

Article

# Interculturalism and Responsive Reflexivity in a Settler Colonial Context

Amanda Kearney 

College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Flinders University, Bedford Park SA 5042, Australia; amanda.kearney@flinders.edu.au

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**Abstract:** This article explores interculturalism in Australia, a nation marked by the impact of coloniality and deep colonising. Fostering interculturalism—as a form of empathic understanding and being in good relations with difference—across Indigenous and non-Indigenous lived experiences has proven difficult in Australia. This paper offers a scoping of existing discourse on interculturalism, asking firstly, ‘what is interculturalism’, that is, what is beyond the rhetoric and policy speak? The second commitment is to examine the pressures that stymie the articulation of interculturalism as a broad-based project, and lastly the article strives to highlight possibilities for interculturalism through consideration of empathic understandings of sustainable futures and land security in Australia. Legislative land rights and land activism arranged around solidarity movements for sustainable futures are taken up as the two sites of analysis. In the first instance, a case is made for legislative land rights as a form of coloniality that maintains the centrality of state power, and in the second, land activism, as expressed in the campaigns of Seed, Australia’s first Indigenous youth-led climate network and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, are identified as sites for plurality and as staging grounds for intercultural praxis.

**Keywords:** interculturalism; coloniality; deep colonising; empathy; Indigenous Australia; reflexivity

## 1. Introduction

This article explores interculturalism in the context of a settler colonial nation. In this instance the context is Australia, a nation marked by the prevailing impact of coloniality and deep colonising (Bradley and Seton 2005; Grosfoguel 2011; Marchetti 2006; Rose 1996). Grosfoguel (2007, 2011), taking the lead from Quijano (1993), conceptualizes coloniality as the entanglement of power, and the ‘coloniality of power’ as being “based in race and racism as the organizing principle that structures all of the multiple hierarchies of the world-system” (Quijano 1993). Coloniality is dependent upon deep colonising, a condition in which the process of conquest remains embedded within institutions and practices aimed at reversing the effects of colonisation, “where colonial authority can still define Indigenous reality through the creation of classes such as the haves and have nots” (Bradley and Seton 2005, p. 43). This is authority expressed through policy interventions, land rights law, and economic interventions in some, but not all Aboriginal lives, families and communities as distinctive cultural and social units set within and apart from the Australian white population (Bradley and Seton 2005, pp. 33, 43).

Fostering interculturalism, as a form of empathic understanding and bridging of cultural differences, across Indigenous and non-Indigenous lived experiences, amidst the conditions of structural inequality has proven difficult in Australia. This paper offers a preliminary scoping of existing discourse on interculturalism, asking firstly, what is interculturalism, that is, what is it beyond the rhetoric and policy speak? The second commitment is to examine the pressures that stymie the articulation of interculturalism as a broad-based project, and lastly the article strives to highlight

possibilities for intercultural praxis through consideration of empathic understandings of sustainable futures and land security.

Examining how interculturalism might support land related matters, such as ecological health and land security for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, within the context of coloniality, progresses the theme of intercultural health, whereby the health and well-being of those marginalised through the violence of settler colonialism and its structural legacy is taken seriously by the nation. The driving questions for this and current wider research are: how might White Australians begin to appreciate the need for land security as living justice among Aboriginal people, and how might collective action for sustainable futures articulate something of an intercultural commitment? It is proposed that intercultural commitments require the cultivation of reflexive responsibility, a move away from individualism, and greater empathic learning across cultural gaps. The expansion of care and concern over matters of land rights, and sustainable futures is treated as a moral commitment, a kind of practical, instrumentalist and educational expression and more expansive recognition of value. In the tense field of settler colonialism, cultural wounding (see [Kearney 2014](#)) and the failure to care, as an ethical retreat from the hardships or lived realities of others, form into a lack of care diffused across a range of perceptible and imperceptible habits. Yet if adjusted through a broader commitment to responsive reflexivity and empathy as a site of learning then new axiological habits, which support plurality and interculturalism may be cultivated.

## 2. Australia as a Settler Colony

Australia is a settler colony, brought into political and social reality in 1788, with British invasion. Predating and surviving this arrival, the nations that make up Aboriginal Australia include distinct ethnic groups that claim their ancestry along linguistic lines and associated bodies of knowledge and Law. It has been recorded that prior to the arrival of the British in 1788, there were approximately 250 distinct Indigenous languages mapping onto as many diverse ethnic groups ([McConvell and Thieberger 2001](#), p. 16; [Walsh and Yallop 2005](#)). Language groups were and are distinct in that they are linked to homelands and particular terrestrial and marine territories that are owned by the group and marked by the actions of specific ancestral beings. Through their linguistic specificity, they come to develop distinct patterns for defining the group and understanding its place in the world.

Genocide and other violent acts aimed at cultural wounding have resulted in the physical loss of entire populations and Indigenous nations ([Kearney 2014](#); [Roberts 2005](#); [Tatz 1999, 2011](#)) and significant drops in language proficiency and transmission as well as abilities to practice cultural expressions and adherences to Law. History has shown that the effects of cultural wounding have not been the same across the country, with hardships and survivals mapping differently onto remote, rural and urban communities ([Kearney 2014](#))<sup>1</sup>. There are discrete local histories and experiences that have shaped group responses to cultural wounding, and yet at the same time, for some there has emerged a nationwide sense of Aboriginality as an ethnic distinction. This has been supported, in part, by Aboriginal political organisations and protests, which began in the 1920s ([Maynard 2003, 2014](#), p. 84), and flourished throughout the 1950s and 1960s ([Clark 2008](#)). Self-determination and unity of purpose distinguish the 1970s in terms of Aboriginal solidarity and protest, with many actions underscored by the prevailing commitment for land and sustainable futures, ensuring the value in sustaining a strong pan-Aboriginal movement.

Concurrently, from the 1970s, multiculturalism entered the Australian national political discourse and has held, despite the fact that the very nature of diverse ethnic citizenries remains underexplored and widely misrepresented in popular visions of the nation and its emergence as a reconciled state ([Curthoys 2000](#); [Foster and Stockley 1988](#); [Povinelli 2002](#), p. 18; [Wimmer 1999](#)). Located within this

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural wounding is the violation of persons and their cultural lives through insult and injury, motivated by the desire to destroy or significantly harm this culture and its bearers ([Kearney 2014](#)).

space are identity politics that circulate around and between citizens of Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent. How these populations conceive of themselves and interact or fail to recognise the experiences of the other are at the center of much political and social reflection. Both the Australian state and its citizens have vested interests in the identity politics that spring forth from assertions of Indigeneity in this settler colonial space. Since the very arrival of British settlers, woven into the nation's fabric has been a logic of separation, that sustains discrete formulations and treatments of bodies and citizens according to categories of "Aboriginal or Indigenous", "migrant", "white", "new settler" and "multicultural". The bounded nature of these formulations has in many respects foreclosed the possibility of interculturalism as a historical or contemporary practice of responsive reflexivity across categories of difference.

In more recent decades the nation has been shaped according to a principle of multiculturalism (Curthoys 2000). As Curthoys (2000) along with McCallum and Holland (2009) reflects however, the conflation of "Indigenous" and "multicultural" has been an "uneasy conversation". Ideologically and physically, these categories have resulted in the reinforcement of difference across the nation and, in turn, the problematising of this perceived difference. Indigenous ethnicities have been subject to particular scrutiny and allowed only a peripheral place within the multicultural imaginary. Never granted full or equitable status within the nation, Indigenous groups have been inscribed as "different" and "beyond". This has led to and validated non-Indigenous violence and the delivery of cultural wounding to Indigenous ethnic groups as groups beyond "domestication" and thus posing a threat to the white nation (Hage 1996, 1998). Domesticating a nation's constituents, as a population made up of various ethnic citizenries, is a process guided by national imaginaries in which certain identities, ideals, and expectations are privileged. Domestication does not accommodate an intercultural logic, rather instead it preferences assimilative logics whereby some cultural expressions must give way to dominant others. How difference will be understood in these nationalist efforts is a historical and contextual affair, bound to ideologies of who belongs, who can be tamed, and who cannot fit.

The discourse around multiculturalism in Australia has contributed to a vision of the nation as an assemblage of diverse and proliferating social identities. That this diversity be treated with respect is the cornerstone of popular multiculturalism, yet how this is achieved remains a point of ongoing tension within intellectual, political, and popular debate. According to Povinelli (2002) and Hage (1998), multicultural policies have led to monoculturalism in Australia through their oversight of the nature of differences. Yet in more recent years, interculturalism has entered the vernacular, a new ideological pose for the settler colony, in the wake of struggling reconciliation projects at the national level (Short 2008). Reconciliation as a peacemaking paradigm emerged as a response to colonial injustice (Commonwealth of Australia 1991a, 1991b; Short 2003) and social instability (Short 2008), formally shaping Australian social and political life, policy reform, and activism around Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

In a review of Australia's political and practical commitment to reconciliation, Short (2008, p. 1) notes that the process began in the 1980s, as an "open-ended" initiative, aimed at educating the non-Indigenous majority about the "Aboriginal problem", as a necessary precursor to any treaty making. The reconciliation process was to be a high level political commitment coordinated at all levels of government and in close coordination with Indigenous leadership and governance bodies, to address Aboriginal disadvantage and aspirations in relation to land, housing, law and justice, cultural heritage, education, employment, health, infrastructure, and economic development, in the lead up to the nation's centenary of Federation in 2001 (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991; Preamble, cited in Short 2008, p. 2).

Political commitment was not consistent, and the decade from 1991–2001 marks a period in which significant political dedications were made to efforts that worsened the state of Indigenous affairs, particularly in relation to land rights, health provisions, governmental representation and overall truth-telling as restituted justice (see Short 2008, p. 2). This is not mere cynicism directed at a political era and its key players, but rather it reflects a failure to deliver measurable outcomes as part of a

reconciliation action plan. As [Short \(2008, p. 2\)](#) astutely notes, Australian reconciliation represents a paradox in the broader field of international post-colonial/settler-colonial restorative justice. Since 2001 there has been no official political and social commitment to progressing reconciliation in Australia, there have been only isolated acts of parliament and legislative interventions aimed at bettering the experiences of Indigenous peoples on the terms of the State. These do not add up to a nationwide consciousness or empathic engagement with reconciliatory or reparatory principles that encourage co-existence and intercultural understanding. The national agenda of an official decade long program of reconciliation (1991–2000) did not deliver radical outcomes, yet has surely influenced the discourse of interculturalism that has emerged in its aftermath ([ANTaR 2010](#)). This marks both a shift in language and approach, and whilst the legacy of reconciliatory principles remain at the heart of interculturalism, the doing of an intercultural praxis remains uncertain. As a nation, Australia has held the centre (as the nexus of power) through acts of colonising, assimilating, reconciling, and co-existing, none of which have promoted empathy, transformation or intercultural health and proficiency.

Recognitions have occurred as to the nature of past wounding and a formal apology was issued by the Australian government in 2008, recognising the atrocities that involved the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families (see [Read 1999](#); [Australian Government 2008](#)). Despite these efforts, however, the extent to which Indigenous cultural recognition contributes to the vision of Australian nationalism is minor. The combination of “restrictive policy framing and lack of political will” has prevented Australia from transitioning into a political and social space characterized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians united in pursuit of equal living standards ([Short 2003](#)). Cultural recognition and acknowledgment of injustice are no antidotes when social justice and equity are missing from the reconciliatory and restorative inventory. Dysfunction remains at the core of these relationships, and interethnic tensions continue to pivot around land, sea, and resource rights, equitable access to the resources needed for a good life, protection from publically sanctioned racism and violence, and paternalism through “management” of Indigenous lives.

[Cowlshaw \(1987, p. 225\)](#) has engaged heavily in documenting “the active part Aborigines were taking in adjusting (or adapting) to the situation they found themselves in”. Challenging notions of authenticity and the binary of possession and loss of ethnic identity, [Cowlshaw \(1987, 1999, 2004, 2009\)](#) draws attention to the adaptations made by Indigenous people across the country, the strategic and rational judgments made under conditions of a judging gaze, and the “physical intrusion of those with superior power”. As [Cowlshaw \(1987, p. 227\)](#) reminds us, for Aboriginal people, survival and emergence is a key part of ethnic becoming and reimagining, alongside the cultural character that the group might choose to occupy.

In order to recognise the emerging forms of cultural identity that spring forth from settler colonial conditions, a form of responsive reflexivity must be cultivated, in opposition to master narratives of tradition and belonging. Seeing and knowing the existence of another requires knowing the conditions of the self. In a settler colonial context, this knowing is also tinged with knowing the historical conditions and contemporary realities that support the power of a white majority over Aboriginal nations and peoples. These apprehensions are vital for interculturalism. Yet what makes responsive reflexivity so challenging and often beyond the mainstream, is the enduring effect of coloniality and deep colonising. Both present obstacles to the cultivation of responsive reflexivity and interculturalism, in ways that are now explored.

### 3. Coloniality and Deep Colonising

Settler colonialism is both the event and a structure of behaviours through which Indigenous space is colonised and brought under the control of an incoming presence ([Wolfe 2006](#)). According to [Quijano \(2000\)](#) coloniality allows us to understand the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern world-system. Coloniality is expressed in the vast and under-detected processes that support and allow the structure of settler colonialism to occur in the first instance and then to prevail to the point

of normativity. One cannot have settler colonialism without coloniality, either as what is left behind after the initial frontier is launched in a historical moment, or in order to facilitate the march of newly configured frontiers of colonialism which continue to take Indigenous people's lands and waters in Australia. By extension, coloniality is a functioning and powerful social determinant that impels the need for interculturalism and its reception among the socially progressive and those aligned with decolonising consciousness. Decolonising consciousness is a reflexive orientation that reforms the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous lived experiences are navigated and mutually apprehended in a settler colonial context (Bradfield 2018, p. ii). Decoloniality is the praxis/action of identifying, unsettling and undoing both the vast and under-detected processes which support the structure of settler colonialism, and also redressing the history of the event of settler colonialism and its structural legacy (see Nakata et al. 2012). This consciousness is a vitally important mode of being as it exposes the conditions that contribute to power imbalances that arise from privileging Eurocentric epistemologies, as governing ways of knowing, in colonial contexts and encourages new approaches to understanding socio-cultural difference (Bradfield 2018).

Coloniality identifies and describes the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination that outlives formal colonialism and becomes integrated in succeeding social orders (Quijano 2000; see also Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2007; Wynter 2003; and Maldonado-Torres 2007). Coloniality of power refers to a crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor and rights. In this sense, there is a periphery outside and inside the core zones. The core zones are treated here as the colonial order that dominates social, political, legal and economic life in Australia. In the context of this particular research the Aboriginal population and its nuanced epistemological, ontological and axiological expressions across the vast range of Indigenous identities is rendered peripheral, that is outside of the core zone of the settler colonial nation. This has been witnessed historically and at present, in such acts as the 1967 Referendum vote to include Aboriginal people as citizens of the country (where previously they were not), in three instances of suspending the Racial Discrimination Act to serve political desires of direct intervention in Aboriginal lives (including the Hindmarsh Bridge case, amendments to the Native Title Act and, the Northern Territory Emergency Response, see Behrendt 2012, p. 166) and in the gap identified in access to education, health, life expectancy, infant mortality and community safety. Herein lies the condition of deep colonising, as traced to the seemingly benign acts of government that constitute a process of "conquest that remains embedded within institutions and practices . . . aimed at reversing the effects of colonization" (Bradley and Seton 2005, p. 33). Coloniality is what lends depth to this colonising, in that legislation and political interventions in Indigenous lives, can be cast as benevolent acts aimed at delinking the nation from its violent past, a restorative gesture, yet by design these acts carry the inequalities inherent in demanding Aboriginal people operate within the core zone should they want rights, recognition and restitution.

The core zone's identification of a gap and exclamation of the need to bridge this, on terms set by non-Indigenous political leaders, speaks to the absence of a space of centrality for Aboriginal Australians in the nation. Instead, Aboriginal lives are pressed, through the coloniality of power, to the edges, visited and acknowledged only in special cases of political consciousness, articulated through the ambiguous language that emanates from the core, that is, for example "closing the gap is a natural extension of the dream this Government has for every Australian, safety, security and prosperity, and a fair go for all" (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). The failure to articulate the gap in terms of settler colonial causation and the merging of Aboriginal presence, cultural life and hardship in the dream of the nation diffuses the existence of real people and first nations' sovereignty. Quijano (2000, p. 533) elaborates, stating:

One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power,



including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established.

Coloniality is not equivalent to colonialism, nor is it derivative from, or antecedent to, modernity (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 218). Coloniality and modernity constitute two sides of a single coin. New identities (settler colonial/national), rights, laws, and institutional expressions of modernity such as nation-states, citizenship and democracy, and, in the case of Australia, the importation of British Common Law, were formed in a process of colonial interaction with, and domination and exploitation of, non-Western people (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 218). For Mignolo (2007) coloniality refers to a condition and an epistemological frame that binds historical projects of expansion and invasion to modernity in inseparable ways. Thus global coloniality is not reducible to the presence or absence of a colonial administration (Grosfoguel 2007) or to the political and economic structures of power. Instead it is left behind and maintained in structures of everyday life as notions of race, racism and inequitable experience. It is invisible and everywhere, linking back to the colonial enterprise, which prescribed value to certain peoples while disenfranchising others, and its retention is found in the persistent categorical and discriminatory discourse that was reflected in the social and economic structure of the colony (Quijano 2007). How then does a campaign of interculturalism take hold among the conditions of coloniality and deep colonising, and what does it mean when the rhetoric is mobilised by the state, the very institution held responsible for the maintenance of these conditions of daily life?

#### 4. Interculturalism: Myth and Meaning

This discussion of interculturalism begins with a cautionary consideration, put forward by Grosfoguel (2005) as to the contexts in which a dialogic and empathic social encounter across difference might operate. As per the interventions generated by the emergence of coloniality and deep colonising as frameworks for understanding the modern world, there is an imperative to read the emerging discourse of interculturalism in modern life as born of social, political, economic and geographic realities, and potentially both reinforcing and toppling the conditions of these in the past and present. For Grosfoguel (2005, p. 115), inspired by Quijano (2000) “one cannot hope for transparent communication, or aspire to an ideal communication community . . . without identifying the relations of global power and the silenced, excluded others, ignored or exterminated by global coloniality of power”.

Intercultural dialogue can only operate in alignment with the premise that we do not live in a horizontal world of cultural relations (Grosfoguel 2005, p. 115). Horizontality implies a false equality that does not contribute to a productive dialogue between cultures. Grosfoguel (2005, p. 115) reminds us that “we live in a world in which relations between cultures are vertical, between dominated and dominators, colonized and colonizers”. This verticality inspires deep challenges for interculturalism, one of these being how “privileges—won through the exploitation and domination of global coloniality—impact communication, intercultural exchange and dialogue” (Grosfoguel 2005, p. 115). “Before any such dialogue can occur, one must begin by recognizing the inequalities of power and the complicity of the north in the south’s exploitation” (Grosfoguel 2005, p. 115).

According to Walsh (2015, p. 12), interculturality means “not only horizontal relationality, but also and most importantly, the rebuilding (in decolonial terms) of a vastly different social project for all”. It is radical and requires delinking from the coloniality of power. It refers to relationships, negotiations and cultural exchanges, seeking to develop an interaction between people, knowledge, practices, logics, rationalities and culturally different principles of life; an interaction that allows and starts in the social, economic, political and power asymmetries (Walsh 2010). It represents a counter hegemony that emerges, for Walsh (2010, 2015) in social movements (her own work focused on social movements in Latin America). It fights to transform problems, with a local and contextualized view, thus interculturality; the action of interculturalism is transformational, local, and contextualized.

Increasingly cited across the broad fields of settler colonial critique (as embedded within the disciplines of anthropology, critical race studies, policy and peace studies), interculturalism is treated as both concept and practice, yet remains under-theorised and under-actualised. Intercultural communication, intercultural competency, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural dialogue are flagged as solutions to social discord and ill communication, in a political sense, as commitments to support education and business and as forms of practical justice in contexts where cultural tensions remain ever present. As a way of smoothing over or bridging difference it is resoundingly treated as something good and ethical, while less often are its deeper needs traced to coloniality explored. In many instances it risks reduction to a form of political doublespeak or policy speak.

Interculturalism may be configured as action and thinking, which occurs in the space between cultures, or a new form of action, derived of and from different cultures. This space is made up of ontological, epistemological and axiological expressions, that is the relations between bodies in a practical sense of geographical placement and proximity in daily life, the knowledge forms that distinguish ways of being and knowing the world and each other, and the value based structures that inform life and relating. In relation to Australia, these distinctions as sites of interculturalism make for very different encounters with plurality. In the first version of interculturalism, that is the formation of an interstitial point between cultures, a delinking of coloniality is not necessarily required, nor is a decolonising consciousness, rather the action and thinking that is born in this space is of another kind. It is akin to Bhabha's (2004) earlier work on "third space". Here neither culture A nor culture B retain eminence, nor must they change, but yet they must transform when operating in the interstitial, a space born of, yet somehow distinct from, the "contact zone" of conflict and settler colonial violence. This has as its guiding quality a concessionary approach, which is adopted in the agreeance to create new relations, emerging from the interactions between the settler colonial state and Indigenous nations, families and persons.

On such terms the intercultural premise that emerges should, in theory, work to benefit both cultural groups. What is problematic in this model of human encounter is the presumption of equitable loss and gain, both as historical fact and future outcome, as one embarks on the creation of an intercultural premise or way of co-existing. Cultural traumas and the wounds born of the colonial enterprise do not dissipate with time, as world histories evidence, and the presumption of political will to facilitate agreeance is not a distinguishing feature of coloniser/colonised relations. It is also the case that when not operating in the interstitial then cultural differences can reinforce and thus remain vulnerable to tension (see Kearney 2014). It is proposed that the weight of concession, in such relations, cannot be modeled as evenly distributed across the settler state and an Indigenous presence, instead it must lay on the side the coloniser, thus beginning a delinking with coloniality, as articulated powerfully by Quijano (2000). This is more likely facilitated by a second modeling of interculturalism, explained below.

The second proposition: interculturalism as a new form of action derived of and from different cultures, is much more radical and holds richer potential for negotiations and cultural exchanges that transform, seeking to develop an interaction between people, knowledge, practices, logics, rationalities and culturally different principles of life. In Australia, this is imagined as a project in which the new form of action that guides cultural dialogue is one of plurality, with differences coexisting. But, rather than retaining the borderlands of the settler colony's power, the settler colony must instead move closer to understanding Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies (as the holistic engagement of knowledge, behaviours and value habits), thus availing itself to the greater shift. It is the ways of knowing, being and valuing the world that distinctively demarcate Indigenous ways of relating that come to the fore in this instance.

Indigenous cultures, have been subject to the assimilatory and domesticating project of settler colonialism since 1788, yet the state has not been subject to any assimilatory equivalent. There has been no adoption of bicultural politicking as seen elsewhere (for example, in New Zealand), nor has there been advancements towards Indigenous governance and control of political, social and/or economic

life. This form of interculturalism calls for an assimilatory mode on the behalf of the settler state that has historically and continuously denied the value of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The onus is on the state to move across to coexist in closer relation to Indigenous cultures, open to their influences. The new form of action is one distinguished by the dominant power changing through empathic learning, which encourages more elaborate and novel insights, discourages belief rigidity and lastly encourages cognitive and personal flexibility, and thus being with difference.

Interculturalism is not an easy project. It requires deliberate and broadly sanctioned political, social, and emotional commitment, launched across the fields of politics, sociality, economics and everyday citizenry. In the context of Australia, it also requires a greater burden of effort be carried by the state, as opposed to evenly distributed across the state and Indigenous nations. In order to progress interculturalism I argue that, in line with the guiding premise of this special issue, cross-cultural understandings must be held to rely upon the witnessing of distinction but also realisation of the intersections across categories, whereby cultures and identities are not unknown to one another, instead they are apprehended by one another as deeply relational encounters of human life, expressed in myriad forms. Compelled to apprehend the settler state, through generations of institutional control and structural designs that imbibe the coloniality of power, it is not Indigenous Australians who must give most to the propagation of plurality and intercultural sensitivity, rather the duty lies now with the state to delink from its colonial roots and the systems that retain their hold. This is now explored further through a close reading of land rights and land activism as sites of intercultural encounter in Australia.

## 5. Land Rights and Land Activism

In Australia, land rights and forms of land activism, in the wake of dispossession, have been a central part of living justice for many Indigenous groups, with campaigns prioritising Indigenous perspectives on land and sustainability matters. Land security is derived from the success of such campaigns and is envisioned in one form as security of tenure (as freehold or stakeholder status), but more expansively as rights to ecological certainty, as recognition of the kincentric bonds that link people to their lands and waters<sup>2</sup>. Security in this sense refers to a certainty and a state of being free from danger or threat derived of uncertain residence and occupation of home territories. It is the right of Aboriginal Australians to effective protection by their government against forcible evictions and denials of sovereign rights and also their right to campaign for and to ensure the safety and certainty of health across their lands and waters. The appeal to maintaining health in local ecologies is also what inspires a growing presence of non-Indigenous participation in land activist movements, particularly in an era of growing concern over climate change, and sustainable futures. Thus land rights and land activism are examined here for their potential as sites for cultivating intercultural understanding.

Land rights as engaged by Indigenous Australians, are part of a multi-pronged expression of cultural autonomy and sovereignty, which seeks to: (a) redress threats to Indigenous knowledges associated with lands and waters; (b) respond to loss of rights; (c) resist and interrupt harms against lands and waters as an expression of responsibility and kinship. Land rights in this context are a response to the historical event of land dispossession and colonisation. The colonial project was dependent upon the Doctrine of Discovery and the presumption of terra nullius as governing the ontology of settler expansion. In 1973 and 1974 Justice Woodward headed a Royal Commission into Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory of Australia. He reported a primary aim of land rights as “the doing of simple justice to a people who have been deprived of their land without their consent and without compensation” (Woodward 1974, p. 2). The Commission’s reports (Woodward 1973, 1974)

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<sup>2</sup> Kincentricity is a view of “humans and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins” (Salmón 2000; Senos et al. 2006, p. 397). Kin includes all elements of an ecosystem and kincentricity is a form of total interconnectedness to “all that is relatable” (Senos et al. 2006, p. 397). This form of kinship entails familial responsibility to the world around and establishes relational terms of engagement across all species and environments.



lay the foundation for the Aboriginal Land Rights Act Northern Territory 1976 (ALRA), and a raft of state based land rights acts that have followed in proceeding years.

The overwhelming scholarly focus on land rights has been on legal frameworks and limitations (Fletcher 1998; Reeves 1998; Rose 1996; Bradley and Seton 2005). The 1980s and early 1990s were a fertile time for Indigenous writing on land rights as the potentials and problematics were explored and examined through a series of test cases (Gale 1983; Peterson and Langton 1983; Yunupingu 1997), whilst others (Altman 2001; Altman and Pollack 1998; Peterson 1985) investigated the economic ramifications of land rights, linking this to Indigenous socioeconomic advancement (Altman et al. 1999). Prevailing interest remains focused on how land rights inform contemporary land use (Yunupingu and Muller 2009), and the limited provisions for water rights under land rights legislation (Marshall 2017). In sum, legislative land rights have interested the nation and its intellectuals for decades, with equal attention paid to the opportunity this presents to redress past wrongs, and also the latent paradox in a legal process determined by the settler state, which demands Aboriginal people continue to fight (on the state's terms) for the return of something that they never ceded (see Kearney 2018).

Legislative land rights are the product of settler colonial ontology, epistemology and axiology. Whilst they are designed and configured as action, which occurs in the space between cultures, they are, by design not capable of delivering social reform that is derived of and from different cultural perspectives. In other words legislative land rights, as the Aboriginal Land Rights Act Northern Territory 1976 (ALRA), a raft of state based land rights acts, and the federal Native Title Act 1993, do not operate with or from an Indigenous ontology, epistemology and axiology. Instead they are carved from the centre of colonial power, thus becoming instruments of deep colonising (see Bradley and Seton 2005). Legislative land rights are a controlled expression of redress, which places upon Indigenous claimants huge evidentiary burdens. By extension, statutory definitions of Aboriginality and traditional ownership place pressure on people to meet certain, potentially impossible criteria associated with tradition and ancestral knowledge.

Community tension is known to arise out of land claim evidence and findings, and there is evidence to suggest this also impacts on people's health, and community cohesion. Elsewhere, in New Zealand, O'Regan (2014) reports that fighting for land rights generates the conditions for multiple forms of identity remake among Maori, changing the ways in which groups identify and configure their futures. O'Regan (2014, p. 27) cautions that it is not yet fully known what happens to identities (and people) through this process, one which is known to reduce Indigenous "history and tradition [to] mere opinion, blown by political winds". Land restitution processes which rely upon the settler colonial state and its legal structures compel a form of social transformation as Indigenous claimants present themselves to fit the demands of the dominant culture. This is a far cry from the cultural plurality that might come with the settler colony making redress as it moves closer to understanding and working with Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies and thus appreciating in full the motivation and aspirations for land rights as a form of living justice. For this to occur, a project of liberation is called for, that involves delinking land rights and restitutive acts from coloniality and modernity.

A delinking of this kind, according to Mignolo, lies in the primacy of the epistemic in undoing coloniality (see Cheah 2006). This is an epistemic habit, which has material dimension; in this case, legislative acts which lead to piecemeal returns of Aboriginal lands. This materiality is the corporeal experiences of those who have been excluded from the production of knowledge by modernity. It is the lived experience of Aboriginal people seeking the return of their lands and waters across the country on terms set entirely by the state. Mignolo campaigns for a border thinking or border epistemology, which inches closer to an interculturalism, whereby Western knowledge (the colonial state) is, on the one hand, recognised as unavoidable and, on the other, highly limited and dangerous (Cheah 2006). For land rights to articulate an intercultural commitment to a new field of projection and articulation which places onus on the state to move across, to comprehend and operate with principles of land and sea restitution that reflect and honour Indigenous expectations and ways of being is required.

The epistemic spaces, which distinguish Aboriginal ways of configuring rights to lands and waters, are qualitatively different from a Western logic, and remain heavily marginalised through the legal process. These rights are distinguished as kincentric (see [Salmón 2000](#)).

Many Indigenous epistemologies rely on a kincentric way of being-in-relation. According to [Salmón \(2000\)](#); [Bradley and Families \(2016\)](#) this way of being is encoded in language, and represents a worldview, a way of thinking, and overall cognition. Not only affecting the way people think, a kincentric way of being brings ontological and axiological specificity, namely it affects human behaviour and systems of value. Kincentricity is interdependency, whereby the survival of people is intertwined with that of the health of lands and waters, and vice versa. There are a great number of cultural contexts in which relational co-presences in place are indivisible from their human kin, and contribute vital elements to the greater whole that is life ([Salmón 2000](#); [Senos et al. 2006](#); [Hogan 2000](#); [Cajete 2000](#)). A land right configured on such terms is one whereby the health and well-being of human kin is comprehended as vitally linked to the health of lands and waters as a relational part of the kincentric circle in which human life is one part. If one part of this circle is alienated, destroyed, poisoned or stolen, then the whole begins to suffer.

Research has drawn powerful links between Aboriginal people's health and rights to, as well as caring for their lands and waters ([Burgess et al. 2005](#); [Jackson and Ward 1999](#); [Kingsley et al. 2009](#); [Schultz and Cairney 2017](#); [Reid 1982](#)). The importance of country (consisting of lands, waters and a full universe of elements and phenomena) to communal wellbeing has been explored through the positive physical health outcomes that come from living or working on country (see [Ganesharajah 2009](#)). The positive effects are more expansive however, and reach beyond the benefits generated by the physical acts of caring for country, and participating in land and sea management programs. Given the diversity of experience that distinguishes Aboriginal people's lives across the country, in urban centres, rural towns and remote communities, it is health not only derived of more traditional modes of being with country that is a measureable benefit of land rights. Equally, benefits come from the accordance of rights, as ownership requiring no physical action on country. The right to safeguard, limit interventions and restrict harmful acts against lands and waters, in the interest of an Indigenous ontology, and axiology, also brings the potential for health across the kincentric field of human and non-human kin. The right to make and influence decisions in relation to lands and waters is also a key part of communal health and well-being. A more fully configured sense of being with country and holding the right to make decisions that impact on the country's physical environments as linked to social, cultural, emotional and political health is a pathway to a fuller suite of rights that operates with the needs of Aboriginal people from all different backgrounds as central.

Land activism, as an alternative to legislative land rights is increasingly presenting as the platform for change and rights assertion, as taken up by younger generations of Aboriginal Australians. Land activism does not require the same levels of participation, nor exposure to legislative process, statutory declarations and evidentiary burdens, that state, territory and national based legislative land rights and native title instruments demand. Land activism as a distinct form of rights seeking, is now a language to express a distinctive connection on the behalf of Aboriginal people, and the means by which to enact this connection in the eyes of a wider national audience. That a wider national audience understands and appreciates the enduring fight for rights to Aboriginal homelands is at the very core of a potential cultural plurality in Australia. In brief I will now outline the context in which land activism presents itself in contemporary Australia.

Land activism offers Aboriginal people the opportunity to participate in collective actions without having to have their Aboriginality tested through statutory declarations, yet does not deliver any legal/exclusive rights. This is however a self-determining space, which brings wholly different rights to participate in and seek personal and communal security through culturally prescribed interests, cultivating a strong Aboriginal centric political commentary and voice among younger generations, shifting rhetoric around matters of sustainable futures and agents of change. Activism is a critical social site for interpreting the cultural complexity and power relations of public life. An

anthropological examination of the motives and aspirations that underscore activism gives rise to greater understandings of social tension, and social change, for activism brings lived contradictions to light, revealing the deep structural factors at play within the nation (Demetriou 2013, p. 7).

One of the rare fields in which Australia witnesses a degree of move across to coexist in closer relation to Indigenous cultures, open to its influences, has been in the field of natural resource management as aligned with Indigenous cultural resource management. Whilst often still vulnerable to the vacillations of the state, through unpredictable funding models and continued political support and practical engagement, federally funded Indigenous ranger programs now total around 123 nationwide, and a number of dedicated Indigenous Protected Areas now exist ( $n = 75$ ) as do models of co-management and conservation (see Bauman and Smyth 2007; Hill et al. 2013; Ross et al. 2009). The adoption of Indigenous land and sea management practices, campaigned for by Arabena (2015) has been configured as a call for nation-based values that are restructured to incorporate on country and Indigenous values of sustainability. Whilst some national programs of environmental safeguards and protection have engaged with Indigenous knowledges and principles of management, broadly speaking the adoption of culturally prescribed management principles remains under developed, despite these showing considerable potential in regards to coastal and oceanic health, climate change and sea level rise, seasonal shifts, reef conservation, feral species and weed eradication, fire management and the restoration of biodiversity (see Prober et al. 2011).

The principle of moving across is also detectable in the desire for sustainable futures and a growing environmental consciousness and increased concern over climate change, drought, species loss, and the impact of resource industries, shared among Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Historically not an easy alliance (see Vincent and Neale 2016; Vincent and Neale 2017), “black-green” relations found shared sites of meaning from the 1970s, yet mutuality cannot be assumed of Indigenous/non-Indigenous environmental agendas then or now. Vincent (2016) reminds, that there should also be refrain from invoking assumptions about a “pan-Aboriginal” environmental imperative (see Waterton and Saul 2018). The aim is not to simplify the complexity of these relational encounters, but rather to reflect on the increasingly growing and generationally nuanced space of shared concern that is emerging among younger generations of Australians. This does exist and expresses itself through movements like Seed and the Northern Territory Protect Country Alliance and in the international activist scene of global support for movements such as Black Lives Matter, and Idle No More<sup>3</sup>.

Seed is Australia’s first Indigenous youth led climate network, and in 2019 will run, in conjunction with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), climate justice bootcamps across the country, bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and non-Indigenous young people for training, skill sharing and networking (Seed n.d.). Promoted as “a launchpad for real action and hard-hitting campaigns to protect country and fight for climate justice”, participants are encouraged to “meet other people who care as much as you do about protecting country” (Australian Youth Climate Coalition n.d.). Seed is at the forefront of youth movements aimed at sustainable futures and political pressure for change, doing so with a resounding commitment to the alignment of environmental health with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural health. Supported by the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Seed campaigns include “Protect Country”, “Land Rights not Mining Rights” and “Don’t Frack the NT”. The first of these invokes a distinctive relationship to the land and sea as Country, articulating an Indigenous ontology of relating. So too protection is configured through Indigenous approaches, which include on the one hand safeguarding the physical environment but equally

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<sup>3</sup> Idle No More is an ongoing protest movement, founded in December 2012 by four women: three First Nations, Saskatchewan women Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, and Nina Wilson and one non-Indigenous Canadian woman Sheelah McLean. It leads as one of the largest transformative movements for Indigenous rights in Canada, emerging from a shared desire to safeguard the lands and waters of Canadian Aboriginal people (Graveline 2012, p. 293). Hashtag #Idle No More went global, accompanied by declarations of solidarity across Aboriginal protest movements and social media campaigns in Australia. Like the Black Lives Matter movement, social media has fanned global interest and cultivated sites for solidarity across divides of black and white, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

important is the moral responsibility that accords to knowing language, songlines, culture and the Dreaming (as an ancestral past and present).

These commitments sit within the national youth campaign run by the AYCC, and heavily influence the ethos and principle of youth protest as it operates nationally. For example, the AYCC, which boasts a membership of over 120,000 nationally, declares,

We see the climate crisis as an issue of social and environmental injustice. The climate crisis affects everyone, but not equally. It is often the most marginalised in our societies that have done the least to cause the problem who are hit first and worst by the climate crisis and carry the burden of polluting industries. This is particularly true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are already experiencing the impacts of climate change and fossil fuel extraction on community, culture and country. It is also true for Indigenous peoples the world over, people in the majority world, people of colour, poor communities, workers, fossil fuel communities, young people and future generations.

The AYCC and Seed draw links between environmental crisis as a governmental failing and threats to Aboriginal land rights, most potently in their anti-fracking campaign in the Northern Territory. Here the blame is placed heavily on the settler colonial state and the threats are expressed as the toxifying of Aboriginal lands and waters, loss of culture and threats to sacred sites, and people's health and wellbeing. Aboriginal control over the futures of their lands and waters is pivotal to local and national health, as explained "Only when communities have the freedom to define their own path, can our people truly heal" (Nancy McDirny, [Seed n.d.](#)). Such health is not presented as being at the cost of national interest, rather as central to national interest. It would seem that the 120,000 members of AYCC and Seed agree. There is no skirting the issue of the prevailing effects of settler colonialism in this activist space, as it is acknowledged and taken as justification for action. As a unifying axiology, there is a direct line drawn between sustainable futures, security as a form of living justice achieved through Aboriginal self-determination and land rights as a right to safeguard ecological integrity.

The context of activism and solidarity oriented towards land matters, and sustainable futures, may be a space that shows striking capacity for the shaping of something totally new, a radical new way of relating, where Indigenous ontologies, and epistemologies are held up as references for the nation's future existence, as a state of ecological and social health. It also shows potential as a space in which interactions between people, knowledges, practices, logics, rationalities and culturally different principles of life are welcomed. In which case, concern and action in this conscious space, which seek to instate sustainable living practices, are *derived of and from* different cultural perspectives and are aligned centrally with a cornerstone of Aboriginal land rights and social justice, that is the drive to *resist and interrupt harms against lands and waters as an expression of kincentric responsibility*. This expression of responsibility outweighs any impulse to safeguard, as primary, the human right. An axiological orientation that implicates human responsibilities to one another and to the environment will generate a vastly different ontology to that guided by the human right as an individuated concept. Such propositions are explored below in relation to responsive reflexivity, as a step towards new relations.

Destabilising the primacy of the individuated human right, an ontology of modernity and coloniality, and also the master narrative of Australian national identity provides an opportunity to be in better relations with another, both human and non-human (as in the ecologies we share in). Commitments of this kind may support a move closer, away from the centre of colonial power, towards the margin, increasingly delinking the present moment and future aspirations from coloniality and the stifling elements of modernity. I propose that these terms of relating deserve considered attention, as they may in fact hold important insights for the praxis of interculturalism. Being in better relations with another is evident in the solidarity supported by movements such as Seed and the AYCC, and more broadly may be proposed of the alliances emerging in relation to sustainable futures more broadly. They may not yet be or ever be entirely intercultural, nor are the alliances always easy, but there is potential to be explored.

At the very heart of solidarity movements is something of a shared concern, a shared need, and desire to gather around a problem perceived by all parties to be one in need of a solution. In the context of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sustainable future alliances, expressed is a shared need to identify better practices. There is also evidence of a recognised value in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as promoted by Indigenous participants and as taught to (or assumed by) non-Indigenous counterparts and their activist platforms. Whether this suffers for issues of translation or romanticism around Aboriginal approaches to sustainability can be debated, yet surely it is a context ripe for examination of interculturalism and plurality. There is a striking sense of respect for Indigenous ontologies in the operating principles of organisations such as Seed and the AYCC, and in identified pathways towards sustainable practices. This suggests they are operating with a capacity to listen and be in the gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous concerns for sustainable futures, land rights and living social justice (see [Hokari 2011](#)).

The gap, most easily configured as a distance between two cultures, might be recast then as an opportunity, a site of interculturalism. Not somewhere to be bridged or a gap to be closed but rather somewhere to inhabit, to accommodate the colony/coloniser as it strives to move across. It is a place to be sat in, thus facilitating a break away from the centre of coloniality and modernity. Being in the gap requires a willingness to let go, delink, and unsettle, all of which are conditions for a decolonising consciousness ([Bradfield 2018](#)). As a non-Indigenous Australian myself, the invitation to be in the gap, excites for the promise that this location provides context for new action, derived of and from different cultures, with the onus of listening to an Indigenous expression of action and learning to substantively rethink about the world we occupy and how we occupy it. How being in the gap affords opportunities to learn through empathy is now explored, for its links to a praxis of interculturalism and the habit of cultivating responsive reflexivity in relation to another culture.

## 6. Learning through Empathy and Responsive Reflexivity

Empathy is, put simply, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (see [Segal 2018](#)). It is dependent upon awareness, rapport, affinity, sensitivity and fellowship. It occurs through relational encounters, which begin with knowing the nature and the limits of the self. The first step in developing empathy is to know the self, that is, coming to know one's own capacity to understand; the baseline of a reflexive ontology. Reflexivity is treated here as that state of being in which the self is encountered as a communal and individual actor, consistently problematised in relation to other presences ([Finlay and Gough 2003](#)). The self is constructed as a participant in social life, operating in relation to structures and dispositions, which expand in their relational capacity to shape the way we know, act, care, perceive and configure the world ([Finlay 2003](#); [Gough 2003](#)). It is by knowing the reflexive self that one can begin to decentre this self, thus creating space for a fuller relational encounter with another to occur. This allows for opportunity to apprehend and witness another, as a positioned and knowing presence. Listening and attending to another is the disposition of steadied non distraction that counters the disposition of distraction when the individuated self is paramount. By listening and attending, the ontology of looking away, the dismissal of some to the periphery and others to the centre, a habit that distinguishes life in the settler colony, is no longer a first impulse.

The cognitive benefits associated with empathy in the context of any learning are written off as: fostering insight into different perspectives and promoting open-mindedness, discouraging hasty and superficial problem examination (in the face of new knowledge and practices), facilitating construction of more elaborate and frequently novel insights, discouraging belief rigidity and lastly encouraging cognitive and personal flexibility ([Gallo 1989](#), pp. 98–99). It is flexibility and a mobility of mind, characterised by the ability to extend one's perceptual capacity and thus epistemic habit, that renders learning through empathy such a key step in cultivating a practice of interculturalism. It is by being with and accepting another story or knowledge habit, and critical intimacy as an ethical way of coming to know something, and hearing and seeing another in its epistemological, ontological and axiological richness that distinguishes the treatment of interculturalism offered here.



Learning through empathy requires contexts for information exposure to and with another, and exchange of experiences. As this discussion of land rights and land activism highlights, the legislative arena of land restitution has not adequately sought Indigenous views on the nature of a land right, nor the security that is achievable through the recognition of preexisting and ancestral rights. Being with another in their epistemological, ontological and axiological richness is not a central tenet of legislative land rights. Rather those occupying the margin are compelled to act in response to the centre and enter their field for participation in acts of land rights and restitution. As such, these processes are likely to suffer for the consequences of not delinking from a coloniality that maintains at its centre, the state as the nexus of power. Here the colonial authority can continue to define Aboriginal people's realities through the creation of haves and have nots which pivots on recognition or denial of land rights and sovereignty (Bradley and Seton 2005, p. 43).

What then of the activist space? Qualitatively there is a distinction between legislative land rights and land activism, namely that land activism does not lead to legal freehold title or recognised native title. In which case, it is by no means a substitute for restitutorial pathways. The reason however I have chosen the example of land activism and solidarity in the context of sustainable future movements is that it invokes a different principle of relating that may be taken as an example of being in better relations. It is not the ultimate solution, for legal rights must compliment other rights, but operates on principles that may transfer across into the legislative land rights space if a commitment is made to interculturalising the terms for relating and delivery of rights. In the examples of Seed and the AYCC, there is evidence of a responsive reflexivity, whereby reflexivity beyond the centre (the white majority) is realised. Reflexive awareness is extended to imagine and more fully witness the experiences of inequality, hardship and oppression, which are lived through by others. In the first instance, responsiveness is receptiveness to the acknowledgement of value in another and legitimacy of another's claim, as to the need for sustainable futures, which in turn become key platforms for action.

Accenting human responsibility over human rights, in these sustainable future movements, works to highlight the relationship between human loss and suffering and other localised presences. This deepens the recognition of loss of ecological health by noting the extent to which it impacts on all that are in relation. The state's failure to reparate and retribute Aboriginal lands and waters works to impoverish the nation, for it holds in place, relations of discord and dysfunction. By striving for national growth based on *new forms of action derived of and from different cultures* ensures the project becomes a multi-sited commitment in which the rights and freedoms of all are more fully realised. That this is taken up locally in the form of activism and solidarity for environmental causes and sustainable futures highlights the everyday space of citizenry as being more receptive to principles and practices of interculturalism than the state, thus raising questions of the State's capacity to ever fully launch interculturalism as a national agenda.

It is the colonial state that falls behind, as a younger generation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian's seek out ways to co-exist and listen. A shift of this kind, in perceptual capacity, invokes the willingness to be with another in a manner which shifts the self, to practice a critical intimacy as an ethical way of coming to know something, and witnessing the other in its axiological richness. These three steps take us deeper into a relational encounter. I conclude this paper with encouragement to sit in the gap, drawing from Quijano's (2000) own reflection on being in better relations. Whilst writing of Latin American revolution and resistance, these words ring true also in the Australian context, where a delinking with coloniality will reveal the richer and at present under-appreciated qualities of the nation as a site of plurality. Australia is not only a settler colony, it is also a vast number of distinct countries belonging to Aboriginal people, and distinguished along lines of ancestry, descent, language and exclusive rights of possession. Quijano (2000, p. 574) states, "it is time to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror where our image is always, necessarily, distorted. It is time, finally, to cease being what we are not".

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