Legacies of Colonial Violence and Decolonial Futures: Structural Reconstruction Pathways for Indigenous Australians

Abstract

This paper examines the continuing effects of colonial violence on Indigenous Australians and explores pathways towards decolonisation and structural reconstruction. Drawing on Johan Galtung's framework of direct, structural and cultural violence alongside postcolonial and settler colonial theories, it combines historical research with a close reading of Alexis Wright's novel Carpentaria. The study analyses how colonial rule has reshaped Indigenous Australians' relationships with land, social structures, cultural identities and knowledge systems.

The findings show that colonial violence continues to be reproduced through land tenure arrangements, legal systems, political representation, education and media discourse. Although the Mabo decision, land rights reforms and greater cultural recognition have advanced decolonisation, these measures have largely remained symbolic and have not fundamentally transformed colonial power structures.

This paper argues that genuine decolonisation must extend beyond formal equality and cultural inclusion. It requires land rights and compensation reform, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, greater Indigenous authority in political decision-making, control over cultural narratives and equal recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems in education and public governance. Such changes are necessary to move from symbolic reconciliation towards substantive power redistribution and epistemic justice.

Keywords: Indigenous Australians; colonial violence; structural violence; decolonization; indigenous sovereignty; epistemic justice

Introduction

In 1788 British colonisers arrived in Australia and established colonial power based on the legal fiction of Terra Nullius. This ideology denied the existing sovereignty, legal systems and knowledge frameworks of Indigenous peoples, lending institutional legitimacy to colonial atrocities. Colonisation was neither a one-off military invasion, nor a series of disconnected historical episodes; it was an ongoing structural system whose impacts were intricately embedded in Australia's land regime, social organisation, cultural stories and

epistemologies. The structural legacies persist in contemporary society even after the formal end of colonial rule and exist in the form of ongoing inequality, marginalisation and Indigenous dispossession (Libesman, 2019).

Scholarly work has carefully documented the deep harms inflicted on Aboriginal peoples by frontier violence, strategies of assimilation and intergenerational trauma, including massacres, land dispossession and the legacy of the Stolen Generations. These studies have been vital in laying the groundwork for the exposure of colonial injustice. Yet, a strictly linear historical view is insufficient to encompass the entire extent of colonial tyranny. The paper therefore directs its analytical gaze to the study of a multidimensional system of violence, examining the ways in which direct violence, structural violence and epistemic violence are mutually reinforcing and work together to form a complex network of oppression directed at the social structures and epistemological systems of Indigenous Australians (Axelsson et al., 2016; Libesman, 2019).

This article conceptualises colonialism as a complex system of structural violence including direct physical injury, institutional arrangements and epistemic domination. It explores how colonial rule fundamentally reshaped Indigenous social structures, land ownership, and cultural identity, how these changes were maintained by direct, structural, and epistemic violence, and how colonial narratives are still reproduced in mainstream media and political discourse in contemporary society. To address these questions, this study uses the novel Carpentaria by Alexis Wright as its major text and compares it to peace studies, postcolonial theory and discourse analysis. This study considers Carpentaria as a literary work and a decolonial epistemological system, resisting the dominant "regime of truth" in colonial society, via a combination of literary analysis, theoretical frameworks and historical data.

The final aim of this study is to reveal the structural fissures of colonial modernity and, on this basis, to outline possible paths toward a decolonial future. It focuses on land and sovereignty recognition, political representation, and the reconstruction of culture and knowledge systems, considering how Indigenous peoples may seek substantial structural reform and epistemic justice under ongoing colonial logics.

Literature Review

The legacy of Terra Nullius in Australia is more than a historical grievance; it is a foundational displacement that continues to influence the socio-legal fabric of the nation. To analyse the trajectory from colonial violence

to a decolonial future, one needs to synthesise peace research, post-colonial theory and discursive analysis. This paper develops a multi-dimensional framework for diagnosing the nature of colonial trauma, analysing the mechanisms of cognitive oppression, and exploring the potentialities for structural reconstruction through hybridity and positive peace.

Galtung's (1969) conceptualisation of violence is the diagnostic point of origin for comprehending the modern Indigenous dilemma. Galtung (1969) goes beyond the limited definition of physical harm to incorporate structural violence. In Australia, the expropriation of land and the imposition of British rule were not simply episodic moments of violence, but were inherent to the fundamental institutions of the new state. This structural framework guarantees that the actual realisation of Indigenous peoples (in terms of health, education and life expectancy) stays systematically lower than their "potential realization." Contemporary Australian socio-economic indicators strikingly mirror the theoretical framework of structural violence. The Closing the Gap Priority Reforms report finds that the systematic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples remains large. Data, for example, show that the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males is approximately 8.8 years lower than that of non-Indigenous males (Productivity Commission, 2023). Another example of structural marginalisation is the state of the criminal justice system. Indigenous adults make up only 3.2% of the entire Australian population, while they make up 32% of the national jail population (Productivity Commission, 2023). These numbers show that the "actual realization" of Indigenous well-being continues to be hindered by institutional arrangements, thus providing empirical evidence of Galtung's (1969) argument that such deprivations are not individual cases of direct harm but the product of the social structure of a society. Galtung (1996) also refers to cultural violence as the conceptual foundation that legitimises such organisations. Terra Nullius is paradigmatic of cultural violence: in naming the continent empty, the colonial power rendered the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty morally and legally invisible to settler consciousness.

Colonial dominance is the occupation of not only territory but also intellectual systems. Foucault (1980), Said (1978), and Spivak (1988) have theorised the ways in which colonisers produce and dominate speech to justify the legitimacy of their authority. This diagnostic of the structure is complemented by an examination of the oppression of cognition and discourse. Colonial power was mostly maintained by what Foucault (1980) refers to as "Regimes of Truth," which offer an account of how the Australian state governed Indigenous bodies through administrative and protective discourses. Policies such as the forced removal of children, the

Stolen Generations, were articulated via a humanitarian language of betterment that served to conceal the biopolitical control and the obliteration of Indigenous kinship ties. Said (1978) further details this phenomenon, stating that the West tends to construct the "other" as a fixed, essentialised being. In Australia, the binary antagonism of the civilised settler and the primitive Aboriginal justified the White Australia Policy and marginalised Indigenous agency. As Spivak (1988) argues, this epistemic violence creates a structural silence where the subaltern's voice is not simply ignored but made unheard in the dominant Western legal and historical archive. Decolonisation, therefore, entails the removal of Eurocentric framings that continue to delegitimise Indigenous knowledge systems.

Although the above theories focus on critique, Bhabha (2004) provides a dynamic option for the 'structural reconstruction' of Australian Indigenous civilisations. Mimicry and hybridity, as Bhabha (2004) argues, are forms of resistance. Mimicry - the colonisers' demand for imitation, which can never be fully realised because of racial difference - creates a rift in colonial power. Instead, this fissure becomes a site for Indigenous resistance. For Indigenous Australians, this is a fissure, a space in which the colonizer's legal language has been employed to question the state. Bhabha's Third Space (2004) offers a theoretical framework for the structural repair envisaged in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Indigenous leaders are not asking for full secession or full assimilation in their call for a Voice to Parliament and Treaty, but a hybrid political configuration where Indigenous sovereignty and the Australian Constitution can coexist. Negotiating this in the "Third Space" allows for a new cultural productivity that escapes the settler/native binary. Hobbs (2020) suggests a concept of Relational Sovereignty, which provides a useful framework for thinking about concerns of sovereignty and Indigenous rights in Australia. Rather than a traditional understanding of sovereignty as unitary and indivisible, this model imagines the Australian state as accommodating many, overlapping jurisdictions. Hobbs proposes a tangible process by which Indigenous authority might be incorporated into state structure through the re-envisioning of treaties as negotiated agreements between equal parties, an idea that aligns with Bhabha's (2004) concept of the "Third Space."

Although the macro-theories discussed provide profound insights, their application to the Australian case reveals a critical conceptual gap that this study attempts to fill. In contrast to Said (1978) and Spivak (1988), who largely theorise "franchise colonialism" – the exploitation of a local population by a foreign authority – Australia is constructed by the unique paradigm of settler colonialism. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) famously argued, settler colonialism is "a structure, not an event." Unlike traditional colonialism, which eventually

“goes home,” the settler colonial project is based on a “logic of elimination”—a continual, structural desire to eliminate Indigenous societies in order to create a new colonial society on expropriated land. Thus, "structural violence" (Galtung, 1969) is not simply an artefact of colonial history in Australia but a prerequisite for the existence of the state in a functional sense. Macro-theoretical frameworks tend to miss the specific resilience of this replacement logic, which lives on today in the form of “discursive governance” in modern land rights and constitutional battles. Moreover, although Bhabha (2004) presents a utopian “Third Space,” this model can be too hopeful in light of the “territorial thirst” of the settler state. The settler state’s structural inertia often rejects the very ‘hybridity’ Bhabha advocates, as in the defeat of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum. Therefore, it becomes vital to complement these macro-theories with local research that recognises the enduring structure of settler colonialism, changing the emphasis from historical grievance to the continuing contestation of sovereignty.

The macro-level theories outlined above give great insight into the nature of colonial authority, but they are sometimes too abstract to adequately address the structural and embedded diseases of settler colonialism. What the literature needs to do is move toward the specific legal and political contestations within Australia in order to bridge the gap between macro-theoretical critique and structural reconstruction. Reynolds (2007) and Attwood (2020) have successfully deconstructed the idea of the “peaceful settlement” in their historical studies, by recording frontier resistance, while the contemporary scholarship is concerned with how these past conflicts are translated into the modern rights framework.

A significant tension exists between “symbolic recognition” and “substantive sovereignty.” Moreton-Robinson (2015) is a seminal Goenpul scholar and claims that the Australian legal system is constructed upon ‘Propertied White Possession’. This is not an identity category, but an ontology. However, such acknowledgement would undermine the very ontological grounds upon which white sovereignty and legitimacy are founded. Hence, white institutional structures are intrinsically incapable of recognising Indigenous peoples. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues, even the most well-intentioned rights frameworks, such as the Native Title Act, operate as a form of violence in that Indigenous peoples are required to prove their ongoing connection to land within a Western legal framework that was built to dispossess them. This critique argues that the state’s structural violence (Galtung, 1996) is not just a matter of history, but is perpetuated through the very laws that are meant to bring “justice” (through the administration of the law).

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the Uluru Statement from the Heart is a contemporary attempt at realising Bhabha's (2004) 'Third Space'. Leading constitutional expert Megan Davis (2017) explains that the idea for a "Voice to Parliament" was not only a call for inclusion, but a structural demand for "truth-telling" (Makarrata) and a treaty. Nevertheless, as the results of the 2023 referendum show, the 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980) that are held by the settler majority still constitute a significant barrier to constitutional change. The failure illustrates the limits of international frameworks like UNDRIP. UNDRIP has the potential for self-determination (Gilbert & Lennox, 2019), but the Australian experience shows how domestic "power politics" can take precedence over international norms. Indigenous communities are left to exercise their agency within a political framework still dominated by colonial power. Historically, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand rejected UNDRIP because of the continuing influence of their shared British colonial legal and cultural past on Indigenous rights (Libesman, 2019; Venne & Watson, 2007).

In conclusion, while domestic and foreign scholarship has provided excellent insights into the development of Indigenous rights, there is a lack of scholarship synthesising these insights from a holistic peace-research perspective. The existing literature accounts for the historical erosion of rights, but typically frames "policy failure" as an accident instead of a functional result of the settler-colonial structure.

This research is more than a descriptive narrative of rights; it analyses the multidimensional effects of colonial activities through the model of "Triple Violence" (Galtung, 1996) and the "Logic of Elimination" (Wolfe, 2006). In the process, it examines how the structural inheritance of colonial violence—from the illusion of Terra Nullius to the contemporary refusal of the 'Voice'—can be transfigured. Finally, the research culminates with proposals towards a "Positive Peace" that recognises Indigenous sovereignty as a pre-existing and transcendent right, not a gift given by the state.

II. Main Body

1. Before 1788: Historical Background — The Dreaming

Australian Aboriginal peoples represent one of the world's oldest continuous living cultures, dating back at least 65,000 years. At the heart of this cultural continuity is the idea of the Dreaming, the basic worldview that Aboriginal identity is based on. The Dreaming is neither a religion in the usual sense, nor a cosmic story that is just about explaining human beginnings. Rather, it is a total system of narratives that accounts for all

aspects of Aboriginal life and culture. These are stories of how ancestral beings created the universe and everything in it – the mountains, the rivers, the animals and human beings. They also outline the normative principles of social structure, codify the rules to be followed, and prescribe the kinds of respect towards the natural environment that are required to sustain a long-term relationship with it. Passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next, these stories contain important knowledge about the world and how it works. As W.E.H. Stanner (1979) claimed, the Dreaming is a moral and cosmological system that regulates social connections, law and human commitment to land, going beyond myth to shape the practical organisation of existence.

Aboriginal communities were built upon intricate social structures and large trading networks which were the basis of their social organisation prior to the arrival of European colonisers. There was a widespread system of trading throughout the Australian continent, which facilitated the movement of key products such as ochre (used in artistic practices), tools, and weapons needed to support a hunter-gatherer economy. Social tasks were shared among individuals in each tribe; women were typically involved in collecting, while men were the primary hunters. Most striking of all was the Aboriginal reverence for ecological balance that persisted in lifeways. Mobility patterns were seasonal, allowing groups to make the most of available food and water supplies, while giving ecosystems enough time to recover before the next hunting cycles. This method limited human damage to the ecosystem and allowed for a long-term coexistence with the land for thousands of years. The practice of controlled burning is more evidence of environmental care. The intentional and planned use of fire encouraged new plant development and helped sustain the health of local ecosystems throughout time. Aboriginal cultures created unique technologies, such as finely ground stone implements for hunting, and maintained habits that ensured ecological replenishment following resource extraction.

Another unique and important element of Aboriginal culture is Aboriginal art. The artistic work often represents Dreaming stories or the ongoing relationship of Aboriginal peoples to the land they live on. The oldest known example of Aboriginal art is a massive rock painting of a kangaroo, with a history of more than 14,000 years, in Western Australia's Kimberley region. Ochre is a natural pigment made from powdered clay and varies in colour from red to brown. It has traditionally been used in Aboriginal art. Different parts of the country have different kinds of art. For example, in the deserts of Western Australia, dot painting is the most popular style. In dot painting, you use lots of small dots to make a picture. In northern Australia, bark painting is the most popular style, especially in the area of Arnhem Land. In sum, these varied artistic traditions stand

as a testament to the cultural diversity of Aboriginal tribes, while remaining grounded in a shared cosmological and relational context. Art has served not only as a vehicle for aesthetic expression but also as an educational tool for the transmission of cultural information and the reinforcement of communal identity among Aboriginal peoples, thereby sustaining reverence for both land and ancestors.

European settlers arrived in the 1700s, shattered this culture, and began a period of destruction, as colonisers, supported by simplistic supremacist ideas such as "Terra Nullius," launched campaigns to violently impose their own culture and values upon what they perceived to be the uncivilised and senseless barbarism of Aboriginal peoples. What followed was a history of warfare, killings and forced dislocation, and the introduction of catastrophic colonial illnesses such as smallpox, which decimated the Aboriginal population, along with their established social systems and collective culture. The Aboriginal population declined from about 750,000 to 93,000 by 1900. Some populations in Tasmania were wiped out, and the cultural roots and generational memories of Aboriginal languages, cultures and ways of life were replaced with Western ones. Policies of assimilation such as the violent kidnapping of the "Stolen Generations" from their families from 1910 to 1970 destroyed those roots. This led to the rapid replacement of Aboriginal traditions with colonial institutions that were vehemently opposed to Aboriginal rights and customs and fervently upheld white supremacy and colonialism, continuing the violence and injustices against Aboriginal peoples that persist today despite significant civil rights reform (Axelsson et al., 2016; Libesman, 2019).

2. 1788–1900: The Colonial Process and Its Negative Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

2.1 Direct Violence

This article theorises the Australian colonisation of Indigenous peoples not as a strictly chronological history but as a multidimensional system of violence. In this sense colonialism is not to be regarded as a solitary type of oppression, but rather as a composite mechanism in which direct, structural and epistemic violence intersect. Collectively, these forces promoted and supported the systematic oppression of Indigenous social institutions, cultural identities and knowledge systems.

The initial stage of colonialism was marked by a huge degree of direct violence. Galtung (1996) argues that the main characteristics of "direct violence" are the visibility of the offender and the purpose of the act. State

violence is systemic coercion by which a government or power structure imposes oppression. This involves both overt, illegal violence (such as torture or mass repression) and institutionally sanctioned activities (such as police brutality or political persecution). The British colonial administration, through the state machinery, conducted a series of activities that formed a model of clear, direct violence throughout the early phases of Australian colonisation. Most of the violence was in the form of direct bodily harm and massacre. The "intentionality" of these actions is clear, whether it was Governor Phillip's order to attack an Indigenous encampment near Sydney in 1790, or the indiscriminate machine-gunning of women and children hiding in caves during the "Mountain Patrol" under Governor Macquarie in 1816. These actions sought to establish colonial order through extreme physical destruction. One example of this is the Myall Creek Massacre of 1838, in which 28 Wirrayaraay people, including women and children, were roped together and hacked to death. Communities were driven off their land under threat of death to make way for settlements and disease wiped out over 90 percent of some Aboriginal nations within a couple of decades, resulting in a complete demographic collapse. This is the most brutal physical form of direct violence. Historian Lyndall Ryan's research attests to the extent of this violence, with a minimum of 270 frontier massacres reducing the Indigenous population from approximately one million to less than 100,000 by the early twentieth century (Ryan, 2022; see also Libesman, 2019).

The colonial government thus reconstituted direct violence as a type of systematic coercion, masked by a "veneer of legitimacy." According to Galtung (1996), state-level direct violence is typically expressed as institutionally sanctioned violent actions through the operation of the judiciary, policing and social control institutions. The Queensland colonial government's Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1883 marked a change from random frontier violence to a more 'scientised' type of racial administration. The Act empowered police to forcibly relocate Aboriginal people onto reserves, and gave the state vast powers over the lives of Aboriginal people and so-called 'half-castes,' a contemporary term for people of mixed descent, and used addiction discourses to legitimise coercive reproductive control. Colonists also used Enclosure Acts to turn Indigenous holy areas into pastoral runs. In New South Wales, 45% of Indigenous land was taken over in one decade alone. Not only did the colonisers medically decimate the Indigenous population through programs of systemic sterilisation and territorial expropriation, but they also tacitly sanctioned this "legitimate" persecution at the judicial level (Libesman, 2019).

Finally, this direct violence was self-perpetuating and cyclical (Galtung, 1996). Through the violent destruction of the Tasmanian Indigenous community and the use of drug addiction as a means of social control, violence was no longer an isolated event of bloodshed but had become a state-driven necessity to "end the bloodline". This brutal operation, grounded in entrenched power systems, resulted in widespread displacement and the core destruction of Indigenous social structures, leaving behind persistent intergenerational trauma.

In short, the history of Australian colonisation is not only a history of territorial expansion, but an evolutionary history of violence. It is a history that includes extreme forms of direct violence, intended for the ultimate physical and biological obliteration of a certain ethnic group.

2.2 Structural Violence

Structural violence is covert and gradual in its operation, but its destructive impact is vast, in contrast to direct violence which is very clear and forceful in its intention to cause harm. Structural violence concretely manifested throughout the history of colonisation in Australia via institutional systems. This section explores the deconstruction and contestation of the structural violence of the White Australia Policy and assimilation strategies through a contextual study of the historical realities and the Indigenous fiction Carpentaria.

Galtung (1996) contends that structural violence is not perpetrated by exterior tools but by four covert mechanisms: penetration, segmentation, marginalisation and fragmentation.

Galtung (1996) first considers marginalisation and fragmentation, stating that marginalisation directly excludes subordinate groups from mainstream society. These strategies, when connected to fragmentation, isolate the disadvantaged from each other, seriously impairing their ability to generate cohesive opposition.

The White Australia Policy is precisely the macro-institutional framework which established this system of inequality in Australian history. The Immigration Restriction Act, enacted at the birth of the Federation in 1901, served as the legal foundation of this policy. The White Australia Policy did not outright erase Indigenous peoples but through certain institutional arrangements systematically consigned them to the margins of the social order. For a long time, it constructed a national order that made white people the default demographic and officially reduced Indigenous groups to objects of control, rather than political subjects. Moreover, the denial of citizenship rights, inclusion in national census and welfare systems deprived

Indigenous peoples of formal status in the state structure and hence precluded their participation in resource allocation and policy-making (Libesman, 2019).

According to Galtung (1969), the onset of structural violence is marked by an unequal allocation of social values. The lack of educational resources on reserves, which was deeply embedded in white norms, limited the ability of Indigenous peoples to assimilate into mainstream culture. Furthermore, the absence of health services added to health inequalities. The labour system was also characterised by pay limits and occupational prohibitions, which prevented Indigenous communities from participating in the process of capital accumulation. Together, these forces locked Indigenous peoples into a social position of low income and poor mobility.

Political institutions cemented this subaltern status. For a long time, Indigenous peoples had no meaningful representation. The bureaucratic system directly intervened in vital spheres of their lives: residency, marriage and work. Policy-making was utterly dominated by non-Indigenous actors. This arrangement both co-opted Indigenous people into the administration of the state and denied them access to real authority, producing a definitive state of 'being determined' by forces outside of themselves.

Similarly, the physical segregation of the town of Desperance in the novel Carpentaria materialises this systemic exclusion. The town is separated firmly between Uptown and the Downs. As the seat of power, Uptown is the "civilized system" as described by the colonisers, while the Indigenous characteristics are locked in the margins. This physical stratification is an example of the systemic unequal distribution of values—resources, dignity, and legitimacy are concentrated in Uptown and hence inflict unseen structural violence on the residents of the Downs.

Secondly, with reference to the methods of penetration and segmentation, Galtung (1996) describes penetration as the top-down internalisation of the dominant group's ideologies by the subordinate group. These factors work in concert and guarantee that the marginalised may only partially see the reality of their oppression. The Aborigines Protection Act, followed by assimilation efforts, embedded state authority in the very fabric of Indigenous peoples' everyday lives from the early 20th century until the 1970s through institutional norms that operationalised the "penetration" of structural violence. This approach was not achieved by overt force alone, but via the ongoing imposition of one particular value system, which led Indigenous peoples to internalise white values incrementally.

The key to penetration is its de-exceptionalization (or invisibilization of the exercise of power). The state no longer relies exclusively on physical violence to exercise its control, but, through seemingly neutral institutional frameworks, ensures that individuals reproduce the dominant social order unconsciously. The education system was the principal vehicle for this strategy and curricula, language and behavioural norms were assessed solely against white society. Indigenous children were thus trained as subjects alienated from their own cultures. Standards of family and child-rearing were also renegotiated, and the only legitimate form of domestic life became white standards. These techniques succeeded in transforming power into 'common sense'. The style of control was transformed from external enforcement to internal self-discipline.

At the same time, the method of segmentation (separation) was directed at social kinship networks. Children were systematically removed from their families and communities, breaking their family ties, their language legacy, and their connection to the land – causing a rupture that was both physical and social. It was a deliberate attack not only on the individual but also on the reproductive systems of the collective. When children are denied the right to grow up in their own community, the intergenerational transmission of culture, traditional knowledge and identity is effectively stopped (Berry, 1999; Libesman, 2019).

In this sense, penetration and segmentation form a closed loop. Segmentation creates the conditions by alienating the individual from the original cultural milieu. Penetration fills the hole by replacing Indigenous cognition with the dominant culture. The result is not just a single layer of repression, but a fundamental reorganisation of the group's way of being. However, in the context of Moreton-Robinson's (2015) white possessive, these mechanisms follow their own structural logic. The system deconstructs the social and cognitive bases of Indigenous peoples so that they are unable to retain an independent subjectivity and cannot mount effective collective resistance (Berry, 1999).

Galtung (1969) emphasises that an actor may be in a lower stratum in one system and yet at the same time seek better status in another. The novel Carpentaria demonstrates how the loss of self-identity that results from the blind adoption of colonial ideas provides a profound illustration of the micro-level operation of structural violence inside the community. In Uptown, the seat of authority, there is a pronounced inclination to "whiten" among the people. Uptown Indigenous families go to considerable measures to emulate white lives, attire, home design, and even accents, seeking to acquire acceptability within the colonial framework and recognition and upward mobility. These occupants severed their customary connections with the "Pricklebush" people, whether voluntarily or not. They abandoned their Songlines and Lore entirely, in search of integration.

The procedure is precisely the technique of penetration: the concept of cultural superiority of the coloniser is effectively imposed on Indigenous people. Also, by means of segmentation, Uptown Indigenous people come to see themselves through the colonial lens, despising those who follow custom or live in poverty, calling them “uncivilized” and therefore becoming detached agents of the very institutional violence that oppresses them.

Structural violence is very destructive. The worst tragedy of structural violence is that the victim ends up internalising the logic of the oppressor. This psychological estrangement is directly related to the theory of mimicry. Indigenous people try to get authority by mimicking the coloniser, but mimicry is "almost the same, but not quite" in the face of systemic violence that has been repeated so many times (Bhabha, 2004). They can never be completely accepted in the white world because of the unalterable marks of ancestry and skin colour; at the same time, the cutting of traditional links leaves them without a cultural base. In the end, this suspended state of identification makes them an alienated group, one that is neither part of the white world nor traditional Indigenous society, and hence experiences a situation of double exclusion.

In summary, the coloniser, using the hidden channels of structural violence, systematically broke down Indigenous cultural identity and ethnic solidarity, creating a tight loop from bodily discipline to spiritual colonisation.

2.3 Epistemic Violence

The discursive dimension functions inside a framework of violence that does not rely on direct physical force, through a monopoly on epistemic legitimacy. This deprivation is rooted in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) terms epistemic violence, a process whereby dominant discursive systems define “what constitutes knowledge” and systematically erase the cognitive modalities of marginalised groups, making them unintelligible and unrecognisable as speaking subjects. By this kind of discursive hegemony, Indigenous knowledge systems are rendered non-knowledge, thereby producing a fundamental form of dispossession that is not only material but also ontological and epistemological.

This is the mechanism behind the marginalisation of Aboriginal viewpoints as it systematically promotes state-aligned, Western epistemologies as the only legitimate frame of reference, while devaluing Indigenous methods of knowing land, law, history and spirituality. As a result, Aboriginal knowledge systems are absent

from education, land management and policymaking contexts where mainstream paradigms that are at times at odds with Indigenous perspectives continue to inform decisions that affect Aboriginal communities and Country. Epistemologies such as the Dreaming and Songlines are regularly disregarded as myth rather than being understood as complex, place-based systems of knowledge developed through persistent contact with the natural world. Such dismissal legitimises judgements that brand Indigenous perspectives a priori as irrational or epistemically inferior.

This form of epistemic violence is well articulated in institutional terms in the Australian colonial context. Policies governing Indigenous peoples from the late nineteenth century onwards did not just impose spatial segregation, but rather implemented a systematic remaking of knowledge itself. Colonial authorities ordered the abandonment of Indigenous languages in favour of English through linguicide, and redefined family structures and child-rearing methods according to white ideals as the only valid standard. Here authority was naturalised as common sense, moving from overt coercion to internalised regulation. Michel Foucault (1980) suggests that regimes of truth operate by generating knowledge through discourse, and by eliminating forms that do not fit into hegemonic norms. This system prioritises colonial knowledge as objective truth, and dismisses Indigenous ontologies as superstition, offering epistemic justification for material dispossession.

The media is a contemporary extension of this discursive regime, fostering epistemic violence through selective representation and framing. The 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response portrayed Aboriginal communities as broken and in distress, marginalising or excluding Indigenous voices. This conceptualisation legitimised top-down interventions as necessary and sensible while marginalising community-led responses anchored in Indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, in the lead-up to the 2023 Australian Voice to Parliament vote, media coverage disproportionately highlighted non-Indigenous perspectives, reducing Indigenous arguments to decontextualised fragments and framing the issue in emotive rather than epistemological or historical terms. In both circumstances, the power to define reality was concentrated in dominant discourse, continuing to position Western epistemology as the normative standard (Esau et al., 2025).

This is further explored through literary representation in Carpentaria. The novel materialises epistemic violence in the contest between mining firms and Indigenous peoples over the meaning of land. Mining corporations are a type of discursive governance: they provide not only extractive technology but a whole epistemic machinery – geological mapping, economic valuation and legal ownership – that turns land into

measurable resources. This positivist approach reduces a relational landscape rich in narrative to commodified deposits, removing Indigenous ontologies contained in it.

The character Norm Phantom is an example of the subjective impacts of epistemic violence. His apparent quietness or eccentricity is not a sign of ignorance but an indication that his epistemic frame is incommensurable with hegemonic discourse. His knowledge of winds, seasonal signs and spiritual relations has no exchange value in colonial organisations, and thus is made nonsensical. His utterance is recorded as "noise" and hence his subjectivity is lost structurally. This echoes Spivak's (1988) claim that it cannot be said that the subaltern is voiceless, but that their voice cannot be heard in the dominant discursive order.

The notion of Terra Nullius is a historical example of this process on the level of legal language, in which Indigenous peoples were declared to be functionally non-existent, as their relationship to land was denied validity. The Native Title Act 1993 was a step in the right direction, but Indigenous claimants still have to fight through colonial legal systems that require written records and fixed territorial boundaries to prove their land rights. Indigenous knowledge systems, as seen in Carpentaria, are still generally left out of what counts as credible legal evidence, thereby perpetuating epistemic hierarchies (Libesman, 2019).

This structure is further elucidated via the mechanism of Otherness as theorised by Edward Said (1994). In contrast to reason and modernity, Indigenous peoples are constituted as the epistemic Other, and their knowledge is treated as intrinsically irrational and incommensurable. This duality allows the colonising subject to assert its own epistemic primacy, making its own knowledge system universal and impartial. Even when Indigenous subjects speak out, their positions are not accepted as valid inside the dominant paradigm.

The effects of epistemic violence are multifaceted. The silencing of Indigenous languages denies the linguistic transfer of knowledge. The non-recognition of Indigenous epistemologies in legal and commercial fields creates a structural disadvantage in land rights and resource control. At the level of subjectivity, internalisation of dominant epistemic norms can result in cognitive dissonance and fragmentation of identity, as Indigenous people may learn to see their own knowledge systems as inferior.

Epistemic violence is then a key tool of structural power. It reproduces asymmetries without recourse to overt force by defining what counts as knowledge and who is permitted to talk. A consistent logic emerges through colonial policy, media discourse and literary representation: by monopolising epistemic legitimacy,

Indigenous peoples are displaced from being subjects of knowledge to being objects of interpretation, constraining the conditions of their political, cultural and material existence.

3. 1970 to Present: The Decolonization Process and Its Limitations

Since the 1970s, Australia has attempted a series of key changes in a slow process of decolonisation to address the ongoing legacies of colonial dispossession. However, beneath the surface of evolving legal and symbolic acknowledgement, persistent structural impediments still prevent the attainment of genuine Indigenous self-determination. Consequently, Australia's decolonisation trajectory is marked by a complicated coexistence of formal acknowledgement and structural limitation (Venne & Watson, 2007).

In the domain of land rights, the Mabo decision was a significant judicial turning point, rejecting the legal fiction of terra nullius and publicly establishing Indigenous land rights for the first time. Still, there are significant barriers to turning these formal acknowledgements into real self-determination. Native title, as institutionalised within the Australian legal system, is essentially integrated inside a Western framework of property law, thereby creating a conditional kind of legitimacy. The legal requirement that Indigenous claimants prove a "continuous and uninterrupted" connection to land creates an inherent evidentiary paradox: it was colonial policies of forced removal that were themselves the primary cause of such disruptions, yet the contemporary legal framework treats this discontinuity as grounds for denying claims. In addition, lands alienated to private ownership, pastoral leases or mining concessions are often not subject to restitution. Given that the bulk of land in Australia is privately owned, complete land restitution is structurally unachievable. In most situations, Indigenous groups are given limited usage rights, not outright ownership or development control, which reduces the material value of land rights and closes off avenues for economic autonomy following colonial expropriation (Libesman, 2019).

In the sphere of cultural governance and knowledge production, the limits of recognition-based frameworks are inherent to the context of cultural governance and knowledge creation, which often hinder decolonising work. The inclusion of Indigenous stories in school curricula may have raised attention and understanding, but in reality such efforts often reduce complex epistemological systems to symbolic cultural representations. A conspicuous empirical illustration may be found in the commodification of Indigenous cultural forms – such as Dot Painting and totemic iconography – in Australia's tourist and creative industries. Mainstream markets

often dislocate these artistic manifestations from their deeper connotations with The Dreaming and Indigenous ecological governance systems, recontextualising them as objects of visual consumption (Museums & Galleries of NSW, 2016). This epistemic reduction reduces Indigenous knowledge to a static and historically restricted object, rather than understanding it as a dynamic and authoritative intellectual system. Fraser (2000) observes that the restriction of recognition to cultural identity, without tackling the underlying disparities in the distribution of resources, risks creating a mismatch that can exacerbate intra-group marginalisation and social fragmentation.

The defeat of the Voice to Parliament referendum illustrates the disconnection between formal political involvement and genuine representational power. This result shows the assimilative and filtering impacts of current discursive processes on heterogeneous political statements. As Povinelli (2002) observes, Indigenous demands are translated by settler-state legal and media institutions through preloaded liberal frameworks, arbitrarily omitting assertions that threaten to destabilise core ideas of state sovereignty. The referendum, for its part, witnessed Indigenous requests for institutionalised voice reframed in mainstream discourse as threats to civic equality or national unity. This interpretive process produced a form of structural silencing, as theorised by Spivak (1988), in which Indigenous voices became inaudible within existing systems of meaning. This illustrates that the achievement of genuine political rights requires the destruction of systemic inequities that continue to affect Indigenous populations. In the absence of such change, all concessions are superficial, incomplete and materially ineffectual (Esau et al., 2025).

4. Future Possible Pathways

Since the 1970s, Australia has undergone a series of decolonising reforms in legal, cultural and political spheres. Yet, as the preceding analysis has shown, these reforms have generally been restricted to institutional alteration and symbolic acknowledgement, without truly addressing the inherent power relations and distributive inequities inherited from colonial regimes. Land rights are still affected by the limitations of state sovereignty and private property, cultural recognition is often reduced to symbolic multicultural participation and mechanisms of political participation still lack meaningful influence due to persistent structural imbalances of power. This suggests that for Australia to continue to progress reconciliation and decolonisation, it must move beyond legal recognition and identity-based inclusion to deeper institutional transformation that can address structural disparities that are the product of colonial legacies.

Land continues to be one of the most significant and contentious topics in Australia's colonial history, as the spread of settler colonialism was fundamentally premised upon the systematic removal of Indigenous peoples from their land. The rebuilding of land justice must therefore be central to the process of decolonisation and reconciliation. The Mabo decision and the subsequent Native Title Act recognised Indigenous land rights on a legal level, but the existing framework remains within the sovereignty of the colonial state and continues to oppress Indigenous sovereignty structurally. What is admitted is a restricted right of use under the authority of the state, not full political or economic independence (Libesman, 2019).

One important avenue for future reform is to lower the evidentiary burden for Indigenous land and sovereignty claims. The current process for Native Title applications is heavily reliant on documentary evidence, historical archives and judicial assessment of continuity of cultural practice, a framework based on Western standards of evidence and one that does not adequately consider how colonial violence has disrupted Indigenous social and cultural continuity. Thus, the legal procedure itself becomes a re-enactment of colonial trauma, as Indigenous groups are required to demonstrate an unbroken historical connection. Future legal reform could therefore ease evidentiary hurdles by bringing colonial historical context into judicial reasoning, substituting rigid evidence requirements with presumptions of customary continuity to alleviate the structural constraints imposed upon Indigenous claimants (Libesman, 2019).

Furthermore, the state should introduce more extensive compensation measures where traditional lands cannot be reclaimed due to historical development, private ownership or resource extraction. Such compensation must not be limited to one-off financial payments but should also involve alternate land allocations, long-term resource-sharing arrangements and co-management rights. Indigenous peoples in mining- and pastoral-dominant regions have disproportionately suffered the environmental and cultural costs of land exploitation and have received little share of the economic rewards. In order for decolonisation to restore meaningful Indigenous autonomy, compensation systems must go beyond symbolic restitution and progress toward a transfer of control over resources and economic development.

More generally, land reform must not be restricted to the adjustment of property relations but must include fresh talks about Indigenous sovereignty. For a long time, Australia's legal system has failed to accept Indigenous sovereignty as autonomous. Instead, Indigenous land rights are seen as derived rights subject to state sovereignty. But this institutional arrangement essentially avoids confronting the legitimacy of the settler-colonial state itself. For reconciliation to go deeper, Australia will need to move incrementally towards

formal recognition of Indigenous peoples as prior political communities with sovereign status, and to consider treaty-making processes or shared governance arrangements that can overcome the limitations of a single state-sovereignty framework (Libesman, 2019; Venne & Watson, 2007).

Another key barrier to deepening decolonisation in Australia, aside from land, is the absence of genuine political representation. The 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum failed, showing that Australian society is still rife with uncertainty and disagreement about power-sharing, and, at the same time, that symbolic political recognition is not enough to address structural inequity. The Voice plan, which aimed to institutionalise Indigenous participation in legislative processes through an advisory body, was rejected, evidencing continued hostility from the Australian public and political system towards structural Indigenous empowerment.

From an institutional standpoint, the referendum's failure stemmed partly from the ambiguity of the proposal itself. The actual functions, powers and operational bounds of the Voice were not fully articulated, making it impossible for the public to form a clear picture and fuelling worries over institutional ambiguity. In democratic systems mainly based on referenda, complex and abstract proposals for institutional changes tend to have difficulty in garnering wide public support. Also, the media narrative was very important during the referendum campaign. Conservative media and political actors often depicted the Voice as a way of conferring special rights on one group, or even as a threat to democratic equality and national unity. Such framing practices fed worries about identity politics and distracted from the underlying inequities that Indigenous communities experience (Esau et al., 2025).

The referendum's loss also revealed wider gaps in the Australian public's awareness of Indigenous concerns. Many voters were not sufficiently aware of Indigenous historical circumstances, structural marginalisation and the necessity of institutional reform, and political discourse consequently remained limited to abstract notions of formal equality and ignored the need for differentiated institutional arrangements to attain substantive fairness. Moreover, Australia's wider constraints on the embrace of cultural pluralism have produced opposition among parts of the population to notions of shared sovereignty and plural governance, thereby limiting the political space for institutional innovation.

The future of political change should therefore aim to re-establish institutional structures for Indigenous representation, learning from the referendum's failure. Because of the high political bar for constitutional change, a more feasible alternative would be to create an Indigenous advisory organisation that is not constitutional but is legally protected by ordinary legislation. This approach would remove implementation

obstacles and sidestep the political stalemate of another national referendum. At the same time, the scope of local Indigenous governance should be expanded by strengthening Indigenous councils, community boards, and Elders Councils, which will enable Indigenous communities to have greater direct decision-making authority in such areas as land management, allocation of public resources, education, and cultural matters.

The longer-term goal of Indigenous political representation is not only to provide more space for Indigenous views to be heard but to fundamentally transform the power relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. If Indigenous participation is limited to advisory, consultative, or subordinate roles, political empowerment will be limited to the limits of symbolic acknowledgement. Institutional design for the future must therefore transcend consultative participation and progressively endow Indigenous communities with more binding, autonomous governing powers, transforming them from policy recipients into institutional co-creators and thus realising genuine political subjecthood in the context of decolonisation.

Beyond policy, art exhibitions have a role in Australia's decolonisation process that goes beyond aesthetics, offering a significant venue for Indigenous cultural expression and transmission of knowledge. They do more than simply display artworks; they help restore the visibility of Indigenous culture in public spaces and reinsert long-marginalised Indigenous epistemologies into national narratives and public consciousness. As Morphy (2001) argues, incorporating Indigenous art in mainstream galleries is not merely about including artworks in exhibition spaces but redefining Western notions of "art" and revaluing Indigenous cultural significance (Langton, 1994).

First, art exhibitions can help raise general awareness of cultural diversity. According to Morphy (2001), audiences who consume Indigenous art only as aesthetic objects, without taking into account its historical, social and mythical settings, diminish its interpretation. Morphy (2001) also states that the more people grasp the broader socio-cultural settings behind Indigenous artworks, the more they appreciate them. Thus exhibitions are not merely sites of display but also educational platforms, where contextualisation is used to communicate the Dreaming, Indigenous land philosophies and ecological governance systems embedded within the works, challenging long-standing colonial stereotypes of Indigenous culture as primitive or static.

Second, art shows serve as a sort of cultural justice by providing Indigenous peoples with a public space to display and build their identities. Historically, Indigenous art was limited to ethnographic museums and considered anthropological artefacts rather than valid artistic traditions. As Morphy (2001) points out, the inclusion of Indigenous art in mainstream Australian galleries at the end of the twentieth century changed its

status from that of ethnographic object to recognised fine art, greatly increasing the legitimacy and visibility of Indigenous culture in domestic and international public discourse. In this context, Indigenous artists were recognised as knowledge creators rather than objects of observation, giving Indigenous communities the possibility to create and express cultural identity on their own terms (Langton, 1994).

In addition, international exhibitions have broadened the global diffusion of Indigenous culture. Morphy (2001) refers to the 1988-89 Dreamings show, which took Indigenous art to international audiences and, in its exhibition catalogue, expressly located Indigenous perspectives at the centre rather than reading works via Western aesthetic frameworks alone. This shows that exhibitions have become a significant channel for Indigenous peoples to participate in global cultural discourse and seek international cultural recognition, to take their cultural expression beyond domestic bounds into a transnational public sphere.

However, Morphy (2001) also warns that exhibitions that focus entirely upon aesthetic appreciation, and lack proper contextualisation, risk depoliticising and commodifying Indigenous art, reducing it to decontextualised visual consumption. Therefore, future development of Indigenous exhibitions should focus on contextual curation using historical framing, narrative interpretation and Indigenous-led exhibition design. It is important to ensure exhibitions continue to be platforms for cultural preservation and knowledge protection, not new forms of cultural appropriation (Langton, 1994).

In the context of developing digital communication environments, new media has also emerged as an increasingly significant medium through which Indigenous peoples pursue political voice, legal rights and popular support. Unlike traditional media, which have historically been controlled by mainstream institutions and have often presented Indigenous issues in a stereotypical or problem-oriented way, digital platforms reduce communication barriers and provide Indigenous communities with increased direct access to public audiences. This allows Indigenous peoples to avoid the gatekeeping of mainstream media, create self-determined narratives and connect directly with the public. Indigenous peoples are actively using media to represent themselves and to develop community, creating an “Indigenous public sphere” outside of mainstream public discourse (McCallum et al., 2012).

First, new media platforms provide easily accessible channels of cultural diffusion and identity construction. Indigenous artists can use platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Twitter/X to share art, language, ceremony and everyday cultural practices directly, allowing cultural transmission to go beyond geographical and institutional boundaries and reach wider domestic and international audiences. These venues raise the

visibility of Indigenous cultures and public knowledge of Indigenous lived experiences, hence promoting greater intercultural awareness and inclusivity. With greater institutional assistance, such as platform verification mechanisms, cultural recommendation algorithms, or regulations promoting Indigenous content, digital spaces could become vital infrastructure for cultural preservation and transmission (McCallum et al., 2012).

Second, digital media has become an important political tool for Indigenous people in search of legal and legislative reform. Indigenous organisations often have little direct power within official political institutions and bureaucratic systems and therefore commonly use media channels to put pressure on policymakers and to mobilise public support. McCallum et al. (2012) explain that marginalised groups with limited institutional access often rely on media coverage and public pressure to place their concerns on the policy agenda. In the modern context, digital platforms serve this function by allowing Indigenous communities to rapidly create public discussion around land rights, environmental protection, police violence and resource distribution, raising issues that were previously marginalised and bringing them to the national agenda.

Digital media also boosts the organisational capacity and mobilisation effectiveness of Indigenous social movements, helping geographically distant groups build more cohesive political networks. As McCallum et al. (2012) note, Indigenous media networks have provided important places of community deliberation that allow Indigenous peoples to coordinate policy discourse and collective action. This "Indigenous public sphere" has grown and sped up in the digital age, helping Indigenous groups to mobilise petitions, campaigns, protests and grassroots activity more effectively. For example, McCallum et al. (2012) point out how Yolngu communities were able to use coordinated media methods to drive a bilingual education campaign which brought the issue into the public consciousness and stalled the government's attempts to end bilingual education policy. This suggests that media mobilisation not only increases public knowledge, but in some circumstances also directly affects policy results.

But the political potential of new media is constrained. McCallum et al. (2012) warn that while Indigenous voices may gain entry into media contexts, they are not immune to the logic of mainstream media and platform visibility mechanisms, and hence not all views are heard equally. Algorithmic prejudice, commercial platform logic and ideological polarisation may continue to marginalise, fragment or trivialise Indigenous issues. Digital channels thereby amplify possibilities for Indigenous expression, but do not in themselves remedy underlying power asymmetries. To fully realise the decolonising potential of digital media, future

reform must also consider platform governance, digital resource allocation and Indigenous media sovereignty to prevent digital spaces from perpetuating existing inequities.

Indigenous cultural preservation and public education are also served by literature and movies. Narrative cultural products can embed Indigenous experiences more deeply into public consciousness than static visual displays, through characterisation, historical storytelling and emotional engagement, and thus have sustained influence upon cultural representation, identity construction and social education. Literary texts such as Carpentaria and cinematic texts such as The Sapphires re-engage long-marginalised Indigenous experiences within the realm of mainstream discourse by narrating themes of historical trauma, gendered struggle and cultural identity, allowing audiences to understand the ongoing repercussions of colonial history through the lens of individual stories (Langton, 1994).

Thus, increased institutional support is required for Indigenous cultural creation, to ensure that Indigenous communities maintain the potential for self-narration and knowledge production. Historically, depictions of Indigenous peoples were predominantly created by non-Indigenous actors, which resulted in representations that were simplified, romanticised or stigmatised. As Langton (1994) has noted, colonial society has long reproduced stereotypes through the discursive saturation of incorrect and unpleasant images of Aboriginality in Australian visual culture. Thus, broadening Indigenous involvement in literature, cinema and media sectors is not simply an issue of cultural diversity, but a necessary corrective to historical monopolies over narrative production. Governments and non-governmental organisations should provide Indigenous creative funds, scholarships and awards to encourage Indigenous writers, filmmakers and artists and reduce institutional impediments to cultural output.

International transmission of Indigenous literature and movies can expand global visibility and promote cross-cultural understanding. In a time of globalisation and streaming platforms, cultural products are crossing national borders and influencing impressions of other countries more than ever. Indigenous art, music and film are finding increased access to Australian and international markets, and this is indicative of the expanding cultural value of the arts outside local communities (Langton, 1994). The greater dissemination of Indigenous cultural products through outlets such as Netflix and Disney+ would enable wider access by international audiences to Indigenous histories and perspectives, reducing the overall international ignorance of Indigenous Australian realities and reinforcing Indigenous legitimacy in local conversations with global recognition.

Above all, literature and movies possess capacities for social, educational and political engagement that go beyond amusement. Cultural representation is a powerful factor in shaping not only aesthetic perception but also the way society defines identity and historical justice. As Langton (1994) underlines, representation is itself political, and visual and narrative media can replicate colonial prejudice or be used as vehicles of cultural reform. When Indigenous makers tell their own stories through cultural items, these products are not only artistic expressions but also challenges to prevailing historical narratives and racial prejudices. Literature and film can help to dismantle reductive portrayals of Indigenous peoples as primitive, dependent or social issues by showing nuanced, multidimensional and agentic Indigenous identities and thus enabling society to view Indigenous peoples as modern political and cultural subjects.

But the transformative potential of cultural production is not automatic. Indigenous works are subject to the danger of being compromised in their critical and cultural authenticity if they are absorbed into market consumption logics or forced to conform to prevailing aesthetic and economic standards. Future institutional support should therefore not be limited to increasing output but should also safeguard Indigenous narrative autonomy at each stage of the creation, production and dissemination processes, so that cultural products are not subsumed by mainstream capitalist consumption but instead continue to serve as tools of historical reinterpretation, cultural dissemination and political expression (Langton, 1994).

The education system is a significant instrument for the reproduction of structural inequalities within the broader decolonising process in Australia. Although current reforms have introduced frameworks such as multicultural education and inclusive curricula, the system is still fundamentally anchored on an epistemic hierarchy based on Western knowledge. Indigenous knowledge systems are often marginalised as ancillary or symbolic knowledge rather than regarded as having equal explanatory ability. As Nakata et al. (2012) argue, curriculum design and knowledge structures within Australian higher education are themselves the product of political choice and they reflect and reproduce existing power relations and hierarchies of knowledge.

More fundamentally, the decolonisation of education is not about the integration of Indigenous content but about the restoration of the basis of knowledge production and legitimacy. The present system tends to treat Western knowledge as “neutral” and “universal”, making its assumptions invisible and taken for granted, while other knowledge systems have to undergo further steps of validation. Nakata et al. (2012) suggest that colonial epistemology has been extensively internalised at the cognitive level when they note that non-Indigenous students frequently have difficulty moving beyond the naturalness and common-sense

authority of Western knowledge. Decolonising education, then, requires revealing the politicality of knowledge production and empowering students with the ability to critically grasp how different knowledge systems are authorised or marginalised within institutions of power.

Based on this, education reform should promote the idea of epistemic justice by recognising Indigenous Knowledge Systems as equally valid as Western science in describing the world and informing practice. For example, Indigenous land management strategies have been proven to be highly beneficial in areas such as bushfire management and ecological governance, demonstrating that Indigenous knowledge is not simply a relic of the past, but a dynamic system with contemporary applicability. Existing scholarship also stresses that decolonial theory seeks to challenge the hegemony of Western epistemology as the only standard of knowledge and to promote epistemic disobedience, a withdrawal from unitary epistemic paradigms to plural and interactive knowledge systems (Fleuri & Fleuri, 2018; Nakata et al., 2012).

The Brazilian experience, in this sense, provides an important comparative lens on the institutional possibilities of decolonising education. Brazil formally acknowledged the cultural richness of Indigenous education and promoted the principle of bilingual and intercultural education through the 1988 Constitution and subsequent educational reforms. This approach allows Indigenous education to operate beyond a single national cultural logic and provides a partial institutional recognition of epistemological plurality (Fleuri & Fleuri, 2018).

There are many ways in which decolonisation of education might be approached at the level of practical implementation. First, Indigenous histories and the processes of colonisation should be included in the core national curriculum rather than being assigned marginal or elective status, ensuring that all students develop a systematic understanding of the historical foundations of structural inequality in Australian society. Secondly, Indigenous scholars' teaching materials should be prioritised to reduce the risk of distortion and misrepresentation in the process of knowledge transmission. According to Nakata et al. (2012), Indigenous knowledge is often simplified, romanticised or misused when it is taken up without proper contextual understanding, which diminishes its theoretical depth and practical importance.

Moreover, institutions of higher learning should build Indigenous research centres and interdisciplinary platforms to enable Indigenous leadership in the production of knowledge and to advance the decolonisation of academic discourse. This is not just about reforming the curriculum but about the basic issue of who has the right to determine what knowledge is, how to interpret history and how to build theory. As previous

scholarship has noted, “education is situated at the crossroads of knowledge politics and the politics of self-determination,” and education reform directly affects Indigenous peoples’ ability to exercise epistemic and political agency.

The organisation of the education system also influences not only the production of knowledge but also the political attitudes of the public and the making of decisions. Baum and Mitchell’s empirical research (2025) into the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum shows a strong correlation between education and voting behaviour. Those with lower levels of education were more likely to vote against the proposal, while those with higher levels of education were significantly more likely to support the proposal. The study also revealed that communities with greater cultural diversity exhibited increased support for the Voice, indicating a clear connection between intercultural awareness and the acceptance of Indigenous authority.

This means that, if there is insufficient education about cross-cultural understanding and historical structural analysis, public reasoning will be confined within a framework of formal equality, limiting the ability to recognise the need for different institutional arrangements to achieve substantive justice. In other words, where education does not effectively articulate the historical contexts and structural features of Indigenous marginalisation, legislative actions are more likely to be misconstrued as giving ‘special rights’ rather than as corrective measures responding to historical injustice.

The decolonisation of education is therefore not only a matter of increasing cultural content but is also intrinsically tied to the quality of democratic decision-making and the forging of social agreement. The only way society can establish the epistemic basis necessary for a structurally informed engagement with institutional transformation is through a systematic deepening of education on Indigenous histories, colonial systems, and cultural plurality. In this view, educational transformation should not be considered as a supplemental element of decolonisation but as one of its fundamental preconditions.

5. Conclusion

The paper discusses the problem of Indigenous Australians via a three-part analytical framework (historical, structural and discursive) to explain how colonial regimes have produced and perpetuated oppression and inequality across a number of dimensions. It starts with an investigation of the pre-1788 social environment, where Indigenous communities were guided by the Dreaming, a broad system of land, law, ethics and

knowledge. The arrival of colonial powers not only ruptured this continuity but also radically altered existing power systems through violence as well as institutional transformation.

Early killings, forced displacement and land confiscation immediately destroyed Indigenous livelihoods at the level of direct violence. At the level of structural violence, state-led processes such as the White Australia Policy, assimilation policies and the Stolen Generations systematically restricted Indigenous peoples' access to resources and social rights through legal and institutional means. At the epistemic level, colonial rhetoric was embedded in education systems, media narratives and scientific frameworks, which devalued Indigenous knowledge systems as ‘non-knowledge’ and stripped them of legitimacy in processes of meaning-making. These three types of violence are mutually reinforcing, creating a multi-layered structure of dominance that functions not only materially but also through cultural identity and subject development (Axelsson et al., 2016; Libesman, 2019).

In further developing this argument, the paper uses literary interpretation to demonstrate how colonial power is maintained not only by external imposition but through internalised mechanisms inside Indigenous communities. In Carpentaria, the Uptown Indigenous community tries to mirror white cultural standards in the hope of gaining social recognition, but such mimicry is always flawed, producing a suspended, alienated identity. These people cannot be fully accepted in the dominant society, nor can they cling to their cultural roots. At the same time, the colonial, utilitarian notion of land as a resource to be extracted is in direct contradiction to Indigenous land conceptualisations of the land as ancestral and living memory. This epistemological clash makes Indigenous viewpoints incoherent inside dominant knowledge systems, effectively suppressing them. This disparity is further strengthened by media and political discourse through the ongoing processes of othering and discursive management.

In analysing the process of decolonisation since the 1970s, the study acknowledges some significant events such as the 1967 Referendum and the 1992 Mabo decision, which represented partial legal recognition of Indigenous rights. However, these improvements remain considerably limited in practice. There are signs of cultural revival, but within restrictive discursive frameworks; legal constraints and existing patterns of land ownership limit the restoration of land rights; and attempts at political representation have met institutional and social barriers, as evidenced by the failure of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum. Thus, the existing reforms are essentially cosmetic and do not touch the underlying institutions of colonial power (Esau et al., 2025; Libesman, 2019).

The study contends that true decolonisation, based on this understanding, involves more than symbolic recognition and demands structural reform of land ownership, political power and knowledge systems. Regarding land, there is a need for more substantive processes for restoration and compensation to restore Indigenous authority over resources. Real transfer of power is only possible if representative institutions possess real political decision-making capacity. Reforms are required in media, arts and particularly education to increase the space for Indigenous knowledge and expression, culturally and discursively, to advance epistemic fairness. Decolonising education is particularly important because it questions the hegemony of Western epistemologies and allows Indigenous knowledge systems to function on an equal footing inside institutional frameworks.

In conclusion, Australia's contemporary decolonisation process is imperfect, with colonial power structures still present in institutional and discursive arenas. Without significant reform, inequality will be repeated in new forms. Australia's future as a fair and democratic country hinges on its willingness to see Aboriginal culture not as a relic of the past but as a significant source of wisdom that can play a big part in enhancing the country. The Dreaming offers not only a model for sustainable living but also an ethical foundation for a country currently coping with its colonial past. As long as Australia continues to deny the injustices on which it is built and refuses to dismantle the institutions that perpetuate those injustices, it will never be whole or truly at peace with its First Peoples. Ultimately, real reconciliation will depend on the extent to which structural reform is possible across systems of governance, knowledge and power (Venne & Watson, 2007).

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