

## CHAPTER 1

# A long, slow dance: The nation's history

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I'm a Marda Marda<sup>1</sup> from Miriwoong Country in the East Kimberley of Western Australia.

I've lived moving between my ancestral country in the Kimberley, and my birth country of the South West of Western Australia, to which my family's narrative was transported when my grandmother was removed from her country as a child. We're all products of our past, yet we make judgements every day about how these foundations manifest in our present. The American writer William Faulkner summed up this notion perfectly: 'The past is never dead. It's not even the past ...' (Faulkner, 1950, p. xx), describing the substantial ghosting of my present by long shadows cast by shifting lights of my ancestors, black and white.

I was born on Sunday, 28 May 1967 in Noongar Country in Perth. This was the first day after the 1967 Referendum that resulted in the now legendary 'Yes' vote that turned the tide, symbolically, if not in reality for all, on the issue of civil rights and the ideal of equality before the law in Australia. The National Museum of Australia's Defining Moments in Australian History project included the 1967 Referendum on the initial list of 100 moments in Australian history created 'to stimulate a public discussion about the events that have been of profound significance to the Australian people' (National Museum of Australia, n.d.). On the world stage it was part of the sweeping tides of change that marked the 20th century as one of rapid and significant social and political transformation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it was a key turning point, a 'defining moment', if you will, in a long community-led political struggle for equality, and beyond this, a reaffirmation of collective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights bound to our respective language groups (sometimes referred to as nations).

The 1967 Referendum was initiated to correct another defining moment in Australian history: the creation of the Constitution of Australia. Specifically, the Constitution transferred powers formerly vested in colonies (which became States in 1901 with Federation) to the Commonwealth, except for administration of Aboriginal peoples, which remained a State (former colony) responsibility because section 127 of the Constitution excluded people classified as ‘aboriginal natives’ [sic] when counting the population for electoral purposes, effectively leaving Aboriginal peoples at the mercy of the States. This was compounded by section 51(xxvi), which made provision to make laws for ‘people of any race, other than the aboriginal [sic] people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws’. As I have written together with my colleague Professor Anna Haebich: ‘This focus on race was part of the Constitution’s exclusionary goal of racial purity, and therefore had to specify that this power did not apply to any Indigenous people; this provision was removed in 1967’ (Haebich and Kinnane, 2013, p. 332).

I’ve always felt a great sense of respect for those Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who worked to change this newly created nation state for future generations. I feel we owe them a debt; an obligation to build on the opportunities they created to make this nation as inclusive, equal, diverse and mature as they had hoped it could be. Like Eddie Mabo’s triumph in the High Court in 1992 (another one of the initial list of 100 defining moments), which led to the recognition of native title (and consequently, of the Indigenous nations within), this victory was not just for Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal people; it was an act of justice for all Australians. These pivotal events now form part of our shared histories.

My own history lessons began as all history lessons begin, with my family. My mother, aunts and uncles were consummate storytellers. Their personal histories sang out from our overcrowded kitchen (or the front veranda in the summer). They were filled with daily triumphs, common tragedies and absurd causes. These family and community histories were also influenced by the larger tides of history I have hinted at: colonisation, imperialism, socialism, the divide between church and state, the Depression, World Wars 1 and 2, peacetime, the Baby Boom, post-war immigration, anti-colonialism, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, women’s rights and equal pay, to name a few. We all share the experience of our respective community histories that are tied to kin, place and circumstance and increasingly intersect with these larger global narratives.

Being Aboriginal, my family’s personal and community histories also resonated with deeper foundations of belonging to country and how this defined our relationships to each other. Being Aboriginal in the emerging nation state of Australia, our histories were also underpinned by common experiences of segregation, of the removal of children from family and country, of incarceration in missions and government settlements without trial, of being prohibited to enter cities and towns because of the all too common out-of-town-by-six-o’clock laws, of young deaths, of deaths in custody, and of all too common poverty. These too were regular elements of the stories that filled our house, but our own narratives were generally more concerned with how we supported each other in spite of unjust laws and regulations; of how we

maintained identity and belonging to each other and to country; of how we mobilised as peoples and the impacts of these movements, and also our respect for the Kartiyas<sup>2</sup> who became part of these narratives. We have also been highly critical of ourselves and of each other, but the complexity of these internal struggles and debates had to take a back seat to the struggle for rights. The positioning of our stories against ideas of dominant narratives that began at first contact with a mix of mutual fear, curiosity and, at times even possibility, became cemented by a narrative in which Indigenous peoples and histories moved from the centre stage to the edge of the canvas, and eventually were air-brushed from the historical frame.

Until the 1970s Australian history books rarely mentioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I came to history as a means of understanding the layered influence of the past in my personal and collective present, yet with an almost normalised awareness that our histories were hidden from most, known only within our own circles. When I began this journey in earnest, recording community oral histories from 1988 onwards as a young man, I had no idea it would result in dozens of stories in books, chapters, documentaries, databases and exhibitions that would be shared with thousands of people. I simply wanted to share our community stories because, quite simply, we value sharing our history among ourselves, and the majority of people in Australia did not know, see or understand us or our history. Many still do not. Some have chosen not to attempt to understand, falling back on myths and misconceptions. Some have chosen a position, a corner, and held it against all evidence to the contrary. Some have seen one aspect of Indigenous Australians, in the news, in reports of disadvantage and so on, and allowed only this window to frame their view. But many have chosen to listen. More importantly, many more have chosen to ask, to question (increasingly critically and self-critically) and to come to an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through the many voices now able to be heard across the 250 language groups and 400 clans that have underpinned this continent's (and its islands') histories for an estimated 60 000 years.

## Introduction

This chapter discusses Australian history through an examination of wider historical investigations, cyclical debates, common and counter-narratives, and key turning points (defining moments) to understand how we, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, have engaged with oral testimony and the archival record to reveal how Indigenous history is understood and how it is made. Instead of a plotted history, it responds to a number of the listed Indigenous historical moments of the Defining Moments in Australian History project to convey the complexity and power of Indigenous history and its influence in our present. This chapter also aims to stimulate discussion around the topic, a goal proposed by the project's patrons, Mr Michael Ball AM and the Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG.

## History's shadow

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history is commonly portrayed as a contested space within the media crossfire of the mainstream press. For students approaching this topic for the first time it may seem a snare-laden track of wildly polemic judgements. Models of Australian history are being reinterpreted as oral testimony, and reinvestigation of the archives unveils rich narratives and counter-narratives.

History's shadow has a way of shifting shape and changing form depending on the light of available evidence, the structures from which shadows are cast and the standpoint from which history is viewed. In 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a number of statements about Australian history; one described the colonisation of Australia as 'the defining moment in the history of this continent' (cited in Dingle, 2014), which he repeated just to make sure it was clear, while launching the Defining Moments in Australian History project at the National Museum of Australia; another, in a speech to business leaders in the lead-up to the G20 Summit in Brisbane, summed up thousands of years of maintenance of country, law and culture as being represented by 'nothing but bush' (cited in Henderson, 2014). Pondering the perception of arriving colonists to Sydney in 1788, the Prime Minister commented:

[I]t's hard to think that back in 1788 it was nothing but bush and that the Marines, and the convicts and the sailors that struggled off those 12 ships just a few hundred yards from where we are ... must have thought they'd come almost to the Moon (Henderson, 2014).

The repeated statement about colonisation being 'the defining moment' caused some consternation. The comment that Australia was 'nothing but bush' caused outrage for many in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

These were remarkably uninformed statements for a Prime Minister who had dubbed himself, in his election-win acceptance speech, as 'the Prime Minister of Aboriginal Affairs'. For those aware of the complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality, society, relationships to country and systems of language, governance and law, they were more than uninformed comments. Prime Minister Abbott's stance was a continuing conservative line, advanced by his predecessor, Prime Minister Howard, and one that appeared, as many of Prime Minister Howard's comments appeared, partisan, entrenched and unquestioning. Others have commented that Prime Minister Abbott was merely attempting to imagine a perspective of his own collective British historical forebears at a point of contact with lands, waters and cultures they knew little to nothing about, noting a statement from Mr Abbott earlier in 2014 that 'initially the impact [of British settlement] was all bad – disease, dispossession, discrimination, at times wanton murder' (cited in Pearlman, 2014). History is strewn with snares and in retreading its paths, perspectives matter, as does the need to be aware of how these tracks were created in the first place lest we wish to repeat past narratives unintentionally, or, if we choose to uphold them intentionally, that we prepare for debate.

In making his statements the Prime Minister was following a well-trodden trail, a long tradition in which what would become known as Australia was believed to be a 'land without history' (McKenna, 2013, p. 562). Writing of changing perspectives of history in Australia, McKenna describes how this continuing practice, in which some Australians 'refer to their history as slight, boring or inconsequential compared to that of Europe or America', can represent a kind of deference to our northern hemisphere roots and influences based on lacking a connection to a long Indigenous past, but also a freedom, a kind of 'blank slate' upon which more recent history is given greater prominence (McKenna, 2013, p. 562). Writing of colonists and of the Australian citizen after Federation in 1901, McKenna (2013) comments:

History was exiled within them. The incongruity of living in an ancient country in which settler society was 'new' only heightened the sense of impermanence, fragility and anxiety concerning the past. The antiquity of the country was hidden from the settlers by their failure to know the Aboriginal languages and cultures that might have afforded them understanding (p. 562).

But there were many colonists who were aware of language, law, culture and ownership. Governor Phillip of the colony of New South Wales even lamented the lack of a treaty between Aboriginal peoples and British subjects. So where did such knowing turn to forgetting? When did these possibilities born of close proximity begin to build to create this 'history anxiety' that would result in the air-brushing of thousands of years of occupation and ownership?

## Beyond the cult of forgetfulness

Australian history has matured significantly from the days of the 'cult of forgetfulness' marked by failure of any real engagement with 'unacknowledged relations between two racial groups', as identified by W. E. H. Stanner in the second of his 1968 Boyer Lectures, 'The Great Australian Silence' (Haebich, 2005, p. 2). This was in spite of the fact that 'early colonists left a lively archive of accounts of both amicable and violent encounters, exploitative and humanitarian relations, and public debates about Aborigines' fate in newspapers, personal memoirs and professional histories' (Haebich, 2005, p. 2). All historical analysis is framed very much within the gaze of the reviewer, and as Anne Curthoys has highlighted, 'the project of colonisation, and later nation building, is inherently and self-consciously historical ... compared to British heritage Australian history was nothing. It was "still in the making"' (Curthoys, 1997, p. 31, cited in McKenna, 2013, p. 262).

Before colonisation the land mass and waters of what is now known as Australia had no single term for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who had occupied it for thousands of years. Europeans imagined this land mass for many centuries, proclaiming, among many different names, *Terra Australis* (Latin term meaning 'Great South Land'), *Terra Australis Incognita* (Latin term meaning 'Unknown Great South Land') and *La Australia del Espíritu Santo* (Spanish term meaning 'the southern land of the Holy Spirit'), to name a few (Taylor, 2004, p. 1). From

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives the continent was made up of separate countries linked through cultural governance of groups who shared law, language, ritual, resources and trade. Within the lands and waters of the Meriam, Kaurareg, Wiradjuri, Gadigal, Adnyamathanha, Arrernte, Noongar, Yawuru, Yolŋu, Kuku Yalangi, Miriwoong or Palawa, to name a few of the 250 separate language groups, the Eurocentric constructions would take more than two centuries to overturn, legally, through the *Mabo* High Court judgment. Yet, the myth of terra nullius that underpinned these notions of discovery and European superiority remain within uninformed imaginings in popular culture.

As an Aboriginal person (or, more specifically, as a Miriwoong Marda Marda), the very particular Indigenous Australian act of ‘placing’ someone opens up many possible complex relationships between Aboriginality, culture, land and our sense of belonging. Aboriginal identities, governance, ownership and sense of ‘peoplehood’ (Rowse, 2013) have long narratives underpinned by cultural spiritual practice bound with country, common narratives bound in shared experiences of colonialism, and unique personal experiences, collective and individual. Despite the impacts of colonisation, and because of our choices to uphold, value (and question) our different collective sense of ourselves as ‘peoples’, the act of ‘placing’ remains an important ethnic and cultural marker within our own language groups and in our own communities. This will be obvious to many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander readers, and to some non-Indigenous readers, but for those who were not aware it is important to know how we see ourselves in our present, and how our present is infused with our collective sense of being members of many traditional nations within this one continent (and its many islands). Our recent ancestors (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) fought for us to be counted as citizens in the nation state in the name of equality. This did not involve transferring one sense of belonging for another, one allegiance for another, but, rather, it acknowledged the personal and collective realities of Indigenous histories and the multiple connections and belongings that underpin our complexity, and the wider multicultural Australian population’s complexities also.

Regardless of the thousands of Indigenous oral histories that have been shared alongside more mature engagement with the archival record in Australia, the question of possession of what has come to be known as Australia, or its polemic counterpart, dispossession of Aboriginal Traditional Owners, remains a long-standing debate within this country. Within these poles historian Penny Taylor relates how these cyclical narratives have a long history linked to Stanner’s ‘cult of forgetfulness’:

Australian history books up until the 1970s rarely mentioned Aboriginal people. Instead they featured colonial heroes, explorers, intrepid pioneers, conquest of the interior and the spread of ‘civilisation’. Most school history books in the first half of the twentieth century devoted far more space to merino sheep than to the original inhabitants. If Indigenous Australians were mentioned at all they were represented as killing an occasional shepherd before fading away before the forces of progress (Taylor, 2004, p. 1).

Stanner’s landmark Boyer Lectures of 1968 were a turning point and a reflection on the changing mood of a maturing nation state. Coming on the heels of the 1967

Referendum, it was voiced closer to the flame of decades of Aboriginal political and social agitation aimed at transforming the Australian nation state, and its people, as stated, in the name of equality and of unique inherent Indigenous difference and rights vested in traditional ownership of lands and waters.

## A world of alternatives

Over time models of Australian history have been subject to reinterpretation and reinvestigation. Change can be seen as a series of shifts in perspective, a reinterpretation of evidence within the changing cultural attitudes of those framing the questions that guided original investigations. Historians cannot be divorced from their cultural foundations, and neither can they be expected to have access to every piece of evidence. Evidence does not make itself known automatically. New evidence is emerging all the time as the vast store of records kept *about* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is used to inform reinterpretations of past investigations. Professor Anna Haebich has written extensively on historical issues of national significance; in particular, she has researched Aboriginal history utilising a wide range of sources, including oral testimony. Summing up the 'battleground of Australian history', Professor Haebich (2005) notes the shift in debate during the period from the 1970s to the early 21st century as one where

proponents have fought to replace national myths of benign settlement and unimpeded progress with discomfiting histories of colonial invasion and destruction driven by demand for land and resources at any cost. These counter histories have played a central role in national debates over native title, sovereignty, Aboriginal deaths in custody, Mabo, the 'Stolen Generations' and more recently, stolen wages – debates that have prompted a crisis in national consciousness and identity (p. x).

Professor Marcia Langton, a Wiradjuri/Bidjara woman, also recognises the shift – from having the 'bizarre' yet common experience of being Aboriginal and being taught histories in school that almost invariably overlooked any sense of an Aboriginal understanding of the past, to eventually arriving at a situation where new generations of historians have uncovered different understandings of the past. As Langton (2008) states, 'the ridiculous and audacious, as well as the common or garden activities of ordinary and extraordinary people have replaced the monotonous tales of the March of Civilisation' (p. xxiv). In regard to the way in which generalised debates and studies of movements in history can remove the personal and connecting nature of our shared histories, Penny Taylor (2004) reminds us that 'the shared past of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may well be harrowing and confronting, but it also contains actions of great courage and humanity by individuals from various backgrounds; lasting relationships of warmth, loyalty and affection; and ordinary people of good will' (p. 18). Within a similarly considered perspective, Langton acknowledges that the approach of Australian history, more generally, is maturing and allowing for alternative views to enter the fray: 'History is a world of alternatives. Readers of the archives will each follow their own trail

through the pages of journals, diaries, past accounts and images, perhaps lured by a special character or intrigued by a particular event' (Langton, 2008, p. xxv).

When we are able to approach history in this way, considering a range of evidence, interpreting the perspective of witnesses, acknowledging the context of the period of evidence making, and importantly, reflecting on our own positions within this analysis, history continues to provide us with new understandings of our present, as Taylor (2004) reminds us:

We should not be afraid of debates or divergent perspectives on the past, and acknowledge that different generations will enter this same labyrinth, revisit available evidence, weigh up new evidence and redress their past as a means of living within their present ... No one has a monopoly on 'truth', and often the only way to advance knowledge is to suggest interpretations beyond the currently perceived 'truths' or wisdoms (p. 18).

This is the historian's craft, and with greater frequency and diversity since the 1970s, thanks in great part to Stanner's Boyer Lectures of 1968, non-Indigenous historians initially, and later, increasingly, Indigenous historians, have created rich narratives and counter-narratives.

Reviewing the 'history anxiety' that has marked Australian history, McKenna describes how assumptions made in 1901 with Federation, that Aboriginal Australians, and for that matter Aboriginal history, were 'destined for extinction' would prove unfounded, and would in fact 'unsettle the moral legitimacy of the Commonwealth', as the 'gradual surfacing of the very history that had allegedly been "vanquished" would come to represent the most significant shift in historical consciousness in twentieth century Australia' (McKenna, 2013, p. 566). Underlying the 'slow and traumatic realisation' of this continent's long Indigenous history and many countries, McKenna (2013) describes how Australians have increasingly come to understand that

[t]here was no history of Australia that was non-Indigenous. From the moment of first contact settler history became part of Indigenous history, and Indigenous history became part of settler history (p. 566).

While many of us have come to understand these greater complexities, some, such as Prime Minister Abbott, trip up old snares as part of the 'cult of forgetfulness'. These old trails have a habit of trapping the unaware or the disrespectful. As Langton, Haebich, McKenna, Taylor and Stanner have reminded us, there are rich and complex narratives to be found and reinterpreted in ways far more interesting than a return to the 'Great Australian Silence'. However, to ensure that we have a greater sense of the trails we follow, it is also important to have a sense of how these trails are interpreted.

## Making knowledge, making history

The Aboriginal history that non-Indigenous Australians became part of and the settler history that Aboriginal history became part of were initially constructed through anthropology for those outside our communities – that is, for people

learning about Aboriginal 'things', as Marcia Langton has referred to the artefacts of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations (imaginings and projections) in her landmark book, *Well I Heard It on the Radio, and I Saw It on the Television ...* (Langton, 1993, p. 31). This earlier anthropology focused on difference of cultures within the ethic of 'capturing' Aboriginal Australia, 'before it is too late', drawing on a notion of authenticity tied to Eurocentric perceptions and standpoints. It was largely constructed from a standpoint of loss, of an Aboriginal history that had followed (been led) down a trail of destruction, miscegenation and equally mixed (read as inauthentic) cultural traditions supposedly 'tainted' by Westernism.

The Wiradjuri historian and writer Lawrence Bamblett (2013, p. 15) highlights this issue by drawing on the work of Gorringer, Ross and Fforde (2011) to identify a 'deficit discourse' about Indigenous people that focuses only on negative elements of Indigenous experience, creating an overall picture of victimhood or inferiority. This is not to suggest that we should not discuss obvious disparities of wealth, health, education and incarceration rates, or disparate and desperate Indigenous historical characters; Bamblett is at pains to remind us that this one perspective does not in any way represent all Indigenous realities. It does, in fact, say as much about those constructing this narrative that deficits are all they are able to see, creating a powerful narrative of helplessness and failure. Often the counter-narrative to this has been to portray only positive achievements within a kind of reverse positivist account, often done through highlighting distinct elements of Indigenous cultures. However, Langton cautions against this approach as essentialism, casting an Indigenous authenticity in romantic terms, trapping Indigenous agency to that of adhering only to tradition, ignoring Indigenous choice, difference, complexity and vibrancy (Langton, 2011, cited in Bamblett, 2013, p. 15).

While rallying against the dominant assimilationist constructions that Indigenous communities have had to endure, Langton has argued that to simply create positive images of ourselves for the purposes of propaganda would be to make naked emperors of ourselves (Langton, 1993, p. 27). This argument is punctuated by the statement that 'there is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make "better" representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives "greater" understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated *Other*' (Langton, 1993, p. 27; original emphasis). This is not to say that this entire field of constructed imaginings by non-Indigenous people is not to be critiqued. Langton clearly understands, and relates the problems that these creations have caused for Aboriginal communities, being tied up in the colonisation of Aboriginal countries, and in the control and manipulation of Aboriginal people and history. What Langton (1993) argues for is the need for Aboriginality to be understood as a created '*thing*' (my emphasis) that 'arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book' (p. 31).

As such, these constructions of Aboriginality that infused the narratives created about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories are understood to have arisen

out of an *intersubjectivity* between multiple perspectives and experiences, and in this manner, there is no one understanding of a singular fixed Aboriginality, or singular fixed perspective of history. Such intersubjectivity is also created through dialogue between different Aboriginal peoples (Langton, 1993, pp. 12–14, 34).

In deconstructing this intersubjectivity, Langton identifies three 'broad' categories of constructions of Aboriginality that we should be aware of: (1) Aboriginal people interact with other Aboriginal people in social situations within our own cultures; (2) Aboriginality is constructed through a process whereby 'there are the familiar stereotypes and constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people'; (3) Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue where 'the individuals involved will test imagined models of each other, repeatedly adjusting these models as the responses are processed, to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other', and in these models 'both the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating' (Langton, 1993, pp. 34–5). In accepting the second category of construction as a colonial manifestation, where does this place the role of the third category? In considering this question, Langton, among other theorists, argues that this is not a post-colonial dialogue. What is called for is not an assumed post-colonial situation, but the need to be constantly aware of the existence of the second category, and the need to avoid falling into its trap. This, Langton argues, requires an anti-colonial stance. An anti-colonial dialogue accepts that neo-colonialism is alive and well in Australia, and needs to be recognised and avoided. This argument of an anti-colonial approach, or a decolonising methodology, is an inclusive one, open to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Beyond questioning both parties, it also begs critical self-reflection.

Calls for self-reflection on the part of non-indigenous people have been a key element of 'whiteness' studies that have sought to deconstruct assumed positions of power held by Western societies, keen to study indigenous disadvantage (deficits) and difference (othering) but less keen to engage in self-reflection of ingrained Western knowledges. As Langton has indicated with the consideration of the third category of 'dialogue', there will be a multiplicity of possible creations that come out of this dialogue. In discussing these possible creations, Langton is chiefly concerned with debunking mythical constructions of Aboriginality. In relating the 'third way' Langton indicates the dialogue between diverse Aboriginal peoples and diverse non-Aboriginal peoples. This is an important consideration. The power of 'whiteness' in making itself invisible is as much a part of the problem of mythologising Aboriginality as the imagined Aboriginality being constructed. That is to say, within the spectrum of 'whiteness' that exists, from neo-Nazi expressions of Arian dominance (a denial of any requirement for self-reflection) to 'white guilt', there needs to be a 're-writing (of) "whiteness" within a discourse of resistance' that will provide a means for whites to 'engage and live with and through difference and diverse racial formations as a crossroads for articulating different cultural landscapes, identities, languages, and histories' (Giroux, 1997, p. 385).

In this way, considering 'whiteness' alongside 'Aboriginality' is an essential element of the process. If this is not considered, that is, if non-Aboriginal people are