

Modernity to Makarrata: Australia Through the Post-Colonial Lens

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Abstract: This article considers whether Australia can accurately be described as a post-colonial nation, and argues that post-colonial theory fails to adequately address the realities of the Australian context, where Indigenous people are recurrently made to exist and (re)assert themselves within prevailing non-indigenous narratives and temporalities.

Keywords: post-colonialism; Aboriginal history; Northern Territory intervention; Makarrata

The Australian nation, as many have come to recognise it, privileges the ideologies of the industrialised west: democracy, capitalism, and a high standards of living afforded by a relatively stable economy. While we adhere to a British Monarchy by way of the Commonwealth, Australia's status as a British colony is no longer applicable in legal frameworks. The Australian nation is also the sovereignty of our Indigenous people, and this sovereignty has never been ceded. The historical processes of colonialism have been unequivocally detrimental to Indigenous Australia, particularly the dispossession of ancestral lands. Indigenous sovereignty and this originary dispossession has mobilised civil rights movements within Australia and continues to do so in the present.

Unsurprisingly, the academic playing field for post-colonial study of the Australian context is suitably charged. The purpose of this article is to consider the question of whether or not Australia could best be described as a post-colonial nation. It is this writer's opinion that any discussion of Australia's post-colonial nationhood cannot be undertaken without specific regard to Indigenous Australia, and the extent to which colonialism still informs current movements in the political and academic spheres. I acknowledge the problematic nature of commenting on lived indigenous experiences from a non-indigenous standpoint. In addition, the research herein was conducted predominately at the University of Technology Library, which resides on Gadigal land. I acknowledge the traditional owners of that land.



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If Australia is best described as a post-colonial nation, it would be pertinent to consider (or acknowledge) the grounds upon which such a claim could be made. Or, more importantly, *who* might be making it in the first place. The voice of activist Bobbi Sykes comes to mind:

What? Post-colonialism? Have they left? (Bobbi Sykes in Smith, 1999).

Given Australia's history of colonial occupation and the black resistance to it, any interrogation of our post-colonial status in the present requires some understanding of the term *post-colonial*, and whether or not this applies to the Australian context and its Indigenous people. As scholars would attest, the term *post-colonial* is a loaded descriptor. It has multiple meanings and embraces a wide range of critical practices. Ashcroft establishes post-colonialism simply as the 'discourse of the colonized', applied to those societies impacted by the historical phenomenon of colonialism and their engagement with imperial discourse (2001). This engagement is expressed through an order of reactionary cultural productions. For Ashcroft, this production 'occurs *through* colonialism, because no decolonising process, no matter how oppositional, can remain free from that cataclysmic experience (2001:9).'

In the Australian case, it would be inaccurate to distill colonialism and its 250 year tenure down to the notion of a singular, cataclysmic experience. Rather, settler occupation in Australia has heralded a series of ongoing cataclysms — frontier massacre, forced child removal, the dispossession of land and culture, to name a few. Moreton-Robinson argues that post-colonial theory fails to make the distinction between the historical experience of Indigenous/settler societies such as Australia, and that of other post colonies such as India, Malaysia and Algeria (2003). Moreton-Robinson suggests that post colonial theory aligns the *post-colonial* in relation to 'the dominant culture in the country of arrival and the one they left' (2003: 37). In this sense, post-colonialism is shaped by white possession, which is always in contestation of Indigenous sovereignty and thus positions Australia as a *post-colonizing* state (2003).

Similarly, Shohat maintains that we cannot not presently view Australia's historical experience as if its blemishes were complicit with a now-defunct colonial project. For Shohat, the hegemonic structures and conceptual frameworks established by colonial occupation 'cannot be vanquished by waving the magical wand of the post-colonial' (1992:105). Shohat maintains that the *post-colonial* is problematically imbued with notions of a 'moving beyond,' where it becomes aligned with other 'post' prefixed contemporary states, situations, conditions or epochs (1992). While these other 'posts' refer largely to a 'supercession of outmoded philosophical, aesthetic and political theories,' the *post-colonial* often suggests a movement beyond anti-colonial nationalist theory in addition to a specific point in time (Shohat, 1992). When aligned with the ideologies of post-war or post-independence frameworks for example, the *post-colonial* tends to imply the definitive closure of a historical period.

In a discussion of Australia's post-colonial nationhood, which of the eligible dates could be stamped for the shifting of the colonial paradigm? The constitutional amendments in favour of Indigenous Australians by virtue of the 1967 referendum? The Mabo decision and the turning over of Terra

Nullius in terra eboracensis in 1992? Perhaps we can look to Prime Minister Keating's admissions in his Redfern Park address:

It was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. (1992)

We might also consider Prime Minister Rudd's resolutions in the 'Sorry' speech to the Stolen Generations:

For the future we take heart, resolving that this new page in our history of our great continent can now be written. We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians (2008).

These events are viewed by some as watershed moments in the progress of Indigenous rights in Australia. Simultaneously, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remain ever critical of them — for being mere symbolic gestures, for not reaching far enough, for not achieving substantive and/or measurable change for the advancement of Indigenous Australians. Or, for all of the above. Keating and Rudd's reconciliations, read in full, both convey a temporal logic where the past is relegated and a new era is ushered into existence. The future is an open book, waiting to be written.

Strakosch & Macoun maintain that this type of logic is symptomatic of settler-colonial discourse, tied to 'the post-colonial image of a single transformative moment of a radical political break marking decolonization' (2012:41). Within a settler-colonial society, this moment — indeed, the 'vanishing endpoint' of decolonisation — is an eternally shifting goalpost, with the potential to legitimise settler presence through the erasure of Indigenous political difference (Strakosch & Macoun, 2012). The nature and timing of this moment are never specified, dependent on government policy, and thus locate Indigenous lives in settler time (Strakosch & Macoun, 2012). Keating posited a mere decade to unequivocally reconcile the wrongdoing of Australia's colonial past. Unfortunately, this has not yet occurred. Rather, the Keating and Rudd governments have bookended the Northern Territory Intervention, which has proven to be fertile space for discussion on the notion of a post-colonial Australia, and the concurrent Aboriginal nationalism which resists the settler-colonial paradigm.

The intervention has been divisive in the political and academic spheres, not least of all among Indigenous critics. In 2007, the Howard government introduced the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Package, to address allegations of child sex abuse and neglect in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. The package, or intervention as it has become known, saw the deployment of police and military force into these areas as means of restoring order. This resulted in the control of ancestral lands, the compulsory management of welfare income, and the total banning of alcohol and pornography. Controversially, these measures were afforded by the government's suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975). Some critics, not limited to the

Human Rights and equal opportunity commission and the United Nations special Rapporteur, condemned the breaching of this legislation.

As Dirk Moses points out, the intervention raised ‘the spectre of neo-assimilation, neo-paternalism, neo-liberalism and even genocide’ among critics, and goes so far as to render the affected communities as *postcolonies* as they have become contested sites of indigenous identity or Indigeneity (2010). One Indigenous commentator, Irene Watson, slammed the intervention as a maintenance of ongoing colonial violence under the guise of humanitarian aid:

the white settler frontiersman of the past has been transformed by the NT intervention into the crusader of the present, rescuing Aboriginal women from Aboriginal men. (2009: 48)

Watson also maintains that depictions of communal disintegration in the territory reinforce white representations of the drunk and disorderly Aborigine as endemic (2009). Noel Pearson, a proponent of the intervention, argues that substance abuse in remote Aboriginal communities denotes victimhood among his people which acts as a barrier to self-determination and the continued survival of Aboriginal culture:

The disorder in our community is the symptom in the sense that it is a product of our history and marginalisation. It is a different question to what extent our history maintains the social chaos. (Pearson, 2009: 4)

The dysfunction of these ailing communities and the divided scholarship surrounding the government response to them demonstrate the problem of mobilising Aboriginal nationhood in the post-colonial context. Martinez points out that where some Aboriginal intellectuals have accepted western models of nationalism afforded by administration, education, or otherwise *modernity*, some view this as a betrayal of the spirit of legitimate and enduring ‘traditional’ culture — often located in remote outback Aboriginal communities (1997). Martinez suggests that it is problematic to define Aboriginal nationalism without placing it in the context of the state, but just as troubling to view it as a mere extension of the colonial project, and thus unable to determine itself (1997).

Now the stage is set for another watershed moment in the Indigenous narrative, which takes places at the intersection of decolonization, Indigeneity and post-colonial theory. In May this year, over 250 Indigenous community leaders gathered at the National Constitution Convention in Uluru to establish a unified position on constitutional reform. The Uluru Statement of the Heart is the culmination of these talks, following six months of community dialogue conducted by the referendum council. The statement prescribes a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous voice in parliament, and the installation of a *Makarrata* Commission to facilitate the discussion of treaty.

Makarrata, the Yolngu word for treaty, denotes a ‘*coming together after a struggle*’. According to the statement, this word captures the ‘aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.’ The statement calls for ‘substantive constitutional change and structural reform’ as opposed to recognition. It also eschews the core objectives of the federally subsidised Recognise Campaign —

the repeal of Section 25 and Section 51 (xxvi), both of which give provision to discriminate on the basis of race. The statement, and the aspirations therein favour Treaty over constitutional recognition.

Much like post-colonial theory itself, Australia's post-colonial nationhood is problematic. Indigenous scholarship is particularly useful in this discussion, because the historical experience of Indigenous Australians characterizes our post-colonial context differently to other global examples. The post-colonial models advanced by many scholars often relate to these examples, but do not adequately address the Australian context where Indigenous people are recurrently made to exist and (re)assert themselves within prevailing non-indigenous narratives and temporalities. Australia's attitude toward its indigenous people is still entrenched in settler-colonial politics, where 'the colonials did not go home' (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Rather, they withhold or relocate the moment of reconciliation and/or sovereign exchange with its indigenous people. This has been demonstrated by successive Australian governments over the last century, where the radical break in the colonial paradigm has been intentioned but always fails to materialize.

I would argue that the Northern Territory Intervention is an acid test for the deep-rootedness of this paradigm, and thus how post-colonialism becomes an ill-fitting framework regarding government, media and scholarly attitudes toward these targeted Aboriginal communities. The critique of the intervention demonstrates the challenge of relocating and representing Indigeneity outside of, or beyond the colonial paradigm. Further, the objectives laid out in the Uluru Statement of the Heart illuminate where Indigenous Australia locates itself in the past, the present, and the near future. Only once these objectives are met by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, can we embrace an ideal post-colonial nationhood.

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