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## Systems, Self, and Sovereignty: Non-Indigenous Practitioners Negotiate Whiteness in Aboriginal Partnerships

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# Systems, Self, and Sovereignty: Non-Indigenous Practitioners Negotiate Whiteness in Aboriginal Partnerships

## Abstract

Australia is built upon a foundation of colonial conquest, and it continues to implement government policies and systems of management based on a colonising logic and the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. This study employed qualitative methods and discourse analysis to draw on the experiences of six non-Indigenous Australians employed by the South Australian Government in Aboriginal partnerships and natural resource management. Drawing on critical Whiteness studies, the article reveals that participants in this cohort are largely critical of colonial structures of government and the inequalities that arise. Despite this critical awareness, there was often a difficulty in finding a language to describe the *fog of Whiteness*, along with the tendency to describe ecological knowledge at the expense of more complex issues of First Nations sovereignty.

## Keywords

Whiteness, natural resource management, First Nations or Indigenous, government partnerships, decolonisation

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## Systems, Self, and Sovereignty: Non-Indigenous Practitioners Negotiate Whiteness in Aboriginal Partnerships

The denial of Indigenous sovereignty and the imposition of patriarchal, White sovereignty are foundational to current Australian policy contexts and frameworks. Tanganeakald Meintang scholar Irene Watson (2009) stated, “the foundation of the Australian colonial project lies within an ‘originary violence,’ in which the state retains a vested interest in maintaining the founding order of things” (p. 45). Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2009) argued, “patriarchal white sovereignty in the Australian context derives from the illegal act of possession and is most acutely manifest in the state and its regulatory mechanisms” (p. 64). Sustained complexity, historical anomalies, and policy contestation shape Australian Indigenous Affairs today (Hunt, 2008). First Nations<sup>1</sup> continue to assert their sovereign rights within a highly charged political environment where the Australian nation-state holds preeminent power (Smith & Hunt, 2008). The skew of power and the denial of Indigenous sovereignty directly affects First Nations Peoples as political decisions and public policy impacts upon their daily lives (Jeffries & Menham, 2011).

Australia’s First Nations Peoples have a long history of frustrations with government policies and governing structures (Foley, 2000). While colonial paternalisms have largely been replaced with current discourses of mutual responsibility in the development and delivery of Indigenous policy in Australia, the emphasis often remains on changing the behaviour of Indigenous communities and Indigenous people (Howitt et al., 2014). However, Australia’s history of colonisation and legalised White supremacy is manifest in policy and carried by non-Indigenous practitioners into the everyday work that government carries out with Indigenous Australians. Examining the role of non-Indigenous Australia, in policy and practice, is essential if we are to adequately address the persistent failures of government in Indigenous affairs in Australia.

This article employs the insights of critical Whiteness scholars to explore these persistent policy failures. It presents the findings of a study undertaken with non-Indigenous employees in the Department of Environment, Water, and Natural Resources, Government of South Australia (DEWNR). DEWNR is a steward for the state’s natural resources, public parks, gardens, heritage places, and crown lands. Within DEWNR, the Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> Partnerships Working Group co-manage natural resources with First Nations in South Australia, under the Natural Resource Management Act 2004 (SA) (Government of South Australia, 1972). Pratt’s (1991) concept of a *contact zone* is a useful framework for describing this partnership space—a space where cultures meet, primarily in contexts of asymmetrical power relations. Whiteness allows the exploration of power relations that underpin this relationship, and how non-Indigenous employees understand the *habits of Whiteness* in the day-to-day operations of this partnership. Unlike most non-Indigenous Australians, including public servants and executives of Indigenous programs who have limited social interaction, knowledge, and/or experience of Indigenous peoples (Larkin, 2013), these employees are immersed in the contact zone working on the ground with

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<sup>1</sup> First Nations is used to encompass the diversity of Indigenous Nations in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal is the term used by the Government of South Australia for First Nations people living in the state.

Indigenous Peoples. In this setting, such habits of Whiteness include the normalising of Western worldviews and science as “truth,” Indigenous ontology being viewed as cultural and traditional-as-past, Indigenous capabilities as being deficit, non-Indigenous time is valued monetarily, and non-Indigenous people are seen as individuals while Indigenous people are racialised.

As seminal Whiteness scholars Dyer (1997) and Frankenberg (1993) remind us, despite anti-racist intentions, invisible privileges of Whiteness continue to locate White subjects at the normative centre. They remind us that the centred position of Whiteness sets up a politics of gazing that looks out, overdetermining the differences of raced others through a White gaze. As Indigenous critical scholars argue, Indigenous communities continue to be gazed at, or blamed for the problems experienced in their communities, rather than processes of colonisation, dispossession, and White sovereignty. These issues exist globally.

Critical Whiteness studies is an international interdisciplinary field providing developments in the areas of communication, culture and post-colonial studies, critical race theory and sociology, feminism, education, psychology, and international relations (Hunter, Swan, & Grimes, 2010). To date, Australian studies of Whiteness have explored a broad range of topics including nationhood (Bielefeld, 2009/2010; Boucher, 2007), immigration (Barton, 2011; Dewhirst, 2008), Indigenous rights (Foley, 2000; Howard-Wagner, 2009), education (Hatchell, 2004; MacGill, 2010; Schulz, 2011), social work (Walter, Taylor, & Habibis, 2011; Young, 2008), health (Kowal, 2015; Nielsen, Stuart, & Gorman, 2015) and research (Carey, Boucher, & Ellinghaus, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2006). These studies in Whiteness contribute to conceptual and practical opportunities for decreasing colonial practices. However, literature on natural resource management (NRM), Whiteness, and non-Indigenous employees remains limited; while the policy tools, and administrative and accountability structures of NRM, inherited from a system designed upon White supremacy, maintain barriers for First Nations (Searle & Muller, forthcoming).

Current work within the field of NRM has revealed issues related to conflicting ontologies, imbalanced power relations, and the dominance of Western institutional structures (Ens, Finlayson, Preuss, Jackson, & Holcombe, 2012; Haynes, 2013; Howitt et al., 2013; Muller, 2014; Nursey-Bray, 2013; Wiseman & Bardsley, 2013); yet, this is not named as Whiteness. Hemming and Rigney (2008, 2010; Rigney & Hemming, 2013) discussed Whiteness in their work on NRM from an Ngarrindjeri perspective with critical analysis of systemic issues, and Marika, Yunupingu, Marika-Mununggiritj, and Muller (2009) mentioned Whiteness in their work within the rural NRM space. However, we have found no scholarship on NRM that employed a Whiteness framework to analyse the perspectives of non-Indigenous practitioners on First Nations co-management in Australia. To address this gap, we asked the following question: How might frameworks and discourses of Whiteness shape the perspectives of non-Indigenous Australians who work within Aboriginal partnerships with the South Australian Government? What are some examples of habits of Whiteness that emerge in this partnership space? How does co-management work in practice? Where are the opportunities for Whiteness to entrench colonial perspectives and practices? How might Indigenous sovereignty be supported by analysing these practices and processes? Applying a Whiteness framework unveils the historical and enduring relations of power that are often invisible to non-Indigenous people, yet hypervisible to Indigenous Peoples. In

bringing the invisible to the fore, the tools of Whiteness allow non-Indigenous practitioners to *examine themselves*.

The article will begin with an exploration of critical Whiteness studies, and how this theoretical framework is vital for understanding the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners in partnership spaces. It will then describe the study that was undertaken with workers from DEWNR, along with the underpinning methodology, before moving on to present the narratives of the participants through three themes: Systems, Self, and Sovereignty. Finally, it will outline insights and recommendations for policy frameworks that will have import in partnership spaces, both in Australia and internationally.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies and Partnerships in the Contact Zone**

Since the Enlightenment, Europeans constructed themselves as the rational, moral, civilised, and superior race of humans, while Indigenous Peoples were constructed as “backward,” “primitive,” “uncivilised,” and “barbaric” (Anderson, 2001). This construction of the superior human justified the colonial mission the world over and established the Western world as we know it. In the Australian context, as with other Western countries, race is used as a marker to include or exclude members of the nation.

Critical race and Whiteness scholars theorise Whiteness as a set of habits inherited from colonial history, whereby White, Anglo subjects are positioned at the normative centre (Hage, 1998). Credit is paid to W. E. B Du Bois (1995a, 1995b) for laying the theoretical foundation of critical Whiteness studies in the 1930’s, by naming Whiteness as a historical construction that is maintained by its invisibility. From the 1980s, White<sup>3</sup> academics began to respond to the challenge of Black<sup>4</sup> and postcolonial scholars to reverse the gaze and interrogate their own culture rather than problematising the oppressed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998, 1999, 2000, 2004; 2005; 2006, 2007, 2009, 2015) has written extensively on Whiteness and its relationship to Indigeneity in Australia. In *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), she stated, “white possessive logics are operationalized within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of common sense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions” (p. xii). She reminds us that Whiteness is not invisible to First Nations Peoples’ but is hypervisible (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xiii). She invites international discussion on Whiteness and the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and notes that scholarship on Whiteness and First Nations sovereignty in America is minimal (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Asymmetrical power relations and White race dominance is perpetuated by the operations of White privileges, which include ignorance of Indigenous epistemologies (Larkin, 2013), avoidance, denial,

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<sup>3</sup>The word White is used here to maintain consistency with the original works, describing people of Anglo-Celtic origin.

<sup>4</sup> Black is the self-defined term used by these scholars to denote their African heritage.

colour blindness, complicity, defensiveness, and accusations of reverse racism (Pease, 2010). Theories of Whiteness break down the good anti-racist versus bad racist dichotomy by revealing how good anti-racists, who may be aware of inequalities, nonetheless remain beneficiaries of colonial power (Kowal, 2015; Salter, 2013). Policy processes, traditionally thought of as either a linear progression of agenda setting, decision making, and implementation, or as the science of muddling through, often neglect issue of power and the agency of frontline workers (Keely & Scoones, 2003). In this case study, we investigate how power, as the normalising of colonial authority, or Whiteness, inhibits equitable policymaking and muddies the translation of policy into practice.

A plethora of Australian guidelines that aim to redress the impact of colonisation are available for practitioners who work with First Nations Peoples (Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Government of South Australia, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2014). DEWNR's *Reconciliation Action Plan* foregrounds issues of colonisation, displacement, reconciliation, respectful and honest relationships, and listening before acting (Government of South Australia, 2014). However, the Indigenous Allied Health Australia (2015) publication *Cultural Responsiveness in Action: An IAHA Framework* is the only document to date that includes "self-awareness" for non-Indigenous practitioners as 1 of the 6 capabilities "essential for successful partnership and action" (pp. 12-15). While this document does not specify Whiteness, it does attend to the importance of exploring perspectives and attitudes. It is important to note these attempts to redress the ongoing impacts of colonialism and disadvantage in government policies, frameworks, and actions. However, as argued by Hage (2000) and Stratton (1998), inclusionary language (in policies such as multiculturalism) can work to ignore and overlook the power of Whiteness and the embedded processes of race, knowledge, and power.

First Nations traditional knowledge and land management techniques are now being incorporated into environmental management policy and practice internationally (Black & McBean, 2016) and in Australian (McCarthy, 1996). First Nations Peoples are expected to work in co-management partnerships under bureaucratic systems fortified by Western epistemologies, which underpin the authority of the colonised countries such as Australia. This is a site where embedded Whiteness in both government institutions and its staff intersect and affect the well-being of First Nations Peoples (Black & McBean, 2016; Hemming, 2007). Policymakers, scientists, engineers, and researchers lack in their understandings about how to move forward with incorporating Indigenous environmental management techniques (Black & McBean, 2016). As such, this article examines how non-Indigenous DEWNR workers observe and experience these initiatives— How and in what ways do non-Indigenous employees understand and negotiate the partnership?

### The Scene

DEWNR regulates eight NRM regions in the state of South Australia. For each region, one or two people manage Aboriginal Partnerships. We spoke with six managers from four of those regions. On a day-to-day level, managers from Aboriginal Partnerships collaborate with First Nations on projects such as feral species eradication, the creation of historical information boards for visitors to national parks, or in the identification of exclusion zones that protect sacred or secret sites from the public. Depending on

the region, whether rural, remote, or urban, managers may spend blocks of time living in Aboriginal communities on country and then return to their city offices.

There are many First Nations whose geographical boundaries do not align with the South Australian state borders or NRM regions. Some of the regions are comprised of a mix of First Nations and some are predominantly a single First Nation; therefore, some participants work mainly with one First Nation while others work with many. Across the State, there is a diverse range of different Aboriginal family groups, corporate groups, native title<sup>5</sup> holders, native title applicants, and freehold land rights<sup>6</sup> owners. While this helps set the scene, the focus of this analysis is upon the perspectives common between participants in relation to the reproduction or deconstruction of Whiteness regardless of similarities or differences of Aboriginal people in South Australia.

### Methodology

This is a cross-sectional study employing discourse analysis (Bryman, 2008; Johnstone, 2008). A key contact was located on the DEWNR website, whom we then cold called, established rapport, and received direction on potential participants and the needs of DEWNR—which ensured research relevance to the department. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants via the key contact who forwarded a letter of introduction onto the DEWNR Aboriginal Partnerships Working Group (APWG). Interested persons were free to contact the researcher privately. From the 12 non-Indigenous members of the APWG, 7 responded with expressions of interest and 6 completed one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

The interview questions were designed to:

- a. Explore the centrality of participants' location in mainstream Australia. What is your personal background in understanding Aboriginal culture and history prior to doing this work? What Aboriginal cultural training have you undertaken through your work?
- b. Identify if and how participants view Whiteness in the structure and culture of the institution in which they are employed. What challenges have you personally faced in working with Aboriginal partnerships with regards to Aboriginal knowledge and sovereignty? Can you identify a persistent problem that occurs between non-Indigenous people and Aboriginal people working in government partnerships?

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<sup>5</sup> The Native Title Act 1993 (Commonwealth) recognises and protects, within the Australian legal system, the native title rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples related to land and waters and in accordance with their traditional laws and customs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). Native title must be granted by a Federal Court of Law.

<sup>6</sup> The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981 (SA) and the Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984 (SA) provide for the vesting of title to certain lands known as the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara and the Maralinga lands, respectively, in the people who are acknowledged as the traditional owners.

Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length and participants have been given aliases.

Discourse analysis and thematic coding of interview transcriptions drew out key themes common across participant responses (Johnstone, 2008). Systematic analysis of the transcripts searched for repetition and differences between transcripts. NVivo software was employed to identify frequent words across all transcripts, and conduct word counts and build matrices of coded themes in order to explore relationships, order patterns, and draw connections (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Words and phrases that denote viewpoints—such as *looking* and *seeing*—are pertinent to unmasking the invisibility of Whiteness. Characteristics of Whiteness, such as a privilege, individuality, and paid employment, were used to code the data; however, this study engaged in cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning (O'Leary, 2010), regularly returning to established theory as well as allowing for new themes to arise. As is common in qualitative work, the operationalisation of concepts was decided upon as they emerged from the data collection and analysis (Natalier, 2013).

The Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at the Flinders University of South Australia granted ethical approval for this study. Approval from DEWNR was granted on the condition that individual participant consent was obtained in conjunction with consent from their managing supervisors.

## Results

Participants were non-Indigenous adults, with five self-identifying as White and one self-identifying as of both Polynesian and European descent. All had worked with First Nations Peoples between 4 and 10 years. Most reported interactions with First Nations children during their childhoods, yet had little formal education about First Nations Peoples in primary and high school. All had come across First Nations issues during their university education, but there was no consistency in their participation in formal workplace cultural training at DEWNR.

The participants employed discourses of Whiteness in complex ways, simultaneously reproducing and deconstructing Whiteness. The participants negotiated meanings of Whiteness through three key themes:

- a. Systems of management within government departments,
- b. Reflections on personal views and attitudes, and
- c. Perspectives on broader structures of state, sovereignty, and knowledge.

## Systems

The first theme that emerged from the interviews reveals participant's perspectives regarding Whiteness across systems of government and management within DEWNR. Australia's governance systems are built upon a form of colonial Whiteness that maintains inequalities for First Nations, and participants in this study are highly aware and critical of systemic inequalities between themselves and the First Nations Peoples with whom they work.

**Paid employment.** Scholars have drawn attention to paid employment, or wage labour, as a mechanism that laid the foundation of Whiteness, (Allen, 1997; Du Bois, 1962; Roediger, 1991). This is referred to in the scholarship as the *material benefits* of Whiteness. A critical awareness of inequalities around paid work and the lack of employment available to First Nations Peoples is clearly evident among this group of participants. Co-management of lands between First Nations and government often requires First Nations Peoples, as representatives of organisational bodies, to engage with government in their free time. First Nations Peoples are often not financially compensated for this highly political work, as are their non-Indigenous counterparts who work in the same space. Management plans place an enormous responsibility on First Nations leaders and significantly add to the stress on First Nations Peoples (Hemming, 2007). Historically, non-Indigenous people have filled paid colonial administrative positions, while First Nations Peoples have been subject to various top-down management regimes, including slavery. Contemporary government has inherited this system, as noted in the following excerpts:

Ben: I'm paid to be here 5 days a week and a lot of the people that I work with live in Aboriginal housing and volunteer their time in a whole raft of different areas, and it's quite possible that the large majority of projects that I'm looking for help to do, whoever is doing them with me would be doing them on a voluntary basis, or with payment from me but it would only be you know one little bit of payment here and one little bit of payment there and while their whole world continues with kids and family and housing insecurity and all that sort of stuff.

Rick: This doesn't apply to all Aboriginal people but to a lot of Aboriginal people they're thinking about really fundamental life basic necessities, whereas we just take that for granted, oh I know my salary is going to go in every two weeks.

The quotes above demonstrate the problematic of who achieves paid employment. Participants recognised their privilege in being paid for the work they do while their First Nations counterparts "volunteer" in the same partnership space.

**Timeframes.** Working to timeframes is a persistent problem that arose frequently across all interviews. Participants reflected critically upon DEWNR's regulated and compartmentalised timeframes, defined by Western management systems, which operate as a top-down colonial approach that maintains inequalities. In so doing, they revealed the privileges of Whiteness that define, structure, and organise the systems and processes of government departments.

Rick: So a lot of [colleagues] won't even go there or won't even bother to try to engage with [First Nations Peoples] cos they know that they're gonna, in their words have a hard time, because they don't work to the same timeframes.

Rick goes on to argue that Indigenous people, rather than external factors, are often viewed as the problem:

Rick: It has been extremely difficult and it's been difficult because we want to do work around this waterhole and the waterhole is not on their property it's on a neighbour's property and the neighbour is not an Aboriginal person, it's a person with long standing connection to the pastoral region, political clout, an old family from that district, old in terms of European settlement and so has political power and is just resisting . . . now if I was to talk to someone [else that I work with]. . . he would have automatically assumed it was the Aboriginal community that's taking a long time; they're too slow, they're not organised, they're fighting amongst themselves, all those common perceptions of what Aboriginal communities are like. But that's not the case at all. It's actually the pastoralist that's blocking, won't participate.

First Nations Peoples share a common complaint that the government does not deliver promised results (Hemming, Rigney, & Berg, 2011). As such, a lack of delivery is an issue for both parties in this partnership space. One participant stated, "government's really slow at doing stuff" (Joe) and another saw that "red tape" (Aaron) could leave Elders dying before they saw outcomes. As Alice argued:

Alice: And timeframes [pause] i-it gets very difficult, cos at the local level we can also appreciate that things take time but our governance structures don't support that very well, that if we've got Australian government funding and timeframes for delivery of that funding we always would struggle.

**Capacity building and governance.** The participants highlighted how responsibility is placed on First Nations to adhere to established management systems. Most participants avoided the typical trap of Whiteness by refusing to name Aboriginal people as the problem. However, it is difficult to avoid this "trap" as can be seen in the following excerpt, in which capacity building is viewed as an efficient way to "get on with things":

Alice: how do you operate in this whitefella<sup>7</sup> government society so that you can get what you need? Because that is still the dominant society we're in. Those rulebooks are not going to get changed dramatically, they're not. So if for that particular Aboriginal traditional lands association or native title group if they understand how to work in White society better they can probably get what they need a lot better too. But it's a corrupt system, that balance of it, not in any individual part but there's some real complexities to how we try and overcome these cultural differences, because I still feel we've got this dominant hammer of White society coming in on Aboriginal culture and saying "yeah you're Aboriginal, we get that, we respect that, but hey you still gotta do it our way."

However, participants were generally critical of existing structures of governance. Jonnie argued that working groups needed to be built in collaboration and with culturally appropriate structures:

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<sup>7</sup> Whitefella is a term used in Australia to denote a non-Indigenous person.

Jonnie: We've built a working group . . . in collaboration with the First Peoples, and because there's a broad group there, lots of language groups represented, what we've had to do is try and get a broad representation of that language group. So we've borrowed from . . . what [the First Nations groups] consider culturally appropriate structure of having seven Directors and built it into our working group simply because we want to have that representation across the board. I think when we started doing that everyone was going "that's a lot of people, why do you have that many people, why can't you have one person, the chair, you know, representing themselves?" It doesn't work, and I think that's really obvious that that doesn't work, so having that group of people takes the pressure off that one individual to make decisions for a whole group of people.

Jonnie believes this is worthwhile because "it works" for the First Nations partners he engages with and is a "step in the right direction." Privileging Western systems of governance in Aboriginal partnerships as normal, central, and superior reproduces the hegemonic nature of Whiteness—several participants recognised that adapting those structures to match First Nations governance models improves process and outcomes.

Insisting that First Nations Peoples and organisations work to the dominant system is a remnant of the colonial mandate to "civilise the natives." Joe was critical of this and spoke of "doing things in a culturally appropriate way . . . rather than the way you've grown up." He cites an example of an international standard in conservation planning that was "not working" and rather than "barrelling through" it was adapted to suit First Nations Peoples' approach to planning, especially in remote areas of Australia. Capacity building in the Western tradition has seen a string of policy failures for First Nations, and participants argued that building government capacity in non-Western ways is a possibility:

Aaron: At the moment the way that we write, even the writing of things poses a challenge, ahh you know, a management plan could be potentially sung or drawn or whatever so there's very different ways of doing it and they're just sort of challenges, like it's just about being creative on how you can merge those things together, about educating [non-Indigenous] people that there is a difference . . . you know there's potential to see things in different ways and to have better, better sort of outcomes.

As Keely and Scoones (2003) stated about policy, "the way in which issues are talked about is highly significant . . . The language in which it is framed is as significant as the actual content" (p. 37).

## Self

The role that Whiteness played in participants' behaviour, thoughts, personal interactions, and feelings was another important aspect explored during the interviews, and it was here that critical reflections on Whiteness became a "trickier business."

**Individuality.** As argued by Dyer (1997), to locate White people as a racialised group is a mechanism for dislodging the position of power that comes from being *just a person* as opposed to being *something*

*else*. Seeing oneself as an individual ties the Western concept of individuality to the centrality of Whiteness. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) reminded us, First Nations Peoples do see White people as a group and are hyperaware of the centeredness of Whiteness. Aaron applied his critical awareness of belonging to a White cultural group in ways that reversed the gaze and contextualised the larger political shaping in which he sees himself as a “pawn”:

Aaron: I think a lot of us take it as an individual thing whereas the [First Nation] movement is a nation-based thing, like it's bigger than any individual [First Nation person] as well. I think whitefella's take things to heart as on an individual basis and kinda don't get that what's happening there is much bigger than just either one of us . . . I find reflecting back onto that as um, as something that can, you know, make me feel sort of little bit more comfortable in those situations.

**A language for Whiteness?** Many participants found it difficult to express or pinpoint a language for Whiteness. Finding a language to describe Whiteness is a difficult task, and this is what organises its centred and normative position. Frankenberg (1993) noted, we must “understand not only how race is lived but also how it is seen, or not seen” (p. 9) In the quote below, Alice identified that Whiteness exists but it remains invisible to her and she is asking for a way to see through the fog.

Alice: I think the biggest thing is Whiteness is fog . . . Whiteness is fog, is not knowing how to how to deal with it, so I know things are different, I know I should consider it, but how do I do that?

Similarly, when Rick was asked if he had learnt anything about himself as a White person, he hesitated before he replied, “Oh yeah yeah I think it's difficult to, I find that difficult to actually put into words I think.”

Ben asked if we were interested in hearing a story about “being pulled up as a whitefella” and told the following story:

Ben: I was desperately needing to pee and we were at this [sacred] men's site you know and um we were there for about an hour and I was absolutely busting and eventually we left and I was the driver and we jumped in the car and drove for about 50 meters and I stopped the car jumped out and had a piss and this old Aboriginal bloke says “is that what you're doing? You're all the same, you think you're so powerful that even your piss is going to damage the place,” and that was just sort of, that that was a humorous thing but it was also just this like [pause] dunno it just showed me we're, we're, they're pretty grounded, pretty grounded, pretty humorous, pretty resilient.

In this story, the “old Aboriginal bloke” uses “all the same” and “you think you're powerful” together as a cultural description of White people. Ben begins to say, “it just showed me we're we're . . .” as if he is about to describe an aspect of Whiteness, but changes mid-sentence to describe First Nations Peoples instead. He is struggling with finding the language and falls back into deflecting belonging to White culture by disguising it behind First Nations humour.

In some cases, participants could see the centred position of Whiteness and attempted to reveal this in their practice. In the quote below, Rick provided an example of making a conscious effort to amend his spoken language to deconstruct the invisibility and normativity of Whiteness when telling a story about settling into working in an Aboriginal community. Rick repositions what would otherwise be centered as normal when he corrects himself mid-sentence to add, “what we would think.” Here he acknowledges what is seen to be “personal” is not a universal truth but a cultural construct.

Rick: almost straight away people would be telling me quite personal, what we would think of as quite personal, quite personal things like their relationships with each other in the community.

Another participant reflected upon written language, giving the example that an ecological character description<sup>8</sup> could reveal the “Western science culture way” of looking at the environment, and name it as such.

Aaron: when you’re writing an ecological character description um, you don’t say this is the Western science culture way of viewing the environment, that’s just being placed there as normal and the only bit that’s actually cultural is the Indigenous bit that’s in there . . . I’d like to see . . . language inserted in the work that we do to acknowledge that this is the way that we, this is a cultural way of doing it, it’s not *the* way of doing it. There’s other ways of doing things and potentially better ways um, it’s making our culture and the things that we think normal like [pause] they’re invisible at the moment, I don’t think a lot of people see the way that we do things is just part of our culture.

**Guilt and victimisation.** Participants noted that workplace Aboriginal cultural awareness training was heavily laden with history, which elicited responses of guilt in DEWNR staff. This response is a privilege of Whiteness. The participants view knowledge of history as a necessary component to contextualise the inequalities between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians; however, gaining an understanding of Australia’s colonial history can be “confronting,” as demonstrated in the quotes below.

Aaron: [in DEWNR] there is significant guilt in non-Indigenous people about colonisation and its impacts.

Ben: The feedback what I’ve got from the people in DEWNR, employees, that quite commonly cultural training follows a pretty similar path which is some historical coverage, some conversation around the political reasons, the policy reasons for why we’re in the current situation that we are in. Quite often people leave feeling pretty deflated, possibly shameful, possibly guilty . . . and they’ve left feeling quite victimised.

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<sup>8</sup> An ecological character description describes in detail the species, communities, and habitats of a specific area.

It is important for First Nations Peoples' to tell their stories of how colonisation affects them, past and present (Cowlshaw, 2004) and, in hearing these stories, non-Indigenous Australians can feel uncomfortable in conversations about Whiteness, race, and its legacy. As argued by Maddison (2011), non-Indigenous Australians must move beyond guilt in order to progress towards decolonisation.

## Sovereignty

In addition to reflections about systems of government in DEWNR and their personal thoughts and feelings about Whiteness, participants' perspectives revealed how Whiteness works in relation to broader processes of nationhood and sovereignty. Central to any relationship are the terms on which they were founded (Salter, 2013). The colonisation of Aboriginal people was based on the originary violence of *terra nullius* (Watson, 2009), and this continues to frame the overarching authority of DEWNR. On one level, participants were critical of the government's tokenistic incorporation of traditional ownership and the symbolic violence inherent in this. They also wished to value and incorporate Indigenous knowledge, especially ecological knowledge.

**The political landscape: Sovereignty and the state.** Participants reflect critically on the government's symbolic acknowledgement of traditional ownership. They argued that Reconciliation Action Plans and performances of Acknowledgement of Country<sup>9</sup> are important, and Welcome to Country<sup>10</sup> delivered by First Nations Peoples is vital. However, this is undermined when the definition of "traditional" relegates First Nations to the past while Western paradigms are normalised as the only system under which to operationalise this partnership, as expressed by Ben's critical insights the quote below.

Ben: So we espouse this and a lot of our planning documents espouse this, you know the traditional owners of the land . . . But how does that articulate? Well it doesn't at all. Aboriginal people are consulted generally late in any planning processes. If they are consulted early my feeling is that they're consulted on this kind of symbolic action side of things rather than actual input into management you know, so for example, I feel like this department would like signs [in parks] that say this land here was used for this and this area here was that. Do we actually want to work with Aboriginal people on the more meaningful management actions about what should happen on their country? No I don't think so.

**Recognition of ecological knowledge: A baby step.** In addition to this critical take on tokenism, participants argued for recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledge. However, what is

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<sup>9</sup> Acknowledgement of Country is based on a traditional protocol of giving recognition to the First Nations country upon which people stand and pays respect to Elders past, present, and future. It is performed by non-Indigenous Australians or First Nations People who do not have ancestral ties to the land upon which they stand.

<sup>10</sup> Welcome to Country is traditional protocol performed by First Nations Peoples who have ancestral ties to the land upon which they stand, welcoming others onto their land and paying respect to Elders past, present, and future.

accepted as valid knowledge, including ownership of lands, is based on terms defined by the colonial mission, underpinned by Orientalist frameworks of knowledge. As Moreton-Robinson (1999) argued, First Nations culture is only recognised by the State if it is traditional and fixed. This is reflected in the ways in which participants spoke about “ecological knowledge” rather than broader questions of sovereignty and social or political knowledge. There is a growing space that is incorporating traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge in NRM in Australia and participants spoke about the ways in which DEWNR sought to respect and protect this knowledge. Participants were highly aware of the issue of traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge as intellectual property and challenged White possessive logic in terms of this perspective (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Joe tells a story of a biologist who ignored community policy and excitedly wrote an article about his “new discovery” of *Grevillea*, which led to businessman looking to secure a financial monopoly on the cultivation and sale of the *Grevillea*. Joe displayed a critical awareness of the perils of the White possessive in which non-Indigenous people exploit and profit from First Nations ecological knowledge.

Joe: we did like a joint biological survey between Parks and Wildlife and the community and it was a whitefella who pointed out this, a unique plant he'd never seen before, *Grevillea*, and . . . then went “new species holy shit that's awesome,” went and wrote an article about it and published it in their newsletter without running it past the community first, which everything was agreed gets run past the community first. Next thing you know there's a fella with an Australian native plant nursery with a pretty bad reputation coming out looking for it, brandishing the article going “oh I'm just looking for this do you know where it is, can I have a look?” . . . So because this particular plant had great horticultural potential beautiful flowers and all this stuff and it wasn't on the market this fella wanted to get the seeds and go through the process of getting plant breeders rights so he would have the monopoly over the sales of that plant. So total, just stuff up, little miscommunication on Parks and Wildlife behalf created a big issue for people on the ground.

Similarly, Rick explained the development of new DEWNR guidelines is an ethical process to protect First Nations ecological knowledge and alleviate differences in approach to ecological knowledge. However, while recognizing the importance of these critical readings, it could be argued that the nature–culture dichotomy underpinning colonial discourses underpin this focus on ecological knowledge. Colonial and Orientalist discourses have a long history of framing Indigenous knowledge as tradition, as closer to nature. Indigenous ecological knowledge, which is seen as traditional, is arguably easier for non-Indigenous practitioners to incorporate under paradigms of Whiteness. A more decolonising move is to recognise the full extent of First Nations knowledge, which includes not just connection to country and knowledge of natural and ecological landscapes, but also understandings of the State's political and bureaucratic systems, and the complex issues of First Nations sovereignty.

One participant decisively moved the discussion on from ecology, as indicated in the quotes below in which First Nations knowledge of bureaucratic and political systems is recognised by non-Indigenous people.

Aaron: Aboriginal organisations have to go for a whole different range of um options, say if they wanna keep themselves running, a whole range of different ah grants or funding opportunities, they've got to liaise with a whole range of different people and I think they've got really much better insights in how to bring all those things together, so coordinating things, how you negotiate and work different parts of the network to progress things and I think a lot of non-Indigenous people are quite blasé to that sort of thing, I have been anyway, but it's interesting to see how an Aboriginal organisation works that, you know looks at the key networks, looks at how they join together, looks at what you'd need to bring them together um like in an agreement making sense, bind that and to start working it. The [First Nation I work with] has thought about that a lot and I guess they're working that strategy on the state and it's really a interesting thing to see because a lot of non-Indigenous people don't actually have to think about that.

Rick: if you go and talk to an Aboriginal group they're very really switched on about those kind of things [political rights], now how they've arrived at that position is, I don't really know what it is, I can speculate but I don't know for sure why they've arrived at that point of view.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, participants in this study were critically aware of structural inequalities inherent in their day-to-day work, and they provided some fascinating critical and engaged reflections on problems emerging in the contact zone. However, we argue that the participants' struggle for a meaningful language to understand the privileges of Whiteness, and they often find it difficult to describe "the fog of Whiteness." In addition, their attempts to incorporate and value Indigenous knowledge in the main focused on ecological knowledge at the expense of broader debates about First Nation sovereignty. This is a difficult task, in view of the tensions these managers negotiate across various aspects of their work— however, harnessing the critical insights and frustrations articulated by the participants is vital in order to explore issues that arise in the contact zone. We argue that a critical awareness is not enough, rather a set of strategies are needed to shift the emphasis from awareness of Aboriginal history, knowledge, and culture (Government of South Australia, 2014) to strategies that tackle the broader issues of sovereignty and power.

While these insights are useful, they are not generalizable— a limitation of the study. Future studies, conducted internationally, examining perspectives of non-Indigenous practitioners working in partnership with Indigenous Peoples will contribute to a body of knowledge that can inform policymaking and its translation into practice. This is especially important as the shaping of environmental policy is currently influenced by the scientific discourses of "experts" in the international arena (Keely & Scoones, 2003).

As we have argued throughout, Whiteness underpins processes of organisational communication, culture, and power (Grimes, 2002). This in part explains how privilege shapes relations, processes, contexts, policy and ecology documents, outcomes of work, and the structure of institutional management (Al Ariss, Özbilgin, Tatli, & April, 2014). Participants in this cohort are largely critical of colonial structures of government and the inequalities that arise. Throughout their narratives,

participants demonstrated a willingness to overcome inequalities and make moves to counter unbalanced systems in this partnership space, especially regarding structural inequalities. They are aware of how tensions exist in the contact zone between different systems of government, leadership models, and knowledge claims.

Strategies that relinquish Western, Eurocentric ownership are required. This research has revealed some important insights that lend themselves to the following recommendations for policy praxis in contact zones and partnership spaces. While this case is situated in South Australia, we argue that these recommendations apply to Indigenous policy and practice internationally. We recommend:

- a. Practitioners continue to challenge colonial governance systems so that governance structures in partnership spaces reflect First Nations governance structures.
- b. Indigenous Peoples' time, physical labour, and intellectual labour be valued monetarily and equally to non-Indigenous people.
- c. The compartmentalised timeframes in Western management systems be reconsidered.
- d. Governments reorientate partnership relationships around Indigenous ways of knowing.
- e. Formal cultural awareness training be delivered consistently in order to include explorations of Whiteness and Western cultural habits, providing them with a language for Whiteness, as well as understanding Indigenous cultures.
- f. Understandings of Indigenous knowledges move beyond ecology to acknowledge political knowledge and understandings of Indigenous sovereignty.
- g. Traditional be understood as *traditional-and-ongoing* not traditional-as-past.
- h. Dialogue, decision making, agenda setting, policymaking, implementation, and evaluation should occur on a nation-to-nation level, and treaty commitments and agreements should be honoured by Western governments.

As argued by Smith (2012), decolonisation needs a radical reworking knowledge construction:

The intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place. Decolonizing methodologies is not a method for revolution in a political sense but provokes some revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation. (pp. 23-24)

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