarely questioned by non-Indigenous people (Strakosch 2016) and relatively scant attention is paid to how the ongoing colonial presence continues to oppress Indigenous Peoples globally (Paradies 2020). Whilst 'decolonisation' is a word subjected to different interpretations and critiques (Zhang 2023), for example whether Critical Policy Studies can achieve decolonization as the 'repatriation of Indigenous land and life' (Tuck and Yang 2012, 21), this paper contributes a timely and practical contribution to the field, by revealing the value of placing settler colonization, which is often unnamed, as a key object of policy analysis relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

Alongside policy analysis that advances understanding of power, domination, and ideology through the use of Western critical theory such as hegemony (Fairclough 2013; Howarth 2010), this study intentionally foregrounds critical Indigenous theory informed by Indigenous scholars to examine settler colonization as a form of ongoing power, but also elucidates examples of resistance. This can contribute a counter-hegemony and anti-colonial approach to policy analysis that attempts to undo historical power relations of domination between policy studies and Indigenous Peoples (Fraschetti 2023)

The processes and impacts of settler colonization continue to result in social, political, and economic marginalization of the globe's Indigenous Peoples, resulting in inequalities in health (Czyzewski 2011, Sherwood 2013). By applying critical theoretical concepts informed by Indigenous scholars to deeply analyze how contemporary public policy can perpetuate marginalization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, alternative options that subvert power inequalities can be identified (Mackean et al. 2019). To counteract a common Western tendency to define the settler colonial past and present in terms of Indigenous dispossession, and essentialize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' experiences of settler colonization, it is crucial to foreground localized examples of staunch resistance, empowerment, and resurgence (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008, Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014) and center transformative alternatives, such as the First Nations Bushfoods and Botanical Alliance Australia. Such solutions require the restoration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' sovereign governance and legal rights to their lands, including the right to control the procurement of Aboriginal plant foods (Staines and Smith 2021). This intentional focus on resistance responds to calls for greater attention in the Critical Policy Studies literature to the resistance and resurgence efforts of Indigenous Peoples to settler colonial structures (Ahmed 2022).

Use of CDA in this study revealed examples of how Australian Commonwealth Government policy related to Aboriginal plant foods is framed according to non-Indigenous settler terms and tacitly upholds neoliberal interests and settler colonization. Considerable rethinking is required about where power lies and how power is exercised in Commonwealth Government Aboriginal plant foods policy to ensure it does not replicate and perpetuate unjust settler colonial power relations.

## Note

1. *Cth* refers to the Australian Commonwealth (Federal) Government to distinguish from State and/or Territory Governments

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