

Justice on *Country*

How Indigenous Resurgence Moves Beyond the Limits of Transitional Justice in Australia

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March 2026

**A Dissertation Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (M.A.)
in Social and Cultural Anthropology**

Declaration of Intent

I attest that I have written this work independently and have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. Literally reproduced text passages, including individual sentences and parts thereof, are marked as quotes.

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Bayreuth, 11 March 2026

Abstract

In settler-colonial contexts, transitional justice (TJ) initiatives such as truth-telling, treaty-making, and formal apologies are frequently presented as mechanisms to redress historical wrongs and reconfigure political relationships. This thesis examines that claim in a rural town in the state of Victoria, Australia, asking: how does the Wotjobaluk community navigate, resist, and remake transitional justice within everyday spaces of care, silence, and resurgence?

Drawing on sustained ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, go-alongs, and semi-structured interviews, the study treats locality as both method and analytic. It shows how Aboriginal community-controlled cooperatives (ACCOs) enact authority, generate trust as a fragile ‘currency of care,’ and mediate the conditional meanings of state recognition and treaty processes.

The analysis identifies two structural constraints on state-led TJ. First, a *necropolitics of abandonment*, in which responsibility for life-sustaining care is delegated to Aboriginal cooperatives as the state retreats. Second, an affective economy of public silence, where fear of being labelled ‘racist’ displaces structural critique. In response, the Wotjobaluk community combines selective engagement with state mechanisms and strategic withdrawal from hostile arenas. Through everyday practices of care, cultural continuity, and self-governance, they sustain political authority and collective futurity alongside, and often in spite of, state processes.

By centring locality and everyday life, this thesis contributes a critical ethnographic perspective to debates on transitional justice, settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty, showing that transformative justice emerges not from state architectures alone, but in community spaces where Indigenous futures are actively made.

Keywords: Transitional justice, Indigenous resurgence, settler colonialism, community-controlled cooperatives, Australia, everyday politics, locality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the traditional lands I travelled through and lived on during my stay in Australia. I acknowledge the Wotjobaluk and thank them for caring for the land and waters I had the opportunity to better understand and experience.

A heartfelt thank you to the members, employees, and the wider community of the Cooperative who took the time to get to know me and made it easier to appreciate the beauty and complexity of Australia. Thank you for trusting me by sharing your stories, resilience, and love for life.

To my friend Eliza, my companion in everyday life and on our road trips, I would not have made it to Australia without you. Having you guide me through an unknown country was the best I could have asked for. In a new landscape of gum trees and infinite land, you were my anchor. To my friend Gime, who unexpectedly appeared and added colour and perspective to my days. To my friend Ben, who welcomed me and shared part of his country, giving me another adventure to remember. To Leo, my first new friend there, thank you.

To my supervisor Katharina, who guided my research from the beginning and supported it as it grew and evolved. To my supervisor Jia Hui, I am not exaggerating when I say that without your support, I would not have survived this Master's. You witnessed my evolution as a person and researcher during this programme, and that would not have been possible without your commitment to us students. In an academic world that often prioritizes publications, you always found a way to be on our side, which is rare and deeply appreciated. I also want to thank Prof. Melina for the meeting that allowed me to trust my instincts when I needed it most.

To my colleagues and friends, God knows how many times you listened to my raw ideas, struggles, stress, joy, and thousands of other emotions. Thank you for supporting me.

To my Mum and Dad, because you are always with me. No matter where I am or what I do, your support fuels my strength to keep going. Your unconditional love and trust mean more than anything else. To my sister, my other half, thank you for always being there.

Finally, I want to thank myself for giving my research and everyone I encountered along the way all the respect and attentiveness I could. Thank you for staying true to what you believe, for questioning yourself when necessary, and for learning the beauty of life in welcoming and letting go.

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1. Into the River: Framing Justice in Place

From this perspective, everything changes. I stand on a paddleboard at the centre of a bend in the Wimmera River. I have walked along these banks many times, but only now do I begin to experience the Wimmera, to feel myself as part of its landscape. The shoreline is rich with red gum trees; the skies are populated by loud, chatty cockatoos.

In the natural noise that I have come to hear as the gentle quiet of Australia's flora and fauna, I am with the Wotjobaluk¹ youth. Today the Cooperative has organised a stand-up paddleboard activity so young people can spend time together with their mob² on Country³.

Everyone is smiling, jumping into the water, paddling, racing - then flopping onto their boards to float. Their happiness is contagious. A sense of ease surrounds our bubble: people watch out for one another, making sure no one is left behind. On the riverbank, a few adults mingle, relaxed, watching their youth be safe and playful.

I am struck by how my perception of the river changes simply by moving from land into water. It brings to mind other misalignments I have been noticing in town: between what is promised and what is delivered, between aspiration and everyday reality.

Just the other day, Aboriginal members spoke to me about their participation in the Yoorrook Truth-telling Commission. They had shared their stories with the state, hoping it would lead to real change. They spoke of the treaty that the state of Victoria committed to pursue; an important step, they said, if it came. But their deeper commitment, they made clear, was here; to keep working within their own community, to be the change they want to see, with or without the backing of national justice mechanisms.

So, how does a playful afternoon on the river speak of strength and future? How do state policy mechanisms shape everyday life in Wotjobaluk community spaces? And what might that disconnect reveal about the limits of policy and the 'quiet' work of community?

¹ The Wotjobaluk people are an Aboriginal group in the area of the state of Victoria. In December 2005, the Wotjobaluk, along with Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk people, received recognition of their native title in southeastern Australia, marking a significant legal acknowledgment of their rights to their ancestral land (First People Relations Victoria 2025).

² Someone's *mob* is someone's cultural Community, family, etc. It can also be used more colloquially, such as 'What are you mob up to?' referring to a group of people (Indigenous Literacy Foundation n.d.).

³ *Country* is used here in the Indigenous sense of a living, relational landscape and social world (AIATSIS 2023).

This thesis engages three interlocking debates in social and cultural anthropology. It contributes to critiques of transitional justice (TJ) by examining what happens when state-centred models of redress are applied within settler-colonial states. It further engages debates on Indigenous sovereignty and decolonisation by approaching community-controlled institutions as sites of political authority rather than merely service providers. The thesis also speaks to anthropological discussions of locality and scale by exploring how national justice frameworks are translated and negotiated in rural settings.

While these debates highlight important structural and political dimensions of justice, they often overlook the relational and affective aspects of everyday life. Much TJ scholarship treats justice as something delivered through formal mechanisms or state institutions, leaving daily practices largely invisible. This thesis addresses that gap by tracing how the Wotjobaluk in rural Victoria navigate, resist, and remake transitional justice in Aboriginal community-led spaces where sovereignty, care, and political authority are actively exercised. In doing so, it highlights the textures of daily life in which justice is enacted, contested, and transformed.

The sections that follow situate the project within these conversations and explain why a close, place-based ethnography is necessary to understand justice in the settler-colonial present.

1.1 The Structural Limits of Transitional Justice in Settler-Colonial States

Transitional justice (TJ) is conventionally defined as a set of judicial and non-judicial measures, including trials, truth commissions, and reparations, developed to address systematic human-rights violations and facilitate societal transformation after periods of conflict or authoritarian rule (Teitel 2003; ICTJ 2008). Historically applied in post-conflict or ‘fragile’ states (Matsunaga 2016, 25), its goals of accountability, truth-telling, and reconciliation have increasingly been adopted by established liberal democracies confronting historical injustices (Winter & Galoob 2016).

Applying transitional justice in settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand presents a fundamental paradox. As decolonial and peacebuilding literature note, TJ presumes a paradigmatic transition away from a violent regime toward a liberal democratic future (Matsunaga 2016). Yet, in settler states the liberal democracy itself is the product of an ongoing colonial project (Cunneen 2008; Balint et al. 2014). Park (2020) emphasises that settler-colonial states are not post-conflict societies, but political formations constituted

through an ongoing structure of settlement. Colonial logics is not a closed chapter of the past but foundational to the state's continued existence. As he illustrates,

one can conceive of a Poland that is not a totalitarian regime or a Liberia that is not at war. In contrast, one cannot conceive of a Canada or an Australia that are not settler colonies because these states are founded on, and sustained by, the fact of settlement (267).

This structural contradiction produces severe limitations in practice. Critics argue that mainstream TJ remains 'narrow' and 'conservative,' often focusing on specific atrocities while obscuring the deeper, exploitative nature of the colonial system (Bell 2009; Cunneen, cited in Balint et al. 2014, 195). Two core problems emerge:

1. Temporality: TJ mechanisms often artificially separate a violent 'past' from a reconciled 'present,' thereby sidestepping the continuity of colonial power. Historical injustice is treated as concluded, relegating colonialism to history and ignoring its ongoing harms and benefits.
2. Legitimacy: When TJ is administered by the settler state, it risks legitimising the very structures it claims to address (Maddison & Shepherd 2014; Snelgrove et al. 2014). In Canada, Matsunaga (2016, 25-26) observes that using TJ within an 'established democracy' can sever the link between present harms and their colonial roots, ultimately de-legitimising Indigenous nationhood.

In response to these structural constraints, a growing body of scholarship calls not for the abandonment of transitional justice, but for a radical rethinking of its premises. Maddison and Shepherd (2014, 255) argue that the transformational capacity of TJ depends on how the concept of transition is understood in context. TJ measures might achieve genuinely *transformative* outcomes only if transition is framed not as reconciliation within existing liberal-democratic arrangements, but as a process that leaves open the possibility of a more fundamental reordering of political and social relations (Davis 2006; Lambourne 2009; Bell et al. 2022).

Park (2020, 261-277) advances the notion of 'radicalized transitional justice' as a potential contribution to decolonisation, emphasizing the decentring of the settler state as the sole agent of justice, embracing political indeterminacy over liberal teleology, and foregrounding Indigenous practices and authority. As Veracini (2015, 103) observes, decolonization will not be a settler-determined process; rather, it will be an Indigenous 'resurgence' that is not premised on settler recognition.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that the limitations of transitional justice in settler-colonial contexts are not accidental design flaws but symptoms of a deeper structural contradiction: a framework premised on transition is being deployed in polities constituted through ongoing colonial relations. While proposals for a radicalised transitional justice open conceptual space for decentring the settler state and foregrounding Indigenous authority, they remain conceptual, leaving relatively unexplored how such reorientations are lived and negotiated within specific localities where state institutions, community organisations, and everyday relations intersect (Shaw et al. 2010; Macdonald 2015; Sharp 2017). Recent evidence reviews similarly stress that understanding transitional justice requires attention to subnational contexts and everyday experiences, since national-level evaluations often obscure how policies are interpreted and enacted locally (Macdonald 2015).

Compounding this conceptual gap is the fact that ‘transitional justice’ remains largely a scholarly and policy-driven category. Outside institutional and academic settings, the term itself rarely circulates in everyday discourse. Yet the policies, commissions, apologies, and treaty negotiations associated with it profoundly shape social relations, political expectations, and affective atmospheres (Kent 2016; Kim 2018). The relative absence of the term in daily life does not signal its irrelevance; rather, it underscores the need to examine how abstract justice frameworks materialise in concrete encounters. Tracing transitional justice ethnographically therefore requires moving beyond institutional design to examine how its assumptions are translated, resisted, and reworked in lived contexts.

This thesis takes these twin gaps - the unanswered question of how radicalised TJ might unfold locally, and the disjuncture between TJ’s institutional prominence and its public invisibility, as its point of departure. Rather than evaluating transitional justice at the level of institutional design, it examines how its assumptions are encountered, negotiated, and sometimes unsettled in place, asking what becomes visible when justice is traced not from the state downward, but from the ground up.

1.2. Transitional Justice in Australia and Community-Controlled Institutions

Transitional justice frameworks have been invoked in Australia in response to policies of *assimilation*, most notably the mass removal of Indigenous children from their families over

generations (mid-1800s-1970s)⁴. These policies have had lasting and deleterious impacts on survivors, families, communities, and nations: intergenerational trauma, persistent social injustice, and cultural, economic, and political inequalities. Australia's *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) on the Stolen Generations described this practice in terms that many have argued amount to genocide⁵.

Centred around acknowledgement and reconciliation, TJ initiatives have been positioned by successive Australian governments as ways to address past injustices and create conditions for 'a more just future'. They include the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997), formal governmental apologies⁶, and reparations schemes established in selected jurisdictions (Balint et al. 2014, 195-196). Despite these actions, a national hesitation persists; scholars term this a politics of 'symbolic reconciliation,' where gestures of recognition are not matched by transfers of power (Slater 2019; Maddison & Nakata 2020).

At the federal level, a longstanding political impasse has limited substantive constitutional recognition and stalled treaty processes, most recently evidenced by the failed 2023 referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. In this context, national transitional justice efforts remain largely symbolic: apologies, inquiries, and episodic reparations acknowledge past harms without redistributing decision-making power or challenging the structural foundations of settler-colonial authority in Australia. The state of Victoria, however, has sought to move beyond this federal stalemate, positioning itself as a national leader through initiatives such as the Yoorrook Truth-telling Commission and a state-wide treaty process, formally passed on Friday, 31 October 2025 (Ashton et al. 2025).

A treaty differs fundamentally from symbolic recognition. Unlike gestures that merely acknowledge past injustices, a treaty represents a negotiated political settlement between the state and Indigenous polities. It is a formal written agreement recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples and their place within Australia's constitutional framework. The terms of such an agreement would be negotiated between Indigenous communities and the state, and

⁴ (Christie 1979).

⁵ Report of the National Inquiry, 'supra n 2 at 'Chapter 13: Grounds for Reparation.'

⁶ The Australian government has issued several important apologies to Indigenous Australians. The most notable was the national apology delivered in 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children—known as the Stolen Generations—and the lasting harm this caused to families and communities. More recently, Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan offered a parliamentary apology as part of the treaty process. The apology acknowledges the harms caused by 'the actions and inactions of the state' and 'the colony that came before it.' (Ashton et al. 2025).

would likely affirm Indigenous self-determination alongside other cultural, social, and economic rights (Davis 2006, 127).

Contemporary scholarship treats modern treaties as negotiated political settlements that *can* reconfigure the terms of relation between state and Indigenous polities. They typically involve: (1) formal recognition of Indigenous peoples as distinct political communities, (2) good-faith negotiation procedures that accord Indigenous representative institutions meaningful agency, and (3) concrete arrangements for shared decision-making, governance, land and resource management, or other institutional powers (Hobbs 2019).

That said, treaty-making does not by itself guarantee equality or a full transfer of power: its transformative potential depends on the scope of what is negotiated, political will, implementation mechanisms, and the local infrastructures that enact and sustain any agreements (Davis 2006; Merlan 2025).

The contemporary revival of treaty politics in Australia was visible from 2016, when several state and territory governments signalled processes of agreement-making with First Nations (Hobbs 2020, 28). Subsequent developments, however, showed the political fragility of those commitments. Some jurisdictions stalled or reversed course: for example, the *Queensland Path to Treaty* process that begun with public hearings and institutional steps in the late 2010s and early 2020s, and that was discontinued in 2024 (Hobbs 2020, AHRC 2024). These uneven outcomes confirm that state-level momentum can be contingent and politically reversible, underscoring that treaty making is not a guaranteed path to transformative justice.

Australia's historical relationship to treaty-making is also distinct. Unlike settler states where treaties were part of early state formation (for example, New Zealand's 1840 agreement)⁷, Australia was founded on doctrines that denied Indigenous political orders altogether. This absence has shaped the political architecture of recognition ever since, meaning that contemporary treaty proposals operate within a landscape where formal recognition and

⁷ Comparative settler states entered into treaty-making at various points during colonial state formation. In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between the British Crown and many Māori Rangatira, forming a foundational (though contested) constitutional document. In the United States, treaty-making with Native Nations occurred between 1778 and 1871, when Congress formally ended the practice, although existing treaties remain legally binding. In Canada, early treaties date to the eighteenth century, followed by the Numbered Treaties (1871–1921) and modern comprehensive land claims agreements from the 1970s onward. Australia, by contrast, did not negotiate treaties with Indigenous nations at the time of colonisation, a distinction that continues to shape contemporary debates on sovereignty and constitutional recognition (Merlan 2025).

institutional capacity must be built alongside, and often upon, longstanding community infrastructures.

Long before contemporary treaty debates, Indigenous community infrastructures were already in place. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) have functioned as essential mediating institutions since the late 1960s: historically rooted and Aboriginal-led, ACCOs constitute forms of authority, care, and decision-making that operate regardless of state recognition (Services Australia 2023). Between the late 1960s and the 1970s, a period of widespread Indigenous activism and demands for self-determination across Australia, community-controlled structures began to take institutional form (VACCHO 2026). Today, ACCOs are incorporated organisations initiated, based in, and governed by local Indigenous communities, with a focus on delivering holistic and culturally appropriate services in place (Kelly et al. 2022; Clapham et al. 2024).

ACCOs were established not merely to provide services, but as deliberate expressions of community authority and practical assertions of sovereignty, reflecting Indigenous peoples' refusal to rely solely on state structures that were neglecting to adequately care for Indigenous peoples (interviews Oct 2024-Jan 2025). As highlighted in Clapham et al.'s study on the role of ACCOs as place-based entities,

these organisations [ACCOs] also have an important cultural brokerage role in the partnerships they form with government and non-government agencies. This role contributes to breaking down the traditional 'siloed' approach to the delivery of health and social services at the local and regional levels and potentially reduces costs to government across multiple portfolio areas, enabling the achievement of outcomes not easily captured in headline indicators (2024, 3).

Importantly, ACCOs operate within a complex terrain of engagement with the state: while maintaining independence, these organisations strategically navigate funding frameworks, policy mandates, and regulatory requirements to ensure sustainability (Janke and Frankel 1998; Services Australia 2023; VACCHO 2026).

ACCOs have also laid critical groundwork for contemporary transitional justice initiatives in the state of Victoria. Members of these organisations have brought local knowledge, organisational capacity, and community relationships into processes such as the Yoorrook Truth-telling Commission and the Victorian treaty negotiations (interviews Oct 2024-Jan 2025; VACCHO 2026). In doing so, they have provided not only practical infrastructure for participation but also models of Indigenous-led governance, decision-making, and accountability. This demonstrates that substantive Indigenous agency operates not merely

through state recognition or national frameworks, but through sustained, locally grounded practices of self-determination (Coulthard 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The state of Victoria counts 34 ACCOs delivering programmes across multiple domains⁸. These services are particularly vital in regional and remote areas, where mainstream provision is limited and where community-controlled institutions often constitute the most stable interface between Indigenous communities and the state. ACCOs also play a fundamental role in facilitating the engagement of marginalised and vulnerable Indigenous community members with mainstream institutions and contribute to social inclusion, social health and wellbeing (Kelly et al. 2022). This work, however, extends beyond service provision. In their daily operations, ACCOs often encounter complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. These local dynamics are seldom addressed directly by national TJ mechanisms, yet they significantly shape how justice is experienced on the ground.

The Victorian treaty process and the Yoorrook Truth-telling Commission are examples of the potential and the limits of state-led transitional justice in Australia. While they signal a willingness to confront historical injustice, their transformative capacity remains contingent upon the infrastructures through which communities engage them. ACCOs occupy precisely this mediating terrain. They are not merely conduits for participation in state initiatives; they are historically grounded institutions of Indigenous governance that predate contemporary transitional justice frameworks and continue regardless of them.

1.3. Shifting the Analytical Focus: Locality and Relationality

Anthropology in Australia has long played an influential role in informing state policy, providing ‘expertise’, data, and community access in areas ranging from land rights to service provision (Kowal 2008; Altman 2009; Altman & Hickson 2010; Lea 2012). While this engagement has at times supported Indigenous claims, it has also positioned anthropology within governance frameworks that prioritise institutional reform and measurable outcomes. Applied research often emphasizes relationships between Indigenous communities and the state, funding, representation, and service delivery, while overlooking the everyday

⁸ These organisations provide services across clinical care, educational disadvantage, disengaged youth support, men’s and women’s health, family wellbeing, child protection, social and emotional wellbeing, homelessness, law and justice, and responses to family and community violence (Clapham et al. 2024; VACCHO 2026).

interactions and tensions that shape life within communities (Nakata & Maddison 2019; O'Bryan 2021).

This gap reflects broader fragmentation in scholarship on Indigenous sovereignty, racism, and settler colonialism in Australia. Indigenous studies, critical whiteness studies, and migration scholarship each generate important insights, yet they have evolved as distinct intellectual spaces with their own priorities (Nakata 2007; Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2015). Works such as Moreton-Robinson's *Whitening Race* (2004) provide foundational critiques of settler-colonial whiteness and Indigenous dispossession, highlighting structural inequalities and racialized power. Similarly, critical whiteness studies interrogate property, race, and settler privilege. However, both tend to focus on structural or theoretical analysis and settler subjectivity, often without engaging with everyday relational dynamics, local community interactions, or migration perspectives. Indigenous studies foreground sovereignty and community priorities, while migration scholarship approaches dispossession and whiteness from yet another vantage point. This disciplinary compartmentalization risks reproducing colonial separations at the level of knowledge production: analyses frequently privilege settler frameworks or institutional reform without attending to the relational tensions that emerge in the everyday lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents (Nakata 2007).

Some recent scholarship, however, recognizes the need to bridge these divides, emphasizing that race, sovereignty, and Indigenous-settler relations are interrelated and mutually informative, rather than isolated domains. Ethnographic research illuminates how these issues emerge through everyday interactions, negotiations, and the lived tensions of coexistence (Kowal 2008; Dunn et al. 2004). Questions of justice, recognition, and social belonging cannot be fully addressed within a single field; they arise in the 'in-between,' where peoples lives intersect.

Current disciplinary conversations reinforce this point. A forthcoming panel at the 2026 Annual Conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, *Does the Anthropology of Australia Exist? Ought It? Discuss.* (High & Sear 2026), examines the historical foundations of Australian anthropology and its contemporary fragmentation across Indigenous studies, migration studies, and settler-colonial critique, questioning whether an 'anthropology of Australia' can be conceived as a coherent field today. Similarly, the panel *The Social Life of Justice in Colonial Systems of Violence* (Mannitz 2026) interrogates how justice discourses extend beyond material compensation toward questions of recognition, memory, and political

futures. Taken together, they foreground the need to examine how justice and national imaginaries are negotiated relationally and locally, a task this thesis undertakes through close ethnographic engagement in rural Victoria.

This thesis contributes to these conversations by grounding them ethnographically. By using locality and relationality as analytical lenses, I approach justice not as a property of discrete domains ('the Indigenous community,' 'the state,' or 'settler society') but as something constituted within and across these relational fields. I examine how justice is negotiated not only between institutions, but between neighbours, co-workers, and community members who inhabit the same social spaces under unequal historical conditions. The rural town, together with the local Aboriginal Cooperative, become the site where these dynamics are visible, revealing how the Wotjobaluk community navigates, resists, and remakes transitional justice in everyday life.

Rural towns occupy a particularly insightful position in this regard. Although often framed as peripheral to metropolitan political discourse, they play a decisive role in national political outcomes. The 2023 referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, for example, showed marked divergences between metropolitan and regional voting patterns, underscoring how national justice proposals are filtered through local histories, economic anxieties, and racialised social relations (Carson et al. 2024; Payne et al. 2025). In such spaces, the promises and failures of transitional justice are not abstract, they materialise in everyday interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, local institutions, and community organisations. Scholars have increasingly argued that the 'local' should be understood not merely as a spatial scale but as a standpoint from which to assess how justice processes unfold in practice (Macdonald 2015, 77). Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), strategically located across Victoria and often situated in these same rural towns, serve as locally grounded 'centres of reference,' linking national policy frameworks with community-led practices of self-determination.

Attending to locality, therefore, is not only an analytical choice but a methodological one. This thesis demonstrates that transitional justice in settler-colonial contexts cannot be understood at the level of institutions alone; it must be traced in the local arenas where it is lived, contested, and remade.

1.4. Being in Place: Methods, Positionality, and Ethical Engagement

This thesis draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between September 2024 and January 2025 in a rural town in Victoria, Australia, in close collaboration with employees and members of the local Aboriginal Cooperative (ACCO). The town's economy is historically based in agriculture, and its demographic profile is older than the state average.

Data collection combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, go-along methods, and media analysis, including local newspapers, social media, television news, and official reports. Field notes documented everyday interactions, spatial practices, and social atmospheres. These approaches were chosen to capture how transitional justice is experienced in everyday life, responding to broader calls within the field for research that moves beyond institutional analysis and examines justice processes through local and lived perspectives (Macdonald 2015).

Among these methods, go-alongs proved particularly effective. By accompanying participants through daily routines and community spaces, this approach gave insight into how social and spatial contexts shape experiences of justice, care, and power (Kusenbach 2003; Alexander et al. 2023; Yeo et al. 2024). Kusenbach (2003, 466) identifies five substantive areas in which go-alongs provide privileged access: revealing layered perception; offering insight into the textures of spatial practices; providing unique access to personal biographies; illustrating the social architecture of natural settings; and facilitating exploration of social realms. This method allowed participants to lead the research, highlighting the relational and affective textures of the town and revealing how everyday practices reflect broader structural dynamics. How spaces are lived and inhabited by the local community emerged as a key element for understanding tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents and the local consequences of national transitional justice decisions.

I conducted seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with Aboriginal members and non-Indigenous employees of the Cooperative, focusing on everyday life in town, their roles at the organisation, their understanding of specific TJ mechanisms, and their relationships within Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Individual conversations gradually shifted my research focus. Initially attentive to healing as a communal and intergenerational process, I found myself drawn instead to the persistent tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in town. It became clear that, although the term 'transitional justice' rarely appeared explicitly in our meetings, my interlocutors were

consistently referring to national policies and local social dynamics shaped by, and responding to, transitional justice mechanisms, public debates, and broader political aspirations. Discussions about rights over land, experiences of racism and discrimination, questions of responsibility and opportunity, and visions of ‘moving forward as one’⁹ were all deeply entangled with wider justice discourses and state-led reform agendas. This realisation led me to reorient my research. Healing did not disappear; rather, it became one dimension among several shaping local debates, relationships, and political imaginaries. The shift was not imposed analytically but emerged from what felt like a pressing concern voiced within the community itself. This necessity confirmed that the relational and affective dimensions I was witnessing were not peripheral to transitional justice, but were, in fact, the very ground upon which its promises were being tested and its limits revealed.

All interviews took place during the final two months of fieldwork. Building relationships sufficient to request permission to record conversations required multiple preliminary meetings. Some participants shared deeply personal stories, necessitating a space of trust before structured interview formats were introduced. Adhering to the right to self-determination outlined in the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (AIATSIS 2012), I repeatedly clarified my role as a master’s student in social and cultural anthropology, explained research aims, and obtained informed consent from all interviewees.

I approached the Cooperative spaces with respect and humility, aiming to be an attentive listener and learner. A receptive presence allowed community members to set the tempo and content of exchanges. This community-directed approach resulted in a slower, relationship-based inquiry, privileging community comfort and agency over a pre-defined research agenda and ensuring findings were grounded in trusted exchange. In line with ethical protocols for research with Indigenous communities, formal interactions primarily involved community leaders and designated public figures, respecting internal hierarchies and protecting the privacy of general members while engaging individuals recognised as authorised to represent communal knowledge and political positions.

To protect participant confidentiality, I refer to the field site as ‘the town’ and to the local organisation as ‘the Cooperative,’ or simply ‘the ACCO.’ This reflects an ethical commitment to limit researcher authority to rename places and to avoid reproducing dynamics of colonial

⁹ ‘Moving forward as one’ in Australia primarily refers to a nationalist reconciliation agenda aimed at unifying Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, though its effectiveness and underlying power dynamics remain contested (Moran 1998).

naming. At the same time, I retain the name of the Wotjobaluk community intentionally: they are publicly active in truth-telling and advocacy at local, regional, and state levels, and naming them recognises their ongoing sovereignty and public voice. All participant names are pseudonymised.

Positionality was central to this research. As a European master's student in anthropology, I confronted multiple dimensions of positioning in Australia's social context, where the Indigenous/non-Indigenous dichotomy remains prominent (Assoulin & Bacaller 2024). My 'outsider status' was explicitly noted on multiple occasions, raising questions of belonging, authority, and responsibility in discussing Indigenous rights. My positionality varied with context and interlocutor, shaped by personal history, nationality, and appearance. Being transparent about my research intentions facilitated trust, and sharing aspects of my personal background occasionally fostered connection (Black 2008; Bell 2019), while never implying equivalence with participants' experiences.

Nationality shaped relational dynamics. As neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous Australian, I was not immediately positioned within the primary settler/Indigenous binary. This sometimes facilitated openness, allowing residents to articulate perspectives on rights and responsibilities. Several interviewees connected to my European background through their own ancestry or travel experiences, which occasionally provided an initial point of rapport.

Gender and social positionality shaped my experience of space and visibility in town. As a woman, I could access discussions and activities at the Cooperative that might have been less open to men, reflecting cultural norms around men's and women's business in Aboriginal practice. My social positionality as a European, however, shifted depending on who accompanied me: walking with Aboriginal peoples made me highly visible as an 'outsider in town', while walking with non-Indigenous Australians often allowed my European background to blend more seamlessly with local social norms shaped by racial hierarchies. This contrast highlights how social hierarchies and racism structure everyday experiences, influencing perception, participation, and presence in shared spaces.

As a master's student, I did not perceive significant advantage or restriction arising from academic affiliation; the more decisive factor was that I was not Indigenous. This sometimes meant my presence was peripheral or restricted in community spaces at the Cooperative. Conversely, I was welcomed to ask questions and engage in discussion with many community leaders.

Before, during, and after fieldwork I asked myself: who am I to write about peoples in Australia? How easily might I observe and critically reflect on a society so distant from my own life in Europe? Such doubts are not new to anthropology, though for much of the discipline's history they were not asked. It was only from the late 1970s that anthropologists began interrogating the politics of representation, prompted by poststructuralist theories and a growing awareness of the discipline's entanglement with colonial projects (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Herndl 1991). This 'crisis of representation' (Pöhlmann et al. 2021) was a belated reckoning given anthropology's long role in producing knowledge about Indigenous peoples without sufficient reflection on the colonial power relations that shaped that shaped it.

Vargas-Cetina and colleagues (2013) pose questions that have stayed with me: Who sets the agenda for ethnographic writing? How does fieldwork change the anthropologist's identity? How does an author choose what to say and write, and what not to disclose? Rather than seeking definitive resolution, I came to understand these questions as part of the methodological conditions of my research. I do not claim to speak for the Wotjobaluk community, Aboriginal peoples, or Indigenous political futures. Nor is this work intended as judgment upon non-Indigenous Australians. My aim is to critically engage with social realities beyond my immediate experience, while remaining attentive to the limits of my perspective and the responsibilities attached to interpretation (Schramm 2005).

While European citizens are implicated in Australia's colonial story through travel, settlement, or migration, this entanglement does not justify speaking for others. My approach is one of situated, accountable interpretation (Haraway 1988; Smith 1999, 2012; Simpson 2014) grounded in relationships built during fieldwork.

1.5. Clarifying Terms

The terms used in this thesis are not neutral descriptors but politically and analytically contested concepts. Clarifying how I employ them is essential, because they shape both my interpretation of the ethnographic material and my understanding of how the Wotjobaluk community engages with justice in place. These concepts are not abstract categories but are embedded within ongoing settler-colonial structures.

I define *transitional justice* (TJ) as the institutionalised measures and processes, such as trials, truth commissions, reparations, and formal apologies, designed to address past abuses and

promote societal change through recognition and acknowledgement. TJ frameworks operate within state institutions. Although widely used in policy and academic debates, the category of ‘transitional justice’ itself is often more visible within institutional and scholarly discourse than in everyday social life, reinforcing the need to examine how its associated policies and ideas are translated into local experience. *Transformational change* denotes deeper shifts in social, political, and power relations, altering the foundations of society beyond symbolic recognition. Throughout this thesis, I maintain this distinction: TJ refers to institutional measures, while transformational change describes the substantive reconfiguration of relations these measures may, but do not necessarily, produce.

When I speak of *transition*, I refer to the temporal and political process being negotiated in the present. And when I argue for *resurgence*, I draw on Indigenous-led, grounded practices that constitute a form of transformational change enacted outside, and sometimes despite, formal transitional justice frameworks. In this thesis, resurgence is not merely theoretical but observed through ethnographic practices of care, cultural continuity, and self-governance enacted by the Wotjobaluk community in the town.

In addition to these conceptual distinctions, several terms referring to identity, belonging, and political positioning require clarification. The geographical area now known as Australia is home to numerous languages and cultures¹⁰, reflecting the diversity of communities present long before European arrival. Although assimilation policies, violence, displacement, and ongoing inequalities have eroded aspects of cultural heritage, this diversity endures. Common terms such as Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander are products of colonial classification, yet they remain part of the vocabulary used in fieldwork, everyday relations, and academic and political debate (Escobar 2004; Nakata 2007; Boswell 2016; Munro 2022).

Wherever possible, I name communities by their specific mobs, as is the case for the Wotjobaluk. When addressing structural or national-level dynamics, I adopt ‘collective terminology’: in the Australian context, Indigenous peoples or First Nations refers collectively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. At times I use Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal interchangeably; however, in the region of Victoria in which this research is grounded, the local Indigenous population is predominantly Aboriginal, or ‘mainland

¹⁰ In Australia there are more than 250 Indigenous languages including around 800 dialects (AIATSIS 2025).

Indigenous.’ Torres Strait Islanders refers specifically to the communities of the Torres Strait Islands in Queensland.

The term Traditional Owner refers to Indigenous peoples who maintain recognised and enduring connections to specific ancestral lands. Centuries of state policy have produced displacement, resulting in situations where multiple mobs may share or reside on the same lands. In this sense, Indigenous signals heritage, while Traditional Owner denotes a specific relationship to Country grounded in historical and spiritual ties. I highlight this distinction because many interlocutors defined their roles in relation to both their mob and their responsibilities to Country.

Non-Indigenous describes individuals without Indigenous ancestry or who are not recognised as Indigenous by any First Nations community. Australia’s population has become increasingly diverse through migration and shifting immigration policies, and non-Indigenous therefore encompasses a range of cultural and migratory backgrounds.

I distinguish analytically between White Australian and settler. In the Australian context, whiteness is historically and structurally tied to settler-colonial power, such that White Australians (often those with strong British ancestry) have been positioned as primary beneficiaries of settler sovereignty. However, settler is not merely a racial descriptor. It denotes a relational position within settler-colonial structures, a position constituted through racialised privilege, legal status, institutional authority, and everyday practices, and defined in relation to Indigenous peoples and their rights.

Finally, racism is used here as an analytic term rather than a moral label. I understand racism not primarily as individual prejudice or overt hostility, but as a multi-level phenomenon that operates through everyday interactions, institutional practices, and broader structural processes that reproduce racial hierarchies. In settler-colonial Australia these dynamics are inseparable from historical and ongoing state formations, including missions, child removals, and policy regimes, as well as from the ways whiteness is normalised and rendered invisible (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Sherwood 2013; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Lentin 2020; Hand 2024). Naming racism therefore does two things: it registers harms experienced by Indigenous peoples in everyday life, and it situates those experiences within institutional and historical structures that shape access to resources, recognition, and political voice. In this thesis, racism becomes visible in the town’s silences, in the unease of public encounters, and in the uneven distribution of care, resources, and recognition.

Clarifying these terms establishes the conceptual vocabulary through which the chapters that follow trace how justice is promised, constrained, and remade in place, revealing how structural limits, settler-colonial contexts, and Indigenous agency intersect in everyday life.

1.6. Thesis Structure

As illustrated in the opening vignette, this thesis traces how justice is enacted locally, alongside and beyond formal transitional justice frameworks. The analysis proceeds in three empirical chapters, each grounded in fieldwork and introduced by a vignette that situates theory within everyday practice.

Chapter 2, *The State's Check, The Community's Burden*, examines the state's relationship with the Cooperative, showing how government recognition, funding, and delegated responsibilities produce a *necropolitics of abandonment*. While the Cooperative enables self-determination and delivers culturally safe services, it simultaneously absorbs the structural and social burdens that mainstream institutions are unwilling or unable to address. This chapter reveals a central limit of transitional justice: the outsourcing of repair to Indigenous institutions.

Chapter 3, *The Name's Price, The Town's Silence*, turns to the town's social fabric, analysing an affective economy of silence that constrains dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. If Chapter 2 showed how state delegation creates structural burden, here I examine how shame, reputational risk, and the performance of 'not-racism' (Lentin 2020) produce political paralysis, inhibiting meaningful public reckoning and limiting the transformative potential of transitional justice.

Chapter 4, *The State's Promise, The Community's Resurgence*, analyses how, in response to these intersecting constraints, the Wotjobaluk community enacts a politics of resurgence. Indigenous resurgence is not separate from transitional justice: it is its vital, grounded core, enacted through youth programmes on Country, relational accountability, and sovereign community agendas that unsettle state-centred frameworks and redefine the meaning of transition.

Taken together, I demonstrate that transitional justice in settler-colonial contexts cannot be assessed through institutional design alone. While it provides a vocabulary of repair, substantive transformation is enacted relationally and locally through Indigenous-led practices of care, refusal, and sovereignty. Through close, place-based ethnography, I show how the

Wotjobaluk both respond to and rework national justice frameworks, revealing how justice is made, stalled, or remade in daily life.

2. The State's Check, The Community's Burden

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) play a fundamental role in supporting Indigenous communities across Australia. Working in partnership with government and non-government agencies, they often act as intermediaries between state institutions and local Indigenous populations. In many contexts, such arrangements reflect longstanding demands for self-determination and culturally grounded service provision.

This chapter examines how such collaboration unfolds in the everyday life of the town. Rather than simply describing what the Cooperative enables, I ask a different question: why has so much responsibility for care come to rest here? What historical, political, and social conditions make the Cooperative indispensable?

Drawing on Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) work on *economies of abandonment* and Achille Mbembe's (2003) theorisation of *necropolitical power*, I explore how state recognition and funding intersect with local experiences of mistrust, racism, and structural inequality. I consider how responsibilities are negotiated between mainstream institutions and the Cooperative, and how these arrangements are lived in practice. This analysis does not question the legitimacy of Indigenous demands for self-determination in the provision of services; rather, it seeks to understand the everyday consequences of how care and obligation are organised in the town. In doing so, the chapter shows how responsibilities that formally belong to the state are often displaced onto local Aboriginal cooperatives.

Photos of Care

The heat is relentless. Wind like the inside of an oven turns my eyelids into sandpaper at every blink. I wander through the town for the last time, taking photographs before my departure. The roads that once felt silent now speak. Gum trees with their bluish-red bark and soft foliage, the last lilac jacaranda petals resting on the footpath, the scattered bricks that remain of the building Keira's father once helped to build, now taken by fire.

Along these streets, social-service buildings trace an invisible pattern. Nearly every block holds one and following them feels like outlining the city's perimeter through its architecture of care. From the outskirts near the river, I move inward toward the main road, unintentionally mapping the network through which care circulates, and where it fails.

My first stop is the Cooperative. I pause before crossing, framing the building from the other side of the street. A low rock wall gently guides visitors to the entrance, its stones inset with mosaic artworks depicting Dreaming stories. Three flags, the Australian, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander, hang still in the heat. On the opposite side sits the medical centre.

Through the small hole of my camera, ready to impress the image onto film, I see not just a building, but the many stories contained within it. How curious that such clean, still walls can hold so much history, tension, and care. I recall what one community member once told me:

‘The Cooperative is the main thing that keeps our [Aboriginal] community going. That’s what makes you feel like you’re a part of something. Or when you’re lost, it’s the first place we know to go. Every *Blak*¹¹ fellow knows that when they’re not on Country, look for the local co-op, find out who the mob are, and get involved in the programmes because you’re going to be looked after (interview, Jan 2025).’

These words return to me now with warmth, and the weight of both care and responsibility. The Cooperative is more than a service provider; it is a social anchor. It’s a space sustained by the commitment of its members and staff, not only to keep the Cooperative running but to ensure that the local Aboriginal community receives the care it cannot find elsewhere.

Over the months I came to realise that while most townspeople know of the government funding that supports ACCOs, few recognise the responsibility these organisations bear.

Click. The photo is taken.

I walk back through town, moving in a slow zigzag. The pattern of services reappears. Centres for aged care, addiction, domestic violence, social isolation, racism, young families. Most doorways have a sticker depicting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. They signal solidarity and cooperation, a promise of welcome. Yet they also point to a quiet displacement: the very institutions that display them are the ones from which the Cooperative has had to retreat, granting its community space to recover from the hostility raised by the Referendum.

Click. Click.

¹¹ The spelling and meaning of the word ‘Blak’ were first redefined by Destiny Deacon, an Erub/Mer (Torres Strait) and K’ua K’ua (Cape York) artist, in her 1994 urban Indigenous exhibition *Blakness: Blak City Culture* (ACCA, Melbourne). She developed the term ‘Blak’ as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression. As Deacon explained: ‘(For me) it’s about creating a world of my own outside my own world.’ (Munro 2020, 2022).

Now, walking these streets feels different, more textured, more legible. I remember how, early in my fieldwork, I used to wonder: If these services are open to everyone, why do they need the stickers? If government institutions cannot care for the entire population, who is left to take responsibility?

Those small stickers, then, do more than signal good intentions; they are visible traces of how recognition is practiced, and how responsibility for care is quietly reorganised in everyday life. Understanding this redistribution of responsibility requires situating the Cooperative within broader state logics of care and abandonment.

2.1. Necropolitics of Abandonment: Cultural Framing of Responsibility

The stickers on mainstream service doorways make tangible a central tension in Australia's project of transitional justice, which is fundamentally a question of care: who bears the responsibility to address historical harms and their persistent inequalities in everyday life?

To analyse this in the town, I employ the concept of a *necropolitics of abandonment*, combining Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics - the sovereign power to decide 'who may live and who must die', with Elizabeth Povinelli's analysis of how late-liberal states outsource care.

In the introduction to her book *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Povinelli 2011), Povinelli suggests that 'to assess care in late liberalism is to assess the capacity of culture as an agent of care' (26). Defining late liberalism as a belated response to social difference and the alternative social worlds it shelters (25), she argues that states frequently frame culture as the primary mechanism through which care should be organised. This move appears to recognise difference, but it simultaneously allows the state to withdraw, leaving the structures of inequality intact. Culture, in this logic, becomes the alibi for the state's retreat.

In the town, the Cooperative receives state funding to organise activities and deliver services, yet it also absorbs the wide-ranging responsibilities and challenges faced by both the organisation and the local Aboriginal community. While the existence of the Cooperative opens space for Wotjobaluk self-determination (Panaretto et al. 2014, 652), it also risks relieving mainstream services of their broader obligation to ensure equitable access for all citizens.

The Cooperative depends on government funds (Victorian Government 2025), but that funding comes with compliance requirements: adherence to state policies, competitive grant

applications, performance reporting, and accountability systems necessary to maintain recognition as a ‘successful’ organisation. Simultaneously, the Cooperative remains accountable to the local Indigenous community, must respond to on-site needs, and sustain a prepared team. As one interviewee noted, the scarcity of younger Indigenous peoples in the town able to continue the Cooperative’s work is an ongoing concern (interview, Dec 2024).

This dynamic is particularly visible in staffing. Despite substantial funding allocations for ‘self-determined and culturally responsive services across health, education, housing and more’ (Victorian Government 2025), several key roles at the Cooperative are held by non-Indigenous staff due to shortages of Indigenous professionals with medical, legal, or administrative qualifications. This reliance on non-Indigenous staff in positions within an Aboriginal-led institution can generate internal tensions around authority and power.

This structural strain is not unique to the Cooperative in the town. Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), Dr Jill Gallagher AO, has publicly articulated the pressures faced by ACCOs across the state:

Our model [ACCOs] of care delivers better results for our communities because it’s run by and for our communities. But most of our funding supports service delivery, not infrastructure. This creates an overwhelming administration and maintenance burden for our ACCOs (VACCHO 2025).

Her statement revealed a systemic imbalance: while ACCOs are recognised as effective service providers, funding frameworks prioritise programme outputs over the infrastructure necessary to sustain them. Administrative compliance, building maintenance, reporting obligations, and workforce shortages accumulate as largely invisible labour, absorbed within organisations already operating under structural constraint.

Recent reporting further substantiates this imbalance. A joint report by Infrastructure Victoria and VACCHO (2025) found that up to \$150 million is required to replace high-risk ACCO facilities across the state, alongside an additional \$30 million annually over five years for urgent repairs. An audit of 200 buildings across 31 ACCOs revealed that more than half of infrastructure is at the end of its useful life, with 42% of total floor space classified as critical or high risk. Despite these constraints, evidence indicates that services delivered by ACCOs generate substantially stronger outcomes than equivalent mainstream services.

ACCO buildings are not supplementary cultural spaces; they function as essential public health and social infrastructure. Yet unlike mainstream institutions whose maintenance is treated as a

baseline governmental responsibility, ACCOs must continually advocate for investment simply to sustain the material conditions under which care is delivered.

Through the language of Indigenous self-determination and multicultural recognition (Dunn et al. 2004; Kowal 2008; Hand 2024), the state frequently treats Aboriginal culture as the mechanism through which communities must organise their own care, rather than guaranteeing universal services or transforming mainstream systems to address institutional barriers in Australia. In doing so, responsibility for care is effectively displaced onto ACCOs. This displacement transfers not necessarily sovereignty, but the everyday labour of sustaining life. Greenhough et al. (2023) caution that,

highlighting culture as the problem can direct attention to individuals' responsibility to 'be caring' without considering how this capacity is shaped by power relations, inequality, and the availability of resources. In other words, it can ignore the question of what enables people to 'be caring', whilst allowing others to ignore care demands. Thus, it can redistribute responsibilities for care from those with management positions to those individuals who are most precarious within institutions (3).

As long as ACCOs continue to sustain Indigenous wellbeing across the state, Aboriginal health and welfare risk being treated not as a collective national obligation but as a community-specific responsibility. As Josh, an employee at the Cooperative, explained:

Governments sit there and say, 'We're going to fix this by delivering this money and those services.' But that's not exactly what we need. We actually need to do other things to address today's issues. If we [ACCOs] are not here doing this work, good luck, governments. They aren't going to do it. If we weren't here... all those problems would blow up in their face. ACCOs know that, and governments know it too. They know they need the community-controlled sector to help them. But that's not the story they present. (interview, Dec 2024)

Josh's reflection underscores that funding alone cannot remedy structural disempowerment. There are 'other things' that must be addressed: racism, institutional mistrust, and socioeconomic precarity. In these areas, money without structural reform achieves little. The Royal Commission (2021) affirmed that Aboriginal peoples require both well-resourced community-controlled services and culturally safe mainstream services. Yet, as Josh highlights, mainstream systems remain in the process of becoming culturally safe, while ACCOs carry the immediate burden of ensuring access.

In this way, the Cooperative becomes a space upon which the state can rely while simultaneously looking away from the deeper social and structural dynamics of racism, discrimination, and institutional exclusion that complicate Indigenous engagement with mainstream services. It is precisely in this dual movement of reliance and withdrawal that the necropolitical dimension becomes visible. Liberal democracies can uphold rights in principle

while allowing marginalised populations to remain exposed to vulnerability, a form of ‘letting die’ (Mbembe 2003). When the state delegates life-sustaining care to under-resourced community-run organisations under the banner of cultural recognition, it funds difference in order to manage its own retreat. The burden of sustaining life is transferred to those already rendered precarious.

The Cooperative thus stands as a contemporary site where cultural recognition, targeted funding, and delegated responsibility converge. This configuration did not emerge in a vacuum. The contemporary delegation of care to Aboriginal organisations must be understood in relation to a longer colonial history that systematically excluded Indigenous peoples from mainstream institutions. To understand why care in the town is organised through an Aboriginal-controlled institution, and why that institution carries such profound responsibility, we must trace the longer colonial genealogy that shaped both mistrust of mainstream services and the necessity of community control.

2.2. Spatial Legacies: Colonial Exclusion and the Making of the ‘One-Stop Shop’

From the 1830s onward, ideological doctrines aimed at the sociopolitical and religious transformation of First Nations peoples began to influence policies in Australia. These doctrines reflected growing entanglements between church and state in shaping the futures and welfare of Indigenous peoples (Caruso 2012, 279). In a time when:

the most desirable infrastructure [was] built around the flagship standard of ‘whiteness’ which would forever, in the eyes of its architects, become the platform for a nation which would stand apart from and above all comparative societies (Caruso 2012, 280),

racial exclusion was instrumental in constructing a national identity. Australian government Aboriginal assimilation policies were advised by anthropological research of the time that supported a paternalistic approach, in which ‘White Australia’ assumed responsibility for Indigenous communities through assimilation (Elkin 1934; Stanner 1958). Such policies operated as exercises of necropolitical sovereignty: they decided who belonged where and who could constitute a family, relegating Indigenous peoples to a liminal status by separating them from kin and Country.

Only in recent decades, most prominently after the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry (1997), have these practices been publicly scrutinised, alongside constitutional debates and the growth of recognised Aboriginal-led organisations (ACCOS).

The Cooperative's creation in the early 1980s responded directly to this legacy of exclusion and consequent Indigenous mistrust towards state institutions. An Aboriginal member of the Wotjobaluk community recalled:

A lot of our people weren't getting service through the hospitals or the doctors. The Cooperative created a place that was a safe space for us to be able to have our medical appointments but also to do what we do as part of our kinship (interview, Jan 2025).

The ACCO therefore represented a community claim to sovereignty: a deliberate effort to create belonging and security in the town against the backdrop of individual and community memories of policies of assimilation, and ongoing discrimination (Lindstedt et al. 2017; interview, Dec 2024). Since the constitution of the Cooperative, an employee traced a change in how the organisation worked: ACCOs shifted from community development groups into formal health and welfare agencies (interview, Nov 2024), now providing Family Services, Justice, Care and Children Services, among others. Mainstream health services have, in some cases, established outposts within the Cooperative because the community feels safer there (interview, Jan 2025).

A concrete example of the Cooperative's role as a health agency emerged in maternal health. While the local hospital employs qualified midwives and doctors and antenatal care is formally available, several members observed that Aboriginal women were not consistently attending appointments. Rather than transforming hospital systems, institutions initiated a programme for maternity professionals to offer regular clinics within the Cooperative. Attendance increased, as families engaged with care in a space they already trusted. A medical centre employee noted:

In the past, if I saw an Aboriginal family and their little 2-year-old wasn't speaking much, I would refer them to the hospital for speech therapy, because that was the only option. But they wouldn't go. They'd say they would, but never actually did. Since we've started offering speech therapy here at the Cooperative, they're happy to attend. It's familiar. They feel comfortable - and that's the difference (interview, Jan 2025).

On one level, this institutional arrangement represents a pragmatic collaboration improving access in a regional area. However, it also reveals a structural asymmetry: the hospital's institutional frameworks remain largely intact, while the Cooperative provides the relational

and cultural infrastructure necessary for care to function. Trust, cultural safety, and community accountability are cultivated over decades within an Indigenous-controlled space. These relationships become the conditions that enable mainstream services to operate effectively.

If maternal health illustrates reliance on the Cooperative's relational infrastructure, child protection demonstrates the deeper structural burden such delegation entails. Aboriginal children remain disproportionately represented in Out-of-Home Care (OoHC), a contemporary manifestation of the long history of state removal. The *Child Protection Australia 2023-24* report showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accounted for 42% of all children on care orders in 2024, with a rate of 63 per 1,000, almost ten times the rate of non-Indigenous children (6.4 per 1,000) (AIHW 2025).

While the state retains formal authority over child protection, community members described how the Cooperative routinely mediates between families and welfare agencies, supports kinship carers navigating complex bureaucratic requirements, and provides emotional care in the aftermath of removals. In this sense, although responsibility for intervention rests with the state, the ongoing labour of repair, which includes restoring trust, maintaining kinship ties, and mitigating trauma, is absorbed locally. An Aboriginal member reflected:

I think the child protection system is broken and probably need some reforms to change that; but what they've [governments] introduced instead is Aboriginal children care which is co-ops taking on the role of child protection. A lot of the work is based on early interventions rather than removal. Removal is an absolute final point (interview Nov 2024).

Lindstedt et al. (2017) provide a concrete example of these limits of 'delegated power,' showing how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) is inconsistently implemented. While the principle prioritises placement with family or community members, in practice, systemic constraints limit its effectiveness. These constraints range from increasing numbers of children in care to socioeconomic disadvantage. As a result, only half (45% or 27,200) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care live with relatives or kin (AIHW 2025).

Out-of-Home Care, even when well-funded, illustrates the immense responsibilities Aboriginal organisations must bear despite limited capacity. Structural limitations, bureaucratic constraints, and ongoing inequities mean that granting ACCOs autonomy does not automatically produce exhaustive outcomes. In other words, state funding and delegated authority cannot substitute for systemic reforms needed to redress historical and ongoing harm (Greenhough et al. 2023, 3).

What emerges is a profound paradox. The Cooperative embodies Indigenous resurgence and self-determination: a space of cultural safety, relational accountability, and community leadership. Yet it is simultaneously positioned as the mechanism through which the state manages its retreat. From assimilation to recognition, governance has shifted, but the asymmetry of responsibility endures.

Under assimilation, Aboriginal families were subjected to direct coercion and removal. Under recognition, communities are funded to manage the consequences of historical and ongoing dispossession. Sovereignty over life-and-death decisions remains unevenly distributed, even as the labour of sustaining life is delegated to Indigenous institutions.

The Cooperative is therefore not merely a ‘one-stop shop’ for culturally responsive services. It is an infrastructure of survival operating within the limits of delegated sovereignty. Its existence signals both political achievement and structural abandonment. It is a site where care is enacted, but the burdens of care are disproportionately borne. If the Cooperative functions as the relational infrastructure that enables care to operate in the town, trust is the mechanism through which this infrastructure becomes effective in practice.

2.3. The Currency of Care: Trust as Safety

In a context shaped by structural abandonment and widespread distrust of mainstream institutions, the Cooperative’s capacity to function depends on its ability to cultivate and sustain trust. Trust operates here as the indispensable currency of care: not a moral abstraction but a relational infrastructure, a precondition for accessing medical appointments, family services, counselling, housing assistance, and community programmes. Without trust, care does not circulate.

The Cooperative’s ongoing labour of nurturing trust also positions it as a protective buffer within the town. It absorbs the impact of racism experienced by Aboriginal peoples in public institutions and everyday encounters, creating a zone of safety in which care becomes possible. This safety is neither automatic nor guaranteed; it is continuously produced through relational work.

Since 2008, the Australian government’s *Closing the Gap* framework has funded culturally appropriate primary healthcare and cross-government initiatives aimed at improving Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (Panaretto et al. 2014). In practice, this has meant

directing resources to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver services tailored to First Nations peoples (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025; NACCHO 2025). While these policies recognise the importance of culturally safe care, they often obscure a crucial reality: funding alone does not generate safety. The effectiveness of Indigenous-led spaces depends less on funding alone than on the fragile and ongoing work of cultivating trust within a broader environment marked by racism and systemic institutional failure.

At the Cooperative, every staff member, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, identified trust as the non-negotiable first step. Without it, appointments would not be kept, referrals would not be followed, and support would not be accepted. Indigenous members emphasised the need to feel comfortable and to witness sustained, respectful commitment. Trust was described not as assumed but as earned through time, consistency, and accountability. As one non-Indigenous employee explained:

Without trust, people don't show up. Successful health care happens through relationships because if you don't have the relationship with a family and you haven't got that trust, then they won't come. They'll agree. They'll say yes, but that'll be where it stops. But if you build trust...we've been able to build trust through playgroup and our parent groups. There, week after week, and playing with their kids and talking with their families, they learn to really trust you, and ask you things (interview, Jan 2025).

This testimony makes visible the mechanisms through which trust is produced: repeated low-stakes encounters, informal interaction, and week-by-week continuity. Care becomes accessible not simply because it exists, but because relationships render it safe to accept. Trust, however, is not merely interpersonal; it is historical. Another interlocutor emphasised the deeper roots of reluctance to engage mainstream institutions:

Because most doctors and hospitals and staff are pretty White, so white walls, pretty institutional looking, and that can... because of the missions and what they did to us [Aboriginal peoples] back in the 1800s, that created a lot of fear for a lot of mob and it still creates generational trauma. The fear of going into those places [White institutions] and not coming out alive. So, we'd rather use our own services if we can because we trust our mob and it's our own mob working with us, and there are allies as well. They're not people that are trying to experiment on us or hurt us. And so that was why the co-op was set up (interview, Jan 2025).

This account links directly to the intergenerational legacy of institutional harm, including removals and missions, and helps explain why Indigenous-led services are often preferred despite broader policy investments. Scholarship similarly emphasises this historical dimension of mistrust (Sherwood 2013), highlighting that mainstream healthcare spaces are embedded within a longer history of surveillance, control, and violence. Staff positionality and

accountability further shape how trust is built and maintained, underscoring the relational labour required for meaningful engagement. As one non-Indigenous employee reflected:

When I first started, because I was the new White person here, it was tricky. The Indigenous community are not always trusting of White people, and I guess that's their 'history'. So, it took time for me to earn their respect (interview, Jan 2025).

Trust appears not as a given but as something that must be earned through sustained presence, cultural humility, and accountability. Non-Indigenous employees described the effort required to move beyond being perceived simply as 'the Whites,' emphasising time, humility, and commitment as prerequisites for credibility. The relational work of listening carefully, showing up consistently, and aligning with community-defined priorities makes care possible. Fieldwork confirmed that these practices were essential to the Cooperative's work, and Indigenous members reiterated that feeling safe required more than service provision; it required evidence of long-term respect.

These local observations resonate with broader empirical research. A 2021 study conducted in three communities in New South Wales, Australia, identified 'trust in the service provider and experience of cultural safety' as among the most recurrent enablers of healthcare access (Nolan-Isles et al. 2021, 3-4). The study also highlighted the fragmentation and complexity of Australia's healthcare system, reinforcing what interlocutors described locally: navigating services requires confidence that one will not be judged, dismissed, or retraumatised. Scholarship on Indigenous service contexts further emphasises the labour required to build culturally competent relationships across difference (Somerville & Perkins 2003; McRae-Williams & Gerritsen 2010; Anderson 2022). Building trust is not incidental to care delivery; it is the central work that makes care possible.

In this context, the Cooperative emerges as a significant site of Indigenous-settler relations. Carlson and Frazer (2020) argue that trust provides a powerful lens for examining such encounters, highlighting how care institutions function as sites of encounter where intergenerational trauma, institutionalised racial discrimination, and monocultural approaches intersect (Carlson and Frazer 2020, 88). The Cooperative exemplifies this dynamic: it is not only a service provider but also a relational space where historical inequalities and contemporary challenges converge, and where the terms of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors are continually negotiated.

Trust ultimately functions as the currency that allows care to circulate. It is earned, historical, relational, and fragile. It is sustained through the everyday practices described above. Trust defines what kinds of care are possible. It is insufficient to advocate for additional gathering spaces for Aboriginal people in the town without confronting the racialised dynamics that make such spaces necessary in the first place. Outside the Cooperative, access to public institutions remains conditioned by discriminatory behaviour and everyday racism. As Sean, an Aboriginal community member, explained:

I guess the reason these co-ops [ACCO] exist is that, particularly in an area like ours when you have this amount of racism and discrimination, very little people would go mainstream. There's a fear of you being judged and all those sorts of things, plus it's a bit of safety for people (interview, Nov 2024).

His reflection underscores that the Cooperative exists not simply because culturally specific services are preferable, but because mainstream spaces are frequently experienced as unsafe. In other words, trust is produced not only through relational labour within the Cooperative, but in response to the racialised conditions outside it. This tension between safety and exposure became particularly visible in the aftermath of the 2023 Referendum. Gabe, an employee at the organisation, described a deliberate shift:

After the 2023 Referendum, the Cooperative decided to take a big step back [in the reconciliation process]. We would invite a lot of non-Indigenous public and community services to our events. For that whole year [2023-2024], no one was invited, just for our [Aboriginal] community to be able to have an opportunity to take a breather [from episodes of racism and discrimination] and feel safe (interview, Jan 2025).

This temporary retreat from cross-community engagement illustrates the Cooperative's dual burden. It must not only manage the delegated responsibilities of service provision described in the previous section but also shield its members from the affective consequences of national political conflict and local racism. When public discourse intensifies hostility, the Cooperative becomes a temporary zone of safety, a space in which Aboriginal community members can temporarily withdraw from exposure.

The argument here is not that responsibilities should never shift from mainstream institutions to community-controlled organisations. Many Indigenous communities have long demanded precisely such transitions as expressions of self-determination. Rather, the ethnographic evidence from the town cautions against romanticising this shift as inherently emancipatory. The Cooperative's existence represents both political achievement and structural necessity. Its capacity to provide culturally safe care depends on continuous relational labour in a social

environment where trust remains fragile. State funding may recognise cultural specificity, but it does not automatically dismantle the racism and institutional distrust that necessitate parallel systems of care. The Cooperative therefore operates as a living infrastructure of trust. It is sustained through daily negotiation, emotional labour, and protective withdrawal when required. It is a space of safety, yet also a repository of risk, constantly responding to the very conditions it seeks to counter.

This constant negotiation with public spaces where belonging is contested sets the stage for the next chapter's examination of the town's affective economy, the circulation of resentment, fear, and silence that shapes what can and cannot be said about racism.

3. The Name's Price, The Town's Silence

This chapter shifts attention from the Cooperative's spaces of care to the affective dynamics that shape everyday encounters around racism in the town. I argue that a local affective economy, organised around what residents refuse to name, channels discussion away from structural reform and toward 'safer' debates about intent and moral character. This protects 'White moral comfort' and constrains public support for Indigenous claims.

Drawing on the logic of *the white possessive*, the organising principle by which whiteness is constructed as the rightful owner and controller of land, authority, and belonging (Moreton-Robinson 2015), and settler colonialism's spatial imperatives, I examine how shame, fear of accusation, and the performance of being 'not-racist' (Lentin 2020) contribute to these silences. Through ethnographic vignettes and interviews, I show how embodied experiences, such as the unease of wearing an Aboriginal T-shirt in a local shop, reflect broader patterns that keep structural inequalities unaddressed.

The Unnameable Feeling

I notice her head tilt slightly to the right, chin lifted. In the dappled shade above us, her eyes tell me to wait, quietly signalling something I cannot yet name. They aren't looking at me, yet they are alert; turned inward, not away. They remind me of the ocean at dusk: dark and reflective on the surface, teeming beneath. Something in her is rising, and I have to give it time. I hold silence, knowing my interlocutor doesn't need any guidance. I hold the quiet with care, uncertain what it is that, for the first time in our interview, allows Agha to take control of the space we have created.

There's still... I sort of feel... there are a lot of people who are still racist, you know, when it comes to Aboriginal peoples. I mean, I thought it myself when I've been in my Aboriginal T-shirt. I feel... you feel that you're treated a little bit differently. I feel like people... I just feel like sometimes if I go into a shop, if I didn't know the person who was serving me, I just feel... I don't feel as welcome. I can't describe it. It's just a feeling that I have when I have my Aboriginal shirt.

Her eyes meet mine. For a moment I'm afraid to say the wrong thing, afraid to close the door she has slightly opened. I ask whether it feels like a negative feeling; why would a T-shirt make people behave differently?

There's still quite a lot of discrimination and racism against Aboriginal peoples... 'Why would you work for the Cooperative?', you know? 'Why would you work there?' ...as if, you know... and I proudly say yes, and it's a great place too. But yeah... I just still feel that little bit of... you don't get it all the time, but just every now and then, especially if I don't know someone.

Agha exhales, a long breath that seems to release something held inside for a long time. I listen, acknowledge, and then slowly move to the interview's final questions; not because what she said was unimportant, but because it needed to remain held in that space. Her comment landed like a scream into noisy silence. During my time in the town, I rarely heard any White Australian name racism so plainly and materially. Despite Agha's hesitancy in defining her experience, she raised racism in our conversation. Not in self-defence or self-justification, but as an everyday reality in town. The reluctance to pin her experience into neat language, and yet her willingness to name it at all, presents the core puzzle of this chapter: why is what is so palpable often so unspeakable?

(Interview, Jan 2025)

3.1. Asserting Possession: The Racialisation of Space

Agha's unease is not an isolated idiosyncrasy; it follows a pattern. During fieldwork, I observed a similar mixture of discomfort and caution among White Australians whenever conversations turned to Indigenous peoples, reconciliation, or local racist incidents. Agha's 'feeling' is not merely personal; it reflects broader, systematic dynamics.

Previous scholarship on invasion and racism helps make sense of what I observed in the town. Patrick Wolfe's article *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native* (2006) and his later book *Traces of History* (2016), together with Aileen Moreton-Robinson's analysis of the *white possessive* (2015), provide a framework for understanding how historical structures continue to shape contemporary dynamics of silence in this Australian town. Wolfe emphasises that race 'emerges not as singular or unified but as a fertile, hydra-headed assortment of local practices' (Wolfe 2016, 19). Seen this way, race is a process maintained through ongoing

practice, leaving historical traces that continue to racialize colonised populations and reproduce unequal relationships (Wolfe 2016, 11). This continuum helps explain Agha's experience: her retreat into an 'indescribable feeling' indicates that racial anxiety circulates not just within her, but across her, the T-shirt, the shop, and the town's social norms.

Agha is not describing personal victimhood so much as an anxious position produced by the town's racialised boundaries. Her Aboriginal T-shirt acts as a trigger: it momentarily aligns her with Indigenous presence in the town and invokes what Wolfe calls the 'crisis of sharing space,' a response 'occasioned when colonisers are threatened with the requirement to share social space with the colonised' (Wolfe 2016, 22). Agha's hyper-awareness in the shop, expressed as 'I don't feel as welcome,' reveals how the white possessive logic (Moreton-Robinson 2015) governs space, targeting both Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people who temporarily affiliate with Indigenous identity. Agha's account does not resolve into a clear accusation; instead, it retreats to a subjective register, 'just a feeling I have.' Her claim that 'a lot of people are still racist' does not translate easily into naming particular discriminatory acts or recognising racism as an entrenched structural fact. The episode leaves her reflective yet silent, almost incapable or unwilling to describe what happens 'on the ground' when racism manifests. Agha's silence is not the absence of speech but the channelling of political reality into a subjective, ambiguous emotion. It is a social mechanism through which the colonial structure reproduces itself.

If self-concealment operates in some parts of town, a shared and explicit understanding of racism exists within Aboriginal spaces such as the Cooperative. A non-Indigenous employee recalled how colleagues corrected an inappropriate comment she had made about a community choice; feeling judged, she then kept quiet thereafter. That example shows two things simultaneously. Racist behaviour is sometimes challenged within the Cooperative yet calling it out does not necessarily lead to wider public discussion and can instead produce silence that blocks further exchange.

Comparing the shop and the Cooperative episodes highlights two further insights. Comparing the shop and the Cooperative episodes highlights two further insights. Within the Cooperative, the Aboriginal organisation confers sufficient authority for Indigenous community choices to be respected and for non-Indigenous employees to modify their behaviour when challenged. Outside this space, however, the discriminatory behaviour in the shop, triggered by an Aboriginal T-shirt, shows how the town frequently produces racist responses that mark who

belongs and who does not. Structural racism therefore manifests not only in isolated encounters but in the very atmosphere of public spaces. Keira, an Aboriginal member, captured it:

Most of the people here in the town are White farmers whose families have been in this town for generations. They think we [the Aboriginal community] are going to steal their land. ... The whole time we've been sitting here at the café, they've been trying to overhear us, watching us (meeting, Oct 2024).

That walk was my first experience moving through town with a community member outside an Aboriginal space. By 'outside' I mean a public place not organised by the Cooperative. As I argued in Chapter 2, the organisation hosts most community gatherings; walking with Keira revealed how conspicuous Aboriginal presence becomes. This hypervisibility is the lived enactment of what Wolfe describes as a crisis of sharing space: Indigenous presence unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions of White possession and belonging. The crisis, however, is not one-sided; it provokes defensive, control-reasserting reactions. These are what Aileen Moreton-Robinson theorises as the operation of the white possessive (2015). In her account, racialisation is 'the process by which whiteness operates possessively to define and construct itself as the pinnacle of its own racial hierarchy' (2015, xx). If the crisis is the threat of sharing space, the possessive response is the racializing force that violently re-marks the boundaries of that space. Moreton-Robinson (2015, xii) describes possessive logics as:

the excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation state's ownership, control, and domination. As such, white possessive logics are operationalized within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making and socially produced conventions.

In the town, the uncomfortable feeling Agha described and the stares Keira experienced are microcosms of the white possessive logic: a social tension reinforced by everyday practice and enabled by structural conditions (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 94-95). Two complementary forms of hypervisibility operate here. Aboriginal peoples become both subjects of attention and objects of racialisation (Keira's experience), while the white possessive becomes hypervisible insofar as it polices what White people may or may not do when affiliating with Indigenous identity (Agha's experience). In other words, policing operates across the racial hierarchy: Indigenous peoples are racialised directly, while White people who affiliate temporarily with Aboriginal presence are policed by other Whites. The possessive gaze in the café thus reasserts 'whose space it is' and frames Indigenous presence as disruption. Bringing Indigenous presence into a commercial space rendered 'neutral' through the naturalisation of whiteness exposes that neutrality as an effect of possession. What appears as ordinary social order is, in

fact, a racialised spatial arrangement in which Aboriginal presence is marked as intrusion and whiteness remains unmarked as norm.

Although these two episodes bring into view how the white possessive operates, the people who experienced them occupy very different positions in the constructed racial hierarchy that Moreton-Robinson describes. Keira is a Traditional Owner who experienced racism as both subject and object; her exposure is embedded in long histories of dispossession. Agha is recognised within the same racial hierarchy as a White Australian, and in the episode described, she was temporarily associated with the Aboriginal community because of her work affiliation at the Cooperative. Their lived experiences of the same policing logic, therefore, are not equivalent. Josh articulated this distinction vividly:

As a non-Aboriginal person, I have an understanding of their experience, but I have never lived that life. There's a distinction I make. I can understand but I can't know. Only someone who has lived life as an Aboriginal person truly knows what the challenges are, and what racism is like in your heart. I can see it, I can observe it, but I get to go home every night and not have to take it to heart (interview, Dec 2024).

The conservative fear Keira identified, captured in her words 'They think we're going to steal their land,' maps directly onto arguments about racial capitalism and the historical entanglement of capital and race. Cedric Robinson's formulation of racial capitalism (1983) emphasises that European capitalism did not merely encounter racism but was constituted through racial logics that justified dispossession and accumulation. In the Australian case, the economic valuation of land was inseparable from the colonial racial project directed toward First Nations (Wolfe 2016, 14; Slater 2018, 8). Moreton-Robinson captures the ontological dimension of this tension:

Indigenous ontological relations to land are incommensurate with those developed through capitalism, and they continue to unsettle white Australia's sense of belonging, which is inextricably tied to white possession and power configured through the logic of capital and profound individual attachment (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xxi).

It is essential in this analysis not to naturalise racism; rather, we must historicise it as an instrument of political economy that has been institutionalised across Australian history. Wolfe's insight clarifies why the crisis of sharing social space in the town is so deeply entrenched: invasion is a structure, not an event (Wolfe 2006, 388). Australia's early colonial formation, conceived initially as a place for convicts and later reshaped by the Merino Revolution (c. 1797) into a site of economic opportunity, generated waves of land-focused settlement promoted by colonial authorities and private interests (White 1981; Balint et al. 2014, 207; Brun 2016). The post-frontier period did not mark the end of colonial relations but

their reconfiguration. As overt frontier violence receded, dispossession was consolidated through legal regimes, pastoral expansion, missionisation, and assimilationist governance. From the 1890s onward, the consolidation of nationalism and the White Australia policy (1901) institutionalised exclusionary regimes that further embedded these logics: Indigenous peoples were forced onto missions and reserves while national narratives framed them as a ‘dying race,’ thereby erasing resistance and consolidating a selective national memory (Gunstone 2012; TallBear 2013, 510-517; Rowse 2014; Slater 2018, 14). In the town area, the forced removal of Wotjobaluk frequently resulted in placement on missions such as Ebenezer Mission, north of Dimboola (Lydon 2009).

This history of nation-building, dispossession, and assimilation helps explain why the seemingly isolated episodes of racism I recorded are in fact lived expressions of a structure. Agha’s and Keira’s stories together reveal the architecture of racism in the town: a structure of possession and exclusion that shapes everyday life. I now turn to the affective machinery that keeps this structure standing and conditions interpersonal silence in town. This machinery includes shame, fear of accusation, and the performance of ‘not-racist’ moralities.

3.2. Performing ‘Not-Racism’: Shame and Structural Avoidance

Having examined how the white possessive operates across everyday spaces, shaping both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous experiences, I will now return to the paradox that puzzled me on the day I spent with Agha: if racism is so present in everyday life, why does it so often go unspoken? I explore this controversy through Sara Ahmed’s framework of affective economies and Alana Lentin’s critique of the performative politics of ‘not-racism’.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed argues that emotions operate as ‘affective economies’: they circulate, attach to signs and bodies, and shape orientations toward others. Feelings do not reside solely in subjects or objects but are produced through circulation and social relations (Ahmed 2014, 4-8). Lentin’s work *Why Race Still Matters* (2020) complements this by showing how liberal public cultures often substitute anti-racist commitments with moral performances of being a ‘good’ or ‘not-racist’ person. This strategy prevents deeper engagement with structural injustice (Lentin 2020, 62-64). Read together, these frameworks help understand how shame and reputation management in the town produce a social logic that discourages naming structural racism.

Reactions to the 2023 Voice referendum illustrate these dynamics. Several interviewees reported that the result produced visible disappointment and withdrawal among Indigenous residents, alongside defensive, public displays of moral justification from some non-Indigenous people. In many accounts the referendum's outcome translated into diminished trust: some Indigenous patients were described as more reserved about attending services, while others reported an increase in guarded or strained interactions with non-Indigenous providers (interviews, Oct 2024-Jan 2025). The doctor's public intervention below, an attempt to assert that a 'no' vote did not automatically equal racism, is one of many instances in which concern for moral reputation eclipsed structural reckoning.

At the time of the Referendum, there were marches in town X; and I know there was a strong 'yes' community. After the no result, the Aboriginal community was very disappointed. They [Aboriginal community] were very reserved, they were personally... they won't listen to you [as non-Indigenous employees] or skip their medical checks. And I know one of the White doctors stood up and said that we [generally referring to the White people] voted no, but not no because we don't want you [Indigenous] to have a say, not no because we're racist. Because the media confused us, and voting yes just didn't feel like the right thing to do. It wasn't going to be representative of all the [Aboriginal] communities. He said that in front of everyone. He was very brave, and it started a bit of a debate. I think that what he was just trying to say was that because he voted no it doesn't mean that he doesn't want the Indigenous peoples to have a say or to have the equality and equity, or to be heard. It just wasn't the 'right thing to do' (interview, Jan 2025).

The doctor's speech contains several features I observed repeatedly when non-Indigenous people talked about the Referendum. A recurring pattern is the construction of a collective 'we' that must be defended from the label 'racist.' At the same time, explanations - such as claims that the media caused confusion, that the proposal 'didn't feel right,' or that the Voice would not represent all communities, operate as deflections that manage public shame rather than engage with structural questions. The result is a discursive shift away from collective responsibility toward a defensive performance: 'I/we are not racist, but...'.

How poorly the campaign was carried out was already a national discussion before it began; discontent among both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians was present from the start, though most Indigenous members eventually supported the possibility that a Voice in parliament might lead to a Treaty with the Victorian State (Nakata 2023). In my interviews, the referendum was described as ruined by the media, unnecessary, idealistic, and rushed (interviews, Oct 2024-Jan 2025). This perception is consistent with analyses of media and polling data, which highlight how the 'no' campaign's simple, repetitive, and highly targeted messaging, amplified by prominent commentators and conservative politicians, contributed to declining public support and widespread confusion about the process (Carson et al. 2024). While my aim here is not to reconstruct the referendum campaign, these structural factors -

including the absence of bipartisan support, strategic media amplification, demographic divides, and the circulation of misinformation, point to the broader political conditions within which constitutional change must operate in Australia. In this sense, the referendum's defeat cannot be reduced to interpersonal prejudice alone; it also reflects systemic barriers to reform embedded within Australia's political and media landscape (Macdonald 2015, 120). Yet at the level of everyday interaction in the town, these structural dynamics were refracted through questions of character and reputation.

Given that the referendum concerned representation for Indigenous peoples in parliament, why did defending one's moral character from the stigma of racism feel more urgent to some than engaging with the referendum's structural politics? Put differently: why did the doctor's intervention appear more about proving 'we are not racist' than about opening a conversation on the referendum's consequences for Indigenous patients and the cooperative-doctor relationship?

The doctor's words gain meaning when considered alongside the relationship between the desire for moral security and the political realities revealed by the referendum (Carlson 2024). Unlike Agha's quiet, interior hesitation, the doctor's intervention performed a public, defensive justification for a vote perceived as publicly unjust. It was a defensiveness that produced no action but instead preserved the speaker's moral position. Ahmed's work helps illuminate this dynamic: shame both exposes and compels concealment. The subject feels 'bad,' and so turns inward to manage that exposure rather than turning outward to repair or transform relations. In other words, shame prompts covering moves that protect reputations without addressing underlying harms. (Ahmed 2014, 102). In thinking about how national shame works to acknowledge past wrongdoings, she explores what shame does to bodies:

Shame feels like an exposure - another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful - but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject turn away from the other and towards itself... In shame, I feel myself to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I have to expel myself from myself... In shame, the subject may have nowhere to turn (Ahmed 2014, 103-104).

For the doctor, what had been exposed by the referendum was two overlapping facts: that many Australians did not support a stronger Indigenous voice in parliament, and that racism toward Indigenous Australians remained real and consequential. The doctor's public defence, attributing the result to confused media coverage, to the campaign's poor design, or to questions of representativeness, amounts to classic deflections that manage shame without engaging structural responsibility. His rhetoric exemplifies the colour-blind frames' critiques

(Bonilla-Silva 2003; Lentin 2020): by insisting ‘I’m not racist’ or ‘we didn’t mean that,’ speakers convert structural problems into a matter of individual intent and thereby close down debate.

This defensive pattern was not unique. Other non-Indigenous members at the Cooperative recalled conversations during the campaign where they had asked family and friends why they intended to vote no. In response, they were often met with a series of questions about the referendum that they themselves struggled to answer fully. This led them to understand how the presence of unanswered questions could drive a no vote. Yet they also felt that providing these answers was not their role, but the government’s. Some pointed out that a lack of personal research made people racist. Others admitted not remembering the referendum’s details, feeling neither outcome would bring success (interviews, Oct 2024-Jan 2025). The common thread is a sense of personal responsibility to respond, coupled with a delegation of ultimate responsibility, and thus shame, to the government for its failed campaign.

These relations between being labelled ‘racist’ and voting no exemplify Alana Lentin’s critique of the performance of ‘not-racism’ (Lentin 2020): by insisting on proving one is ‘not racist,’ the doctor (and others) short-circuits structural analysis and closes down conversations about underlying power. Slater (2018, 19) extends this point by arguing that racial power is frequently treated as a problem of individual self-awareness rather than one demanding social transformation. Framing the referendum as a confusing government mechanism therefore functions not to interrogate racist structures but to allow individuals, the doctor in this case, to step back from responsibility while preserving their moral self-image. For Indigenous peoples, this retreat translated into diminished trust, more entrenched racial harms, and a lost opportunity for representation (Hendrick & Yung 2023; Farrelly 2024). The doctor’s defensive framing also sidesteps the argument that Indigenous representation in public fora is a fundamental right. Treating the Voice as merely a political campaign outcome obscures claims for structural recognition and diminishes the legal and moral urgency behind Indigenous demands (Centre for Global Indigenous Futures n.d.).

Having seen how the doctor’s performance of ‘not-racism’ manages public shame, I now turn to another episode, the Mount Arapiles dispute, which shows how the same affective economy quietly strangles political deliberation at its roots.

3.3. The Binary Trap: How Affective Anxiety Forecloses Political Engagement

A second revealing incident occurred in the town library. That morning, I had seen a poster in town: ‘Save Arapiles Climbing. Save Natimuk. Stop The Bans. Sign The Petition.’ The poster reflected a local dispute: Parks Victoria and the Aboriginal community sought to protect rock art and ceremonial areas, while some climbers argued closures would unfairly restrict access and claimed they had been excluded from consultations (Bergin & Aeria 2024; Bergin 2025; BGLC 2025). Overhearing a short conversation, I heard one man say: ‘If you sign the petition, you’re considered racist’ (local conversation, Dec 2024).

As with the doctor, the threat of being called racist becomes real precisely when others recognise racist behaviour in you, and not necessarily because the accused person understands what counts as racist or how to change. Ahmed’s notion of affective economies is central here: emotions circulate, attach to signs and bodies, and shape what people do and do not say. The man’s remark did not disclose his position on rock-art protection or climbing access; it revealed that the possibility of being labelled ‘racist’ is enough to shut down discussion. His worry exposes a perceived moral binary: signing the climbers’ petition would mark him as racist for ‘not standing with the Aboriginal community,’ while not signing preserves a safer neutrality. This is more than anxiety about a name; it is anxiety about being forced into a restrictive moral framework with only two roles: the good White (with Indigenous peoples) or the bad White (against them). The affective economy, together with the performance of ‘not-racism,’ produces a binary that disables nuanced political engagement (Slater 2018, 18). The man at the library might legitimately care about both climbing access and Indigenous heritage, yet the affective economy prevents that complexity from being voiced.

This episode again illustrates the silencing effect of structural racism and affective circulation in the town. In Agha’s case, she held her silence about discriminatory behaviour at the shop, avoiding the concrete proof of structural racism. In the doctor’s case, defensiveness closed down any real discussion of the referendum’s consequences. Regarding the man at the library, we see how any action touching Indigenous rights is immediately categorised, making genuine dialogue impossible. The structural conflict over land is thus transformed by the affective machinery into a dangerous test of personal morality. Political engagement is abandoned in favour of identity management, and the difficult politics of land are reduced to a binary question about one’s moral self: ‘racist’ or ‘not-racist.’

The affective economy in the town achieves its purpose: protecting the settler-colonial structure of possession and exclusion. Anxiety about the word ‘racism’ becomes so powerful that the fear of being labelled racist collapses political nuance, forecloses discussion of alternatives, and makes silence or disengagement the only ‘safe option’ for many White residents. The white-possessive logic does not always need to win arguments; it simply needs to make arguments socially dangerous. This forecloses the kind of contested, structural reckoning that transitional justice requires.

If the previous chapters traced how responsibility is delegated and how affective silence stabilises settler possession, the next and final chapter of analysis turns to what is built in spite of those constraints: from the limits imposed by state withdrawal and affective closure to the grounded ways the Wotjobaluk community cultivates alternative relations of care, authority, and futurity.

4. The State's Promise, The Community's Resurgence

Drawing on theories of resurgence and Indigenous knowledge, this chapter examines how the Wotjobaluk community navigates the burden of delegated care and public silence through a dual practice of engagement and refusal. Within the Cooperative's sovereign space, community members participate in state transitional justice mechanisms with pragmatic scepticism, even as they enact a more foundational justice through everyday cultural practice. This analysis traces how Indigenous-led resurgence operates not as a supplement to transitional justice, but as its grounded condition of possibility, the relational infrastructure that enables justice to be lived locally. I argue that Indigenous resurgence is not separate from transitional justice: it is its vital, grounded core.

If...

The air in the Cooperative activity room is thick with the sweet, sharp scent of glue and the powdery smell of poster paints, and full of the sound of young voices tumbling over one another. It's Monday afternoon - art workshop time - and Keira is once again gathering the youth of the Wotjobaluk community around the big table.

Children are drawing, running around the room playing with their cousins, some following instructions, others opting for a free-style interpretation of the task. They are loud and messy. They are sparkly children.

While Keira maintains order and guides the young participants with her words, she does not seek to control how they use the space. The art workshop is a place for them to be themselves; a platform for Aboriginal children to express who they are.

One day, Keira reads us the book 'If...' by Sarah Perry, a book that invites readers into a world of imaginative possibilities where leaves turn into fish and cats fly with wings. After a beautiful reading that encouraged the children to call out other wonderful realities, Keira gives them a task:

'Now,' she says, 'let's draw something you would like to leave for your children and grandchildren; about your story, about the present world. You can decide to use either a traditional or a modern Aboriginal art style. And remember, Aboriginal culture is not less real

than the world we live in today. We live in both realities; realities that interact and speak to one another in the present. Whatever you draw, it's gonna be the art of *Blak* fellows, and you have to be proud of it.'

With that, Keira invites the children to recognise both their Aboriginal culture and the mainstream world; not as mutually exclusive options, but as co-existing realities they can navigate together. She makes explicit that knowing and practising both does not require choosing one over the other.

An animated yet focused energy descends in the room, punctuated only by the soft crinkling of coloured tissue paper and the sticky, deliberate sounds of brushes applying glue.

Those young, strong hands are shaping a world of possibility.

(Art workshop, Nov 2024)

4.1. Power and Precarity of Treaty: Scepticism and Withdrawal

The workshop shows how the Wotjobaluk community enacts authority and care on its own terms. This grounded practice resonates with what Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) describes as:

A resurgent approach to Indigenous decolonization premised on self-actualization, direct action, and the resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power (Coulthard 2014, 24).

Coulthard's critique of the 'politics of recognition' urges a shift away from seeking validation within colonial structures and toward building alternative ones. Sarah Wright (2018) extends this insight by showing how refusal can function not as disengagement but as a reorientation of dialogue, a way to resist and redirect colonial logics (Wright 2018, 130).

In the town, this duality is palpable. Wotjobaluk members participate in government bodies and state mechanisms, yet they also cultivate spaces of retreat and renewal that strengthen community authority. This tension becomes clearer when situated within Victoria's contemporary transitional justice landscape.

As outlined in the introduction, Indigenous rights mechanisms operate unevenly across Australian jurisdictions, and the state of Victoria has frequently been characterised as comparatively progressive in this regard (Cowan 2013; Hobbs & Williams 2019; Castan 2020). In October 2025, the Victorian Parliament passed the Statewide Treaty Bill, and the

treaty formally signed the following month acknowledged Indigenous enduring connection to Country and the harms of colonisation (Ashton et al. 2025; First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria 2025). As Co-Chair and Gunditjmara man Rueben Berg stated:

Aboriginal voices from across the state have been clear that Treaty is the change we need to create a better future for our people (First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria 2025).

This development carries particular historical weight given Australia's longstanding absence of treaties at the time of colonisation (Davis 2006; Hobbs 2019; AHRC 2025; Merlan 2025). Yet, as discussed in the introduction, recognition in Australia has repeatedly proven vulnerable to electoral shifts, media cycles, and changing public sentiment. Victoria's treaty therefore embodies both the promise of structural transformation and the persistent fragility of recognition within a settler-colonial polity where political will remains contingent.

This fragility means that recognition risks remain procedural rather than transformative unless translated into durable, everyday relations. The treaty establishes a formal relationship between the Victorian government and First Peoples. It does not automatically reshape the social environment in which that relationship is lived. Agreements negotiated in Melbourne enter regional communities where Indigenous-non-Indigenous divides remain pronounced and where debates over land and sovereignty are often fraught.

Comparative research reinforces this caution. Jaymelle J. Kim's (2018) study of transitional justice in British Columbia, Canada, showed that many Indigenous participants experience such mechanisms as part of a continuum of colonial bureaucratic violence. Whether transitional justice alleviates or reproduces harm depends on how it is lived locally (Kim 2018, 118).

For Wotjobaluk members, participation is therefore strategic rather than celebratory. Cooperative members serve on local, regional, and state bodies and have contributed testimony to the Yoorrook Justice Commission¹². Their engagement is genuine but tempered by scepticism about institutional capacity to deliver substantive change. Coulthard (2014) reflects on this scepticism, noting:

Settler-colonialism has rendered us [Indigenous people] a radical minority in our homelands, and this necessitates that we continue to engage with the state's legal and political system. What our condition does demand, however, is that we begin to approach our engagements with the settler-state legal apparatus with a degree of critical self-reflection, scepticism, and caution that has to date been largely absent in our efforts. It also demands that we begin to shift our attention away from the largely right-

¹² The Yoorrook Justice Commission was Victoria's and Australia's first formal truth-telling inquiry into historic and ongoing systemic injustices perpetrated against First Peoples through colonisation, led by First people (Yoorrook Justice Commission).

based/recognition orientation that has emerged as hegemonic over the last four decades, to a resurgent politics of recognition that seeks to practice decolonial, gender emancipatory, and economic nonexploitative alternative structures (179).

Coulthard's insistence on critical self-reflection and a 'resurgent politics of recognition' speaks directly to the Wotjobaluk position. Engagement with state mechanisms is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The treaty may open doors, but it does not automatically transform the social conditions in which that relationship is lived (O'Sullivan 2021, 75; Moore et al. 2024). The work of making participation meaningful and secure must happen in the social fabric of communities themselves.

The tension between policy-level recognition and the everyday realities experienced by Wotjobaluk is a core finding of this chapter. State-level transitional justice mechanisms typically take place in capital cities, with limited direct engagement of the broader public. Consequently, they often fail to engage non-Indigenous residents outside metropolitan centres. When state mechanisms and treaties do arrive in regional communities, they enter an arena where the Indigenous/non-Indigenous divide is pronounced and debates over land and recognition are particularly fraught. These conditions shape how such mechanisms are received, negotiated, and resisted.

This duality is lived, not abstract. Sean, a longtime Cooperative member, described it plainly. He acknowledged the state as 'progressive' for creating mechanisms where 'communities like ours' can feed into government. Yet he also referenced the town's geographical remoteness and how location shapes access and influence:

We don't get a lot of those guys [from the government]. They sit in Melbourne and they don't travel this far very often. Locally, we talk about 'the invisible line' in Ballarat, a point past which government rarely travels. Victoria is a lot more progressive than other states. A lot of departments have local, regional, and then state committees. If you're lucky enough to get on at a state level, that's where you can have the most influence particularly around change; and that happens locally which is quite handy (interview, Nov 2024).

The justice system offers a concrete example of how Indigenous communities enter into state structures. The 18-year Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) is a long-term partnership aimed at improving justice outcomes for Aboriginal peoples, addressing over-representation in the criminal justice system, and promoting self-determination (Aboriginal Justice Victoria 2024). As Sean noted, reporting begins at the local level, feeds into regional Victorian Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees, and then into state-level bodies. Through the self-determining state-level Aboriginal Justice Caucus, members serve as conduits between

community and government and often chair Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees. His experience in these bodies is that change is incremental but possible: ‘If you get enough people on board, then it could happen. Not now, but maybe in five years’ (interview, Nov 2024).

Yet this institutional access exists alongside a very different local reality. While Sean and other Aboriginal members worked inside formal representative structures, public engagement in the town often felt hostile or indifferent. During the 2023 Referendum, several non-Indigenous residents displayed overt nastiness toward Indigenous individuals and organisations, actions that at times necessitated heightened security for staff and community events (interviews, Oct 2024-Jan 2025; Bergin 2025).

The local no vote, over 80% in the town, was experienced by many in the Wotjobaluk community as tangible proof of local indifference; the prospect of ‘sitting across the table with people who might have voted no felt very uncomfortable’ and suggested that ‘very little locals cared about the average Aboriginal cause in the area’ (interviews, Oct 2024-Jan 2025). In that atmosphere, safety and the need for collective closure became primary reasons for the Cooperative’s decision to limit mainstream collaborations in 2023-24 and to pursue a strategy of local disengagement.

A similar dynamic of division unfolded around Dyurrite (Mount Arapiles). After the Victorian Government released a management plan in November 2024 to protect areas of the mountain that hold rock art, public debate became heated. Media coverage foregrounded climbers’ claims of exclusion and the Wotjobaluk community’s fear to experience stronger racism. In an interview with ABC News, a representative of the Wotjobaluk community said, ‘A lot of Aboriginal people don’t comment because of how much hate it generates.’ The ABC monitored social media activity following the release of the plan, which included subsequently removed instances of racist or hateful content. The Wotjobaluk representative continued, saying that because of the racism on social media, many community members no longer post because of the negative effect it had on themselves and on the broader community. He added, ‘I can comfortably say on behalf of the community, we all see it [racism], we just don’t say anything’ (Bergin 2025).

Responses from non-Indigenous residents followed a familiar pattern: some were unaware of the closure; others dismissed it as media ‘drama.’ Wotjobaluk members, by contrast, described a deliberate strategy: they kept communicating directly with Parks Victoria while avoiding

media engagement they feared would be distorted and weaponised against them. Beneath these decisions lay a bitter perception that, despite decades of advocacy, many people simply did not care about the rock art itself. An Aboriginal member captured this sense of exclusion: ‘There’s always this divide between Aboriginal Australian and everyone else. And anything that’s remotely done for Aboriginal peoples, people just don’t care’ (interview, Nov 2024).

These testimonies reveal a fundamental asymmetry. While the treaty establishes a new formal relationship between the state and First Peoples, it does not automatically transform the social conditions in which that relationship is lived. Institutional access exists, but its effects are unevenly distributed across geography and shaped by local hostility.

For Wotjobaluk members, engagement with state mechanisms is therefore neither naïve nor celebratory. It is strategic. Participation becomes one avenue among others, a means of influencing policy while remaining alert to its limits. Scepticism, here, is not withdrawal from politics but a sharper way of engaging it. It is within this space, between cautious engagement and guarded distance, that resurgence takes shape.

4.2. Cultural Burnout and Strategic Refusal: Remaking Relations

If Sean’s account reveals the structural duality of Indigenous engagement, Keira’s testimony exposes its embodied cost. She acknowledged real progress, noting a political climate that feels less dangerous than the activism of the 1990s, but emphasised the wear that comes with standard transitional justice mechanisms. These include giving testimony, attending public hearings, and preparing submissions.

In terms of the racism and the truth-telling, I feel like it’s put it back in the spotlight, and we’ve been able to really take charge this time, when back in the 90s, when I was a young girl and we were travelling to the rallies, our old meetings, it was a lot more dangerous... it’s made it easier to be able to express, come out a bit more with our truth-telling, and be honest and fight in a different way rather than being victimized constantly or stereotyped (interview, Jan 2025).

Keira’s memories underline continuity of commitment and show how recent openings have translated into concrete gains: artists collaborating with the local gallery to foreground truth-telling, Wotjobaluk participation in statewide treaty dialogues, and formal recognition under Native Title. All of these reconfigure cultural visibility and political standing (O’Brien 2014; Emmerton & Giselsson 2024; First Peoples-State Relations 2025). Yet she also expressed scepticism about whether these formal mechanisms would translate into tangible, local healing and support (Payne et al. 2025). She put the dilemma bluntly:

We're all sharing, we're all telling our trauma. However, how are they going to look after us and what are they going to put in place to help the healing process of that? Because they haven't done that at the moment.

I think the Yoorrook Commission is great because we're [Indigenous] able to get it [the truth, the injustice] off our chest. Some of us are able to do healing through it, through the telling; and it helps to tell the story over and over to heal sometimes. But it's hard; it can be taxing on us, and you get cultural burnout. It can take a lot out of you. We're *Blak* 24/7 and we live with both sides of it 24/7. Sometimes it can get too much to be able to share and talk, and so we rather just lock ourselves away and avoid it sometimes. It seems like we're constantly giving. What are we going to get back from it? And that's what I want to know.

I think it's a great thing if the government can take it and use it and create something beautiful that's going to create healing and create equality for us in our local communities. I see it doing a lot of work in the city. I don't see it doing a lot of that down here [in more remote areas]; the government need to give more information to the wider community. Our mob knows about it, but a lot of non-Indigenous mob still don't understand what it means (interview, Jan 2025).

Keira's testimony crystallises three interlinked issues: the potential for truth-telling to enable healing alongside the cultural burnout it can generate; the urban-rural disparity in how these mechanisms is implemented and resourced; and the consequent need to refuse and retreat as a form of self-preservation, to step away from public visibility when continual exposure becomes unsustainable.

Cultural burnout is central of her critique. While stress and burnout in racialised contexts are discussed in the literature (Crow 1997; Shell et al. 2022), Keira identifies a particular cultural exhaustion produced by repeated acts of testimony and representation, a process of 'constantly giving.' This burden is compounded by structural imbalance: transitional justice mechanisms often position Indigenous peoples as both subjects and objects of inquiry, while demanding little comparable reflection from non-Indigenous citizens (Kunjan 2024). Cultural burnout, as Keira describes it, does not stem from weakness but from sustained political labour. Truth-telling requires not only recounting injustice but inhabiting it again, often in public, and repeatedly. The exhaustion she names emerges from this ongoing demand to translate lived experience into testimony, while continuing to navigate the very inequalities being described (Moore et al. 2024).

This dynamic does not position Indigenous participants merely as victims of process. Rather, it reveals the uneven distribution of emotional work within transitional justice frameworks. While Indigenous peoples give testimony, non-Indigenous society is not required to undergo an equivalent reckoning. The imbalance is not in voice, but in burden.

In this context, local refusal is not merely 'tactical' but essential for well-being. Choosing to 'lock ourselves away and avoid it sometimes' resists exhausting public expectations. As Wright

(2018) notes, refusal redirects energy and reframes struggle, enabling the community to invest in resurgent, community-controlled practices (for instance, the art workshop described in the vignette) that provide relief, renewal, and intergenerational transmission of culture. Keira's experience completes the chapter's argument: resurgence is not simply an alternative political strategy; it is a vital source of sustenance for those who shoulder the labour of engagement. Her question, 'What are we going to get back from it?', exposes the unequal exchange at the heart of state-centred recognition politics in transitional justice mechanisms.

Sean and Keira's commitment to their community, and the ways it translates into engagement with the state's legal and political system, reveals both the state of Victoria's relative potential to advance Aboriginal representation and recognition, and the limits of state mechanisms to secure substantive sovereignty. Their actions also demonstrate why strategic withholding emerges as a necessary response to structural neglect, local hostility, and cultural burnout.

Within the Cooperative, Wotjobaluk resurgence is enacted through the everyday remaking of social relations that this approach enables. Collective behaviours, such as public silence on Dyurrite (Mount Arapiles) and withdrawal from mainstream collaborations, show that choosing not to engage in certain state-directed spaces does not close off dialogue but redirects it into community-controlled spaces (Wright 2018). This stance becomes visible through the Cooperative, the heart of this thesis.

Under the constraints of delegated care and public silence, the Cooperative becomes something more than a service provider; it becomes the primary site where refusal is transformed into a new kind of conversation. Sarah Wright (2018), building on Rose-Redwood et al. (2018), argues that the power of dialogue lies in 'the very framing of what might be communicated and how and by whom' (129). At the Cooperative, that framing is Aboriginal-led, and thus creates a distinct social environment. Unlike mainstream services where Aboriginal peoples must accommodate an imposed system, here the community sets the terms. What emerges from interviews with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees is the conscious *unlearning* required of non-Indigenous staff to work within the resurgent space of the Cooperative (Somerville & Perkins 2003; Brearley & Hamm 2013; Bell et al. 2022).

As a non-Indigenous employee explained, it involves building trust and earning respect on the community's terms:

I try to show them [the Aboriginal community] that, you know, I care. I think they can see that. So, I have earned a lot of the Elders' respect, which is really hard to do. I'm actually really proud of that. But

I work hard, and do my best to listen to what the community wants. I'll ask questions or I'll seek what they want me to do (interview, Jan 2025).

This expectation is clearly stated by the Aboriginal community. A community member emphasised that non-Indigenous workers must be ready to follow community guidance:

Personally, the diversity [at the Cooperative] is needed. I think it's the only way. We need non-Indigenous workers and professionals in there to work with us, but to learn our way as well. So, it's not just a give, a constant give. If you're going to be working in the community, then that's what we want. We want you to engage with it. We want you to want to learn from us rather than trying to tell our community that this is how it's got to be (interview, Jan 2025).

What we observe is a willingness to withdraw from the colonial logics experienced outside the Cooperative, requiring non-Indigenous employees to be open to change. A non-Indigenous employee recalls a meaningful lesson:

I was going to fix everything for her [Aboriginal member]. I knew exactly what to do. She came in, and she had an issue she needed help with. I knew exactly what to do, clever me, and I told her what I was going to do. And then she just looked at me and said, 'Now shut up and listen.' And from that day on, I shut up and listened. And that was the best thing that ever happened to me (interview, Dec 2024).

These moments of recentred authority show refusal not as withdrawal alone, but as generative. By redrawing the boundaries of legitimate engagement, the Cooperative creates the conditions under which Wotjobaluk knowledge, identity, and futures can exist. Its most visible expression is everyday activities, like Keira's art workshop, where forms of resurgence are taught, felt, and passed on.

4.3. The Art Workshop as the Heart of Resurgence

Returning to the art workshop, its full significance as the core of this resurgent practice now comes into focus. The children creating *Blak* fellow art are not separate from the treaty signed in Melbourne or the testimony given to the truth-telling Yoorrook commission. The art workshop is the living ground that gives transitional justice state mechanisms their significance. Such work is motivated by future generations, who are already actively crafting their futures through everyday local practices.

By telling the children, 'Aboriginal culture is not less real than the world we live in today. We live in both realities; realities that interact and speak to one another in the present' (interview, Jan 2025), Keira refuses a colonial either/or and validates the complex, simultaneous world Indigenous peoples navigate. She foregrounds traditional and modern Aboriginal art not as

opposites but as coexisting, dialogic realities. Her words foreground two pivotal aspects: the continuity of past, present, and future within Indigenous life, and a refusal of colonial authority to determine what counts as ‘real’ Aboriginal culture. That power, she insists, rests solely with the *Blak* fellow artist.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* (2011), writes of the need for Indigenous peoples to clearly articulate,

our visions for the future, for living as Indigenous peoples in contemporary times. ... We need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community and ultimately, action. We must move ourselves beyond resistance and survival (17).

For Simpson, resurgence does not depend on a friendly colonial political climate; rather, it emerges through the transformative capacities of Nishnaabeg culture itself. Reflecting on the concept of *Biskaabiiyang*, a verb often translated as ‘to look back’, she clarifies that it does not mean returning to the past, but ‘re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens. It means reclaiming the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism’ (Simpson 2011, 49–51).

This is precisely what occurs in Keira’s workshop. Her reflection embodied a re-creation that draws from the past while orienting toward present and future:

Our [Aboriginal] kids go through two educations. Their cultural education, being and understanding of the land; and then they have their White education that they have to do because the government says so. But when we’re handing down our knowledge, it’s about understanding. ... it’s the *Blak* way, it’s not a mainstream way. Because no other mainstreamers, no White person is doing what they’re doing. And that’s going out, putting story, learning about what symbols are in terms of Aboriginal artwork; but also understanding their senses, what’s their surroundings, what is the world they’re living in.

Within the time I was there [art workshop], I was constantly telling them to listen, see, taste, smell, all of that sort of stuff at different points, and then grounding them, keeping them grounded. Because if you keep them grounded, then their spirit is calm. If you can give them their culture young and ingrain it in them young, they’ll always have their identity. They’ll always know that no matter where mainstream society takes them, they will always have a community back home. They will always have stories and connection to their Country, and they will always be able to find home wherever they are through that (interview, Jan 2025).

In this way, cultural resurgence operates as the core infrastructure of justice: knowledge transmission and identity formation create the conditions for community-led accountability and sovereignty. Keira’s words position Aboriginal culture not only as the cornerstone of community and identity, but also as a realistic negotiation with the demands of mainstream society, a commitment to hold onto identity within structures that continually question it.

Martin Nakata (2007) captures this complexity through his concept of the *Cultural Interface*, reflecting on his own struggle to navigate between the Western knowledge system and his lived experience as an Islander (2-10). For Nakata, this is not a simple intersection of two worlds, but a dynamic interface where knowledges meet, transform, and evolve:

While we [Indigenous peoples] have maintained continuity with our former knowledge tradition, much of the content of this tradition has been transformed in its interactions with Western knowledge systems and continues to evolve in interactions with Western knowledge and its institutions, technologies and practices. Islanders exist, live and are positioned in a particular relation to other knowledge, interests and people as we pursue the dual goals of equality with other Australians while maintaining and preserving cultural distinctiveness (Nakata 2007, 198).

Nakata's analysis complements Simpson's argument that resurgence is not a nostalgic return to an idealized past, but an active framing of the future through cultural continuity. Together, their work situates Keira's practice as an insistence that young people learn to inhabit the cultural interface with confidence and groundedness, aware that their identity and community are living, evolving, and sovereign.

From the distant promise of treaty to the immediacy of the art workshop, this chapter has traced resurgence as a living political practice. It does not wait for institutional transformation; it generates continuity, authority, and futurity in the present.

The Cooperative becomes the site where engagement and refusal coexist, where sovereignty is not merely negotiated but enacted. Justice here is not deferred to legislation or hearings. Resurgence is practised daily, in boundary-making, in knowledge transmission, in relational accountability.

The future is not anticipated; it is rehearsed, shaped, and carried forward by the Wotjobaluk.

5. Country in Motion: Everyday Justice and Indeterminate Futures

This thesis engaged with a local Aboriginal cooperative in a rural town in the state of Victoria, Australia. By reflecting on personal stories and social perceptions, I examined tensions between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous residents, how transitional justice mechanisms translate into economic support for Aboriginal cooperatives, and how national decisions and policy outcomes reach rural towns and interact with existing social dynamics. The central question was: How does the Wotjobaluk community navigate, resist, and remake the project of transitional justice within everyday spaces of care, silence, and resurgence?

Across the empirical chapters, I demonstrated that transitional justice in a settler-colonial context is not simply implemented; it is interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped at the local level. The analysis first highlighted how the state's delegation of responsibility to the Cooperative produces a landscape in which care, cultural continuity, and community safety are sustained locally, even while structural authority remains elsewhere. It then explored how an affective economy of silence constrains dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, limiting the transformative reach of state-led initiatives. Finally, the analysis shows that in response to these structural and social constraints, the Wotjobaluk community enacts a politics of resurgence grounded in everyday practice. This resurgence takes shape through youth programmes, relational accountability, and sovereign community agendas. The findings also point toward important directions for future research.

Recent evidence reviews in the transitional justice field emphasise the need for more subnational and longitudinal studies capable of tracing how justice initiatives unfold in specific local contexts over time (Macdonald 2015). Building on this call, further research could compare rural and urban communities across Australia or follow treaty and truth-telling processes as they develop. Such work would make it possible to assess how national justice frameworks interact with locally grounded institutions such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and how these dynamics shape the everyday possibilities of justice.

This thesis therefore positions the local Aboriginal-led cooperative as the indispensable hub of care and resurgence for the Wotjobaluk community. In a landscape where transitional justice (TJ) mechanisms are limited by their colonial foundations and state-centric design, local Aboriginal peoples both engage with state processes and independently write their future by

refusing to remain confined within TJ frameworks. They respond to delegated care by strengthening community institutions and services; they confront racial silence by seeking dialogue when it can be constructive; and they pursue sovereign community agendas that persist with or without state recognition.

Taken together, these practices show that the Wotjobaluk community navigates transitional justice not as passive recipients of reform but as political actors who selectively engage, strategically refuse, and actively reconfigure its terms. They resist by declining to accept symbolic reconciliation as sufficient. They remake by grounding justice in relational, cultural, and spatial practices that exceed institutional design. The result is neither full incorporation into state-led transition nor outright withdrawal, but a dynamic and sovereign negotiation that unsettles the assumption that justice will be handed down ‘from above.’

The broader significance of this finding lies in what it reveals about the structural premises of transitional justice in settler-colonial states. If justice must be enacted locally, relationally, and often in spite of state structures, this exposes the limits of frameworks that presume a completed colonial past and a unified national future. Transformative change cannot be reduced to institutional mechanisms or symbolic recognition. Rather, it emerges through sustained, Indigenous-led practices that redistribute authority in everyday life.

This conclusion invites a reconsideration of what ‘transition’ means in contexts where colonial relations remain foundational. As Maddison and Shepherd (2014, 255) suggest, ‘[the transformational capacity of TJ] is also reliant on the conceptual underpinnings of the political shift in the context in which it is applied.’ They argue that the very premise of transition must be rethought if transitional justice is to become genuinely transformative. In the Australian context, phrases such as ‘move forward as on’ are common; yet decolonial scholarship warns that assuming Indigenous and White Australians will move together risks ignoring how some are unwilling to relinquish colonial privilege. Scholars call for openness to indeterminacy and uncertainty (Park 2020) and to the mutability of relations (Bell 2022; Dalgarno 2025; Nakata 2007). Collectively, they point toward a radicalized politics that embraces indeterminate futures, where ethical collaboration is possible but never on predetermined, settler-defined terms.

The implications of these findings extend across policy, community life, and scholarship. For policy, the research suggests that transitional justice initiatives must move beyond symbolic recognition and short-term funding cycles toward sustained power-sharing and secure

institutional resourcing for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. Without durable funding arrangements and recognised decision-making authority, TJ risks reinforcing settler governance while shifting responsibility for care onto Indigenous institutions. At the level of community life, the study shows that justice for local communities is not enacted only through formal mechanisms but through everyday practices: youth programmes on Country, negotiations of silence, and forms of relational accountability. These practices shape whether national frameworks are translated into trust, resentment, or withdrawal. The thesis contributes to scholarship by arguing that locality is not merely a setting but a scale of analysis. Attending to the town's silences, care infrastructures, and social tensions reveals how national justice frameworks are lived, mediated, and constrained in place.

Further research should examine how locally grounded collaborations unfold over time: where they occur, what changes they produce between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, and how these local dynamics may ripple outward to influence national debates. We observed preliminary shifts in these dynamics at the Cooperative, where the Wotjobaluk community affirmed their knowledge and non-Indigenous employees had to develop new skills and overcome preconceptions. Future longitudinal and comparative studies could investigate the conditions under which resurgent practices create transformative shared spaces, and what non-Indigenous peoples must learn, and potentially relinquish, to participate ethically.

It will be equally important to look at future collaborations and partnerships between ACCOs and government institutions. Such research should observe how responsibilities and burdens are shared across Australian communities, how these partnerships affect the ways services are utilised and by whom, and what changes they register in populations' understandings of belonging and identity.

My experience as a European researcher also raised questions about responsibility for injustice and the safeguarding of Indigenous rights. Australia hosts many European migrants, tourists, and temporary workers; these circumstances warrant examining how future 'guests in Australia' might be introduced and brought closer to the social and political landscape. It would be useful to explore Indigenous perspectives on such newcomers and the responsibilities they carry within settler-colonial structures.

Finally, this raises critical questions for anthropology in Europe: What is our responsibility, as scholars shaped by colonial traditions, to engage with settler-colonial contexts such as Australia? How can we be accountable allies, amplifying Indigenous scholarship and critiquing

colonial power within our institutions, without replicating extractive or saviour complexes? And what might we learn from turning our attention closer to home, engaging with Indigenous communities in Europe on their own terms?

This thesis has shown that justice is not delivered by design alone. It is enacted in relationships, sustained in communities, and claimed by those who refuse to let their future be someone else's project.

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