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# Becoming a Settler Descendant: Critical Engagements with Inherited Family Narratives of Indigeneity, Agriculture and Land in a (Post)Colonial Context

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## ABSTRACT

Using personal reflections from my experiences as a descendant of settlers, I undertake an autoethnographic interpretation of how my inherited family history of agriculture and memory structures my relationship to land. Agricultural identities have been foundational to the formation of the Australian nation and in the metamorphosis of settlers into settler descendants. Memories formed by settlers and inherited by their descendants as family stories become a consubstantive force in the determination of relationships to land. At the same time, I recognise how the dispossession overtures of these sentiments continue the erasure of autochthonous Indigenous belonging by the colonial settler state. Thus, my work critically engages with how an autoethnographic approach to issues of settler colonial identity in the historical past might stifle or conversely open up critical engagement with ethical responsibility to Indigenous peoples in the political present. This analysis reflects on the broader society's proclivity toward agricultural identities, borne out in the recent debates surrounding Indigenous author Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu* [Pascoe, Bruce. 2014. *Dark Emu*. Broome: Magabala Books monograph], which positions Indigenous people as Australia's first agriculturalists. These trends follow scholarship that seeks to expose normative and racist beliefs about Indigenous others through attentiveness to troubled colonial history.

## KEYWORDS

Settler colonialism; memory; indigeneity; agriculture; postcolonial

## Introduction

My first memory is deeply rooted in place and family. I run through a field of sorghum, sunlight shining off the glossy chlorophyll-rich green fronds, the rainbow hue of its rays squinting my eyes at the corners. I can feel the warmth radiating off the tilled soil, the earthy smell divulging its rich fertility. My older brother runs ahead of me, laughing and squealing as I chase him through the field. He is just tall enough to see over the crop that my father has planted but that still dwarfs me. When I look around all I can see is flickering green fronds and the blue sky above. I lose a gumboot from my three-year-old foot and feel the emotive pull between going back for the shoe or running on to catch up with my brother. Strands of my unsecured blonde hair catch in my mouth as I turn to look back to where I've come from.

Like dreams, this memory has no start or end but encapsulates a feeling of being located in a particular place at a particular moment in time. In this memory I locate the particular experience of not only of being a child of non-Indigenous settlers, but also of understanding my relationship to land as through an agricultural lens. This lens, both a way of seeing land and a way of being with land, has carried with me through my life. The first-ness of this memory and its originality in my life history, underlies the central concept for exploration in this essay—the affective power of memory and stories and their inter-generational transmission in transforming *settlers* into *settler descendants*. While place and family are centring themes in narratives about attachment to land, it is memory that I argue carries the transformative burden of turning settlers into settler descendants. In adapting methods from life writing, namely autobiography and biography, along with autoethnography, a particular challenge emerges pertinent to this tranche of non-indigenous scholarly writing. That is, how to reflect on moments drawn from life writing, without abandoning the critical and analytic power of an ethnographic perspective. What is at stake in these explorations is the affirmation of colonial control of land using the emotional weight of affect as a shield to Indigenous critique and ultimately, decolonial agendas. Hence, this paper asks if a critical non-Indigenous autoethnography is possible in a (post)colonial context.

Methodologically, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, 273) have emphasised how autoethnography ‘treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act’ and that as such, it forms ‘both process and product’. In the process of crafting this article, I considered which memories and family stories have been the defining components underpinning my sense of belonging to Australia, particularly those that I have inherited as part of my settler descendant identity. Though I have lived most of my life in cities, for me, this belonging emerges particularly out of and is generated from within an agricultural identity, the mixing of labour with land and of connection to non-urban spaces. It is important here to pay attention to what is considered *memory* on the one hand, and *stories* on the other, while acknowledging the iterative relationship between the two. That is, which memories and stories co-mingle my family with land through time. For me, the memories and stories that persist and are seminal to my own identity are predominately those which speak to my family’s predecessors as explorers and subsequently agriculturalists, involved in the so imagined ‘history-making’ work of ‘discovering’, toiling, and re-making Australian soil. Land and its continued possession and repossession take centre stage. What were earlier antecedents’ memories, have become later generations’ stories, told on numerous occasions throughout my life. For the purposes of this article, I requested that my parents replay many of them to me over the phone, in WhatsApp chats and discussions held on Zoom.

My process of engaging this autoethnography has been a much longer trajectory. As an anthropologist, for almost fifteen years I have conducted research with and about Indigenous and (increasingly) non-indigenous people, asking probing questions about what it means to belong in contemporary Australia. This has included writing about how identity categories are constructed and, as such, should be thought of as relational and contingent, being held in relationship to one another other (Dalley and Martin 2015; Trigger and Dalley 2010). In Australia, as in other colonial and postcolonial contexts, I have been acutely aware of the gravity of being a non-indigenous researcher studying

Indigenous people and the kinds of ethical accountability that this entails as distinct from other kinds of research. As my research has increasingly shifted in focus to non-indigenous settlers and their descendants, I have been struck by how the questions that I ask research participants might be answered by myself and my family. In my ethnographic practice more generally, it has been, as Ellis et al. describe it, a desire to ‘concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience’ (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 274).

### Settler colonialism, belonging and decolonisation

My hesitancy in undertaking this autoethnographic and biographical endeavour has been the underlying question as to whether it is possible to be self-reflexively critical about the political intent and potency of engaging settler narratives of belonging (Anderson 2006; Bessire 2019). Explorations that critique colonial identity have been engaged now for some time by Indigenous scholars such as Araluen (2019) and in the literature of settler colonial studies and settler colonial theory (Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Strakosch and Macoun 2012; Veracini 2007). Non-indigenous scholars often refer to their work as being ‘decolonial’, or of attempting ‘decolonisation’, citing the seminal work of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012). Yet Tuck and Yang’s work is explicit in what it does and does not consider within the purview of a decolonial frame, urging that it must involve some tangible change in the life and circumstances of Indigenous people. Decolonisation is, as they say, ‘not a metaphor’. Arguably, much of what is touted by non-indigenous scholars as being decolonial, including the field of settler colonialism, falls markedly short of this expectation (Neale et al. 2019). So too and explicitly, this article does not set out to achieve a decolonial end, but instead concerns itself with laying bare, and thus critiquing, colonisation as the foundation of settler and settler descendant identity (see also Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Paradies 2020). I consider this to be a decidedly pre-decolonial exercise. At risk here is the contradictory move of voicing liberal views on decolonialism for political ends while re-perpetuating, and thus affirming, the privilege and power of one’s own settler colonial identity. Rachel Busbridge (2018, xii) writes of postcolonial politics that the quandary involves ‘tracing and interrogating unequal relations of power but not to reinstate them by affording them ontological primacy’.

Settler colonialism remains at its most potent and controversial in settings where colonisers have not attended to the difficult work of history and truth telling, let alone to reconfiguring the unequal power relations that underpin contemporary relations. Arguably a key space for the perpetuation of silences about history is within the family—the location of intergenerational memory transmission. As memory studies scholar Ashley Barnwell (2021, 47) points out, ‘the stories we inherit within families—stories that anchor our sense of identity and belonging—may be the most deep-seated, and the most difficult to transform’. What is at stake is what historian Tom Griffiths (1996, 4) evocatively describes non-indigenous assertions of these kinds of knowledge as ‘an obscuring and overlaying din of history-making’. For Griffiths (1996, 4) what this amounts to is ‘part of a genuine attempt by white Australians to foster emotional possession of the land’, albeit ‘sometimes accompanied by respect for pre-existing Aboriginal associations’ (1996, 5). Emotion and sentiment reverberate keenly in family and memory, where romanticism for the colonial past and the life experiences of one’s

ancestors nonetheless continue to have direct impacts on Indigenous people in the political present (Barnwell 2017, 2019). An increasing number of scholars have explored these issues in a range of postcolonial contexts, including for their own settler families (e.g. Krichauff 2017; McCabe 2017).

Another notable example of this is the non-Indigenous historian Peter Read's (2000) monograph *Belonging*. Read's book explores and celebrates his own intimate connection to the south coast region of New South Wales, an exploration Linn Miller (2003) describes as something more akin to a 'longing for belonging'. As part of his conceptual analysis, Read identifies three kinds of belonging: rational; emotional/intuitive; and Aboriginal, being spiritual or innate. It is the way that Read shifts between endorsing modes of belonging based on 'romanticism' generated by memory and 'rational' forms of belonging that so irks Miller (see also Gelder 2000). As Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003, 27) similarly critiques, Read's use of the sentimental to express belonging 'is problematic for a number of reasons, notably for its denial of the racialized structural power relations that have produced the legal conditions in which this sentiment is possible, enabled and inscribed'.

Critiques of Read's work, like that by Miller, emphasise the danger of romanticising memory, and point out how it equates to a settler nostalgia or melancholy, replacing considered critique with emotion or affect. Perhaps it is because of the desire to explore affect and memory in less critical modes that has led to belonging being a key offering of non-Indigenous Australian fiction writers (Barwell and Cummins 2018; Potter 2019). However, Indigenous scholars, particularly novelists and poets, have highlighted the dangers of folding in Indigenous stories with those of settler colonists (Araluen 2019; Konishi 2019; Leane 2014; Wright 2016). Part of unpacking and thus resisting the monolithic colonial imaginary, what Rifkin (2013) calls the 'settler common sense', includes being attentive to its racial contours and the various subjectivities it subsumes. In Australia, settlers and their descendants include a range of non-White identities and minorities who may share in solidarity much in common with Indigenous people. Recent scholarship and activism—linking Palestinian with Aboriginal people is one example—demonstrates the solidarities possible across boundaries of states and identities. Nevertheless, in Australia, as in other (post)colonial nations, it has been White settler identities that have historically dominated and continued to do so (Ahluwalia 2001; Butler and Ben 2020). In this article, I use memories and stories drawn from my own family history to focus on the foundations of settler descendant belonging in Australia. For my family, this has a particular agricultural trajectory.

### Settler belonging continued: a pastoral imaginary

Frieda Knobloch (1996, 1) describes colonisation as 'an agricultural act' and an 'agricultural idea'. In many parts of the colonised world, the most pervasive agricultural form is pastoralism. What is referred to in Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand as 'pastoralism' and the 'pastoral industry' (though generally 'ranching' in the Americas) describes the various processes associated with the breeding and care of a number of domesticated animals, predominately sheep and cattle. Not only has the keeping of these animals had detrimental impacts on fragile ecosystems, but it has also played a key role in the foundational and continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Bassett 2009). In many settler

colonial contexts, cattle in particular have acted as mobile colonisers, continuously pushing out the geographic and social frontier beyond the locations that their owners could themselves settle (Grandia 2009; Sayre 2009; Turner 2009). Historically, it was the need for yet more land to accommodate animals that initiated and perpetuated the legal justification for the taking of land, including across entire landmasses such as Australia and New Zealand. Australian Indigenous poet and scholar Jeanne Leane (2014, 12) describes this the ‘transplanting of an Anglo-European pastoral dream into the Australian context where both land and people are resources and commodities in a capitalist colonial project’.

Debates about agriculturalism’s place in Australian prehistory and history have lately been reanimated by the work of Indigenous author Bruce Pascoe. Pascoe’s (2014) book *Dark Emu* provides an overview of evidence—archaeological, ethnographic and historical—to support the categorisation of pre-colonial Australian Aboriginal people as agriculturalists. This is a departure from what has been a fairly consistent understanding of Aboriginal people’s lifeways as being hunter–gatherer, reliant not on the domestication of plants and animals but on the continued (sustainable) harvesting of plants and animals from the landscape. Finding a ready public audience, and lauded by many scholars, Pascoe’s work has continued to be contested both for its use and presentation of evidence, and its co-opting of schemas of progress that some argue diminish the complexity of hunter–gatherer lifeways (Griffiths 2019; Keen 2021; Neale, *in press*). As Griffiths (2019) notes, the adoption of the ‘template of agriculture’ is nonetheless understandable as it ‘is turning a political tool of oppression and disdain into a case for dignity and respect’. Putting to one side scholarly criticisms of the methodological underpinnings of Pascoe’s approach, the public’s valorisation of Aboriginal people as ‘agriculturalists’ is a reminder of its potency as a schema for the configuration of legitimate and valued forms of identity (Mayes 2018).

While it is politically appealing to refer to all non-Indigenous people living in Australia as ‘settlers’, thereby emphasising that colonialism and colonisation is ongoing (Wolfe 1999), this categorisation downplays the challenges posed by intergenerational transmission of land-based memory and story (Krichauff 2017, 4). It is this intergenerational transmission that sediments belonging, creating a category of settler descendant who may be more attached to the privilege of landedness than their settler forebears. Settler descendants’ sense of entitlement to belonging may be more acute among those with agricultural, particularly pastoral connections to land, which by its continued exclusionary practices and presence in the landscape exclude Indigenous people (Rowse 2014). One of the most evocative forms of settler pastoralism has been its often-iconic forms of materiality. Most will be familiar with a typified image of a stockman (cowboy), with slight variations on a theme of a man dressed in heeled boots, long trousers, a button up shirt and a broad-brimmed hat. Aside from this, pastoralism in its many incarnations has readily identifiable forms of place-based materiality that position it within the landscape. Of these, arguably the most influential has been fencing—structures built on and into the landscape to constrain animals but also to denote ownership—to keep in and exclude others. Within the boundaries of these fenced areas, pastoralism socially inscribes land with colonial production, while at the same time both actively and inadvertently removing traces of Indigenous ownership (Instone 1999).

In my own family history, the erasure of Indigenous people from land through pastoral activity has been direct. From the 1910s to the 1930s, my maternal grandmother Mary Dalley (néé Leake) grew up on cattle stations (ranches) that her family ran in north-east Australia, many of which had Aboriginal people working as domestics (cooks, cleaners and nannies) and stockmen (cowboys). In most instances, these people had themselves been dispossessed or were the descendants of Aboriginal people who had been dispossessed by pastoralists. The justification for their removal into state 'care', though really control, was often Indigenous people's predation on cattle, finding it a ready and easy supply of food in what were often harsh environmental conditions. As in many parts of Australia, Aboriginal people were corralled into state-funded Christian missions, and later forced back to work on stations to earn income for the missions. The ebbs and flows of dispossession and repossession is illustrative of the intertwined nature of pastoralists' wresting of land and their reliance on Aboriginal people as forced and slave labour to work that land (McGrath 1995, 39–43).

Later, in the 1960s after returning from overseas duty as an army nurse during World War II, Mary and her husband Frank Dalley, ran a post office in the tiny town of Adavale, in western Queensland a remote part of northeast Australia. On walks around pastoral properties in the region, Mary collected stone artefacts made by Indigenous people and donated them to the state-based collecting institution, the Queensland Museum. The Queensland Museum is one of Australia's major collecting institutions founded in 1862, whose own history parallels that of the non-indigenous settlement of the state. Some of the earliest collections made by the Museum include the physical remains of Aboriginal people and their secret-sacred material culture, including burial goods. As a former curator, Yugambeh Aboriginal man Michael Aird has said the Museum's Aboriginal collection includes 10,000 artefacts, 7,000 photographs and 400 human remains (Aird 2002, 306). Many of these items were stolen from their resting place or from Indigenous people by pastoralists, anthropologists and government officials, put on display and studied by non-indigenous researchers. It has been only since the 1980s that the repatriation of these objects to Indigenous people has begun in earnest.

I first learned of my grandmother's donations while volunteering in the Indigenous Studies section of the Queensland Museum in 2002. One of the tasks undertaken by volunteers was to audit the collection and to enter the information into the Museum's database. While in the darkened storage room one day I pulled open a drawer of stone artefacts and was shocked to find the artefact's donor listed as 'M. Dalley'. The happenstance of finding this collection of over 100 objects, appeared coincidental but was in keeping with Mary's colonial interest in Aboriginal culture. The dusty shelves at her home held many books about Aboriginal people and the pieces of glass, stone and metal that she collected on walks and travels were likely to have been worked by Aboriginal people. Mary was an example of what Tom Griffiths (1996, 1) termed the 'antiquarian imagination', being 'a historical sensibility particularly attuned to the material evidence of the past, and possessing a powerful sense of place'. While I do not doubt that her collecting was borne out of a genuine interest in Indigenous culture, the manner of the presentation of these objects, as items found and displayed, suggests the sense of entitlement to remove these objects from the land that was being farmed.

In spite of her fascination, or perhaps explaining it, among the many memories she shared of her life and travels there was only one that involved Indigenous people directly.

The memory is from event that took place on the Leake family cattle station, ‘Kentle’, near the town of Charters Towers in northeast Australia. As a young girl on a holiday break from boarding school, Mary had done something that so enraged her mother that she attempted to choke her. According to the story, it was only the intervention of an Aboriginal woman working as a domestic in the house that prevented her mother from killing her. What is noteworthy in Mary’s retelling of this particular memory is her focus on the intervention of the (unnamed) Aboriginal woman, rather than for example, the detail of why she was in trouble. What this points to is Mary’s crafting of the Aboriginal woman as a saviour, something akin to the image of a ‘noble savage’, and the purposeful demonstration of what Mary desired to be her own acceptance by Aboriginal people, in spite of their dispossession and subsequent integration as forced labour in the pastoral economy. The overtures naturalise herself with Aboriginal people and in turn, her role as a coloniser on Aboriginal people’s land. While Indigenous authors, such as Corr (2018) and Behrendt (2016), actively criticise these narratives in the archives, popular culture and academic writing, it is similarly the responsibility of settlers and their descendants to ensure these critiques permeate settler family history and storytelling.

### A ‘first settler’: migrancy and discovery and the root of belonging

A key figure in family history is the ancestor that was the first migrant in a new land. Much family history is centred on establishing the identity of this person and connecting oneself to them through genealogical research. In my own family history, the expansion of the colonial frontier in Australia was particularly perpetuated by my maternal grandmother’s (Mary Dalley neé Leake) grandfather, Thomas Tate. Tate was a medically trained naturalist and came to Australia from Northumberland by way of New Zealand in 1871 (Pearn 1991, 528). In 1872, Tate accompanied failed explorer William Hann and five others on an expedition through northern Australia. At the time of the expedition, William Hann and his brother Frank had taken up pastoral leases in northern Australia and were becoming known for expanding colonial settlement and the identification of land suitable for mineral prospecting (Ross 2003). The Hann expedition is well described in Australian history for ‘opening up’ Cape York, a region now renowned for its expansive cattle stations (Taylor and Huxley 2021, 77).

Within our family history, one story about Tate on this expedition has persisted and was told by my maternal grandmother to my mother and by my mother to me. The story relates how during the expedition, Tate was reportedly the first (non-indigenous) person to report the existence of a tree kangaroo; what was later categorised as *Dendrolagus bennettianus*.<sup>1</sup> However, as our family story describes, Tate was denied the opportunity to claim formal identification of the species, as his documentation and specimens of the animal were insufficient to warrant formal recognition. Tate came to be on the Hann expedition by way of another failed expedition *en route* to Papua New Guinea, which resulted in the wrecking of the boat *Maria* off the east coast of Australia (Pearn 1991, 529–530; Ross 2003, 273). Tate was said to be one of few survivors. In later life he became a schoolteacher in the Torres Strait, an archipelago of remote islands off the northern tip of Australia, and our family history remembers him as ‘one of the first’ Whites to be stationed in the region.<sup>2</sup> These remembrances of Tate as ‘the first of’, are

foundational to the justification of his and our family's continued presence in Australia, and to those generations that will likely come subsequent. There is a sense in which the difficulties that he experienced, surviving a shipwreck and being denied his rightful place as a discoverer, eclipse the horrors that colonisation wrought on Indigenous people in these parts of Australia.

Absent from family stories are the roles that Indigenous people played both in Tate's achievements and in enabling his exploration across the Australian continent. In fact, even a cursory search of online archives adds a far more nuanced account of Tate's life, in which Indigenous people play a far more prominent, if not crucial, role. In particular, written out of the story of Tate's expedition to Cape York is the role of an Aboriginal guide, known as 'Jerry' in the archival record, who was in fact the first to draw Tate and Hann's attention to the existence of the tree kangaroo, as Covacevich (2002) has rightly pointed out.<sup>3</sup> Recently, Peter Taylor and Nicole Huxley described Jerry as an Aboriginal man from the Girramay language group who had been working as a stockman on properties owned by William Hann and his brother Joseph. One of Jerry's descendants, Nicole Huxley's family history details Jerry's capabilities as an intercultural communicator, working as an intermediary between local Aboriginal groups and the expedition (Taylor and Huxley 2021, 73). Ironically, my own family memory focuses on the denial of Tate's rightful place in history as discoverer of a new species, when in fact it has been Jerry's more crucial role that has been expunged. Similarly, that Tate survived shipwrecking off the north Australian coast may well have been on account of assistance rendered by local Aboriginal people. This is particularly likely given that at the time, the region was sparsely settled by non-indigenous people.

When Tate died in 1934, he was eulogised in newspapers with descriptions such as 'last of old explorers', considered something of a pioneer in his travels and activities through northern Australia. Among my maternal forebears, Tate is our family origin story as far as our connection to Australia goes. Tate is the beginning of my maternal family line's expression and assertion of an autochthonous connection to Australia, an intergenerational connection handed down through children and descendants. His story is the foundation of what Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton Robinson (2003) calls the 'White possessive':

Migrancy and dispossession indelibly mark configurations of belonging, home and place in the postcolonizing nation-state. In the Australian context, the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject-colonizer-migrant is based on the dispossession ... it mobilizes the legend of the pioneer, 'the battler', in its self-legitimization.

In my family, Tate's story provides an instance of what Moreton Robinson refers to as 'a version of Australian history that privileges the exploits of White Australians by representing them as the people who made this country what it is today' (2003, 24). In fact, in one account, it was said that 'his contributions to Australian history were significant in the broadest context' and that 'he typified a group of doctors whose explorations and discoveries advanced the cause of science in this country' (Pearn 1991, 528). In Tate's case, the historical connection and foundation of his figure is not only originating but also latched to the quintessential Australian figure of the kangaroo, albeit the tree-living kind not its ground-dwelling cousin.

Interpreting the significance of an origin ancestor (migrant) story, pinpoints a moment in time at which the family line established its justification for what becomes an inherited occupation of Australia. This invokes questions about the ‘possibility of settlers “becoming” Indigenous’ (Paradies 2020, 5) or if the transformation to such a status is in fact possible (Dalley and Martin 2015; Martin and Trigger 2015; Trigger and Dalley 2010; Trigger and Martin 2016). These questions are germane to a number of regions, including South Africa (Kuper 2003, 389), where settlers, or more commonly settler descendants, have asserted forms of autochthonous identity. This includes within processes of Indigenous land claims or native title processes set out to acknowledge the connections of Indigenous people. In what can be a combative process, settlers and settler descendants are sometimes called upon to testify to the connections of Indigenous people (Redmond 2007). In New Zealand, for example, Michele Dominy’s (1995, 2001) ethnographic research among Pakeha (non-indigenous) sheep farmers in the high country notes the affective connections of the farmers.

Similarly, for northern Australia, where they conducted research with cattle station owners of ‘diverse ancestries’, Trigger and Martin (2016, 825) emphasise aspects of belonging held in common with Aboriginal co-residents. In the examples that they refer to, it has been the co-mingling of labour with land that provides the basis of ‘common affects often arising from interrelated histories, biographies, and collaborative experiences of physical work’ (Trigger and Martin 2016, 826).

Nonetheless, there remains the political question of whether the expression of affective connections to land on the part of non-indigenous people is used as an attempt to dislodge the a priori rights of Indigenous peoples. To be explicit, attempts by settlers and their descendants to inhabit concepts of ‘native’, ‘native status’ or indigeneity or to co-opt these terms, should be viewed within the broader political claims of Indigenous people. In this sense affect and memory should not be seen to exist outside the political realms that generate them.<sup>4</sup>

### Figuring relations with indigenous people

In the more recent past, during the 1990s, my parents began what was to be a fairly short-lived process of engaging with the Indigenous people whose traditional spiritual affiliations to land include our family farm. Avondale is a 2000-hectare beef cattle property that my parents purchased in 1981, and where my father now lives permanently. Avondale was my first home and has been the only property consistently owned by my immediate family throughout my life. During the 1990s, it was broader political processes in Australia around the formal recognition of Indigenous people’s rights to lands and waters that stimulated my parent’s interest in engaging with the Traditional Owners of the land on which Avondale is located.

During a recent interview, I asked my father Tony about this process:

Cameo: In the ‘90s I remember you invited people from a local Aboriginal community to come out to Avondale?

Tony: Yes, that’s right. We were living in Brisbane at the time, but we joined a group of people called Rural Landholders for Coexistence, which was a national movement without a lot of people involved. But it was the time when the native title stuff was really prominent for consideration ... it was very much a big part

of the national debate at, and whatever, at the time. And so, it was Liz's [my mother] suggestion actually, that we invite some people from the Githabul mob at Woodenbong to come to the farm to see if they were interested in entering into a coexistence joint agreement with us, which there were protocols and templates about for that sort of thing. A couple of gentlemen came, the leader I still remember was Matthew Green.

After a couple of false starts they came and spent most of the day here, and you and Alex [my older brother] were here at the same time, I can recall. And they stayed for two-thirds of the day but essentially Matthew I think said that they didn't have a close connection to this part of the country, that they used to traverse it, their predecessors would've gone through here for various activities around Tenterfield. But they didn't identify closely with the property and they weren't really interested in anything to do with it. It was harmonious and pleasant. He promised to come back and teach me how to fish properly but that never eventuated for whatever reason. So that was a bit of a dead end really. I don't know what the outcome would've been had they been interested. I daresay we would've entered into some formal agreement, although I don't know what's happened with such agreements thirty years later. I suspect they're not instruments of any great impact now, is my general sense of it, but I wouldn't know.

It is significant that in his accounting, my father refers to my presence and that of my older brother Alex, pinpointing not only a moment of shared memory-making but also a juncture at which the responsibility of developing ethical relations begins to be divested between generations. In some senses, this transferral of responsibility foretold or presaged my own interest in settler colonial relations. In 1995, Githabul people lodged what is known in Australia as a native title claim over 140,600 hectares of land in what is known as the Border Ranges, the region including Avondale. Following a determination made by a Federal Court judge, Githabul people's non-exclusive rights were recognised over a significant portion of the region. Their non-exclusivity means that Indigenous rights are held in parallel with (not to the exclusion of) other kinds of leases, including what is known as pastoral leases. What this means is that there has been no change in my family's unfettered access to Avondale, not even a requirement to negotiate or engage with Githabul people in its management. This is the same in all parts of Australia where Indigenous people's rights are treated as secondary to those of non-Indigenous lease holders.

What is significant about my father's memory and family story is the that it acted as a means of closing off a responsibility to Indigenous people, exemplified by what my father refers to as a 'dead end'. In his recollections he also notes that he 'does not know' what the outcome would have been had there needed to be a more sustained, genuine engagement with Indigenous people. I am particularly interested in the way in which this story now, and in the future, feeds into my family's collectively held settler descendant memory and how it might unduly generate a false sense of legitimacy for our senses of belonging in Australia. That Githabul people 'didn't identify closely with the property' and 'weren't really interested in anything to do with it' seems to have acted as an affirmation of our settler descendant belonging, rather than perhaps what it could have been: the beginning of a dialogue about landedness and connection. At the same time, the absence of an Indigenous connection, or one that has a recognisable contemporary manifestation, could be a reflection of brutal or punitive colonial histories that removed Githabul people from

these places. Hence, in my retelling of it, I am conscious of wanting to undo attempts to resolve its tension or to see it as a closing off of responsibility to the colonial past and our colonial present.

### Unsettling settlers and their descendants

In this paper I have used memories and stories drawn from my family history to explore the significance of intergenerationally transmitted affect in crafting settler descendant forms of belonging. While many conduct autoethnography among those of their own social group or among a network to which they belong, it may be that they do not feel by extension a sense of obligation or responsibility to the more remote members of that group. My task in this article is doubly difficult as not only am I focused on myself as the subject of study, but also those who are among my closest kin. The desire to remain loyal to those genealogically close to me is tempered by the reality that such affections conflict with political views that I have about (post)colonial reckonings with settler history, both that which is temporally past and that which continues. Life writing in its various forms and autoethnography face a very real challenge of ensuring that these loyalties do not supersede our moral and political responsibilities to the histories of those who are marginalised and forgotten (Healy 2008).

Life writing, including biography and autobiography, along with autoethnography, provides a ready vehicle for exploring belonging in a number of contexts. Many Indigenous scholars use family biography or autobiography as the basis for their explorations of indigeneity. Take for example, the Wiradjuri Aboriginal poet and scholar and Evelyn Araluen (2019) whose evocative writing engages her country and landscape through memory. Araluen contrasts her own life history with what she describes as the 'void of settler colonial subjectivity' (2019, 5). But elsewhere, engagement with settler histories has become more nuanced, to not only reflect the multicultural nature of the category 'settler', but also its changing development in contemporary Australia (Butler and Ben 2020; Trigger and Martin 2016). Rather than being the 'void' described by Araluen, such accounts testify the affective connections of settlers and settler descendants to land, which are performed and reproduced through memory and, later, stories. The intergenerational transmission of memory and stories point to the cumulative nature of belonging, even across what are relatively minute genealogical timespans.

There is of course a danger that in expressing settler and settler descendant connections these memories and stories become weaponised and used to the exclusion or detriment of others. It is naïve to assume or assert that such connections can be apolitical in the sense of seeking to compete with Indigenous belonging. This is especially salient in a context such as Australia, which remains colonial and where reckonings with truth-telling about past injustices remain in their infancy. Nevertheless, it is also the case that within families the uncritical manner in which such memories and stories are transmitted has facilitated the flourishing of untruths about the past. In my family this has notably included the omission of Indigenous people and their labour in key stories about our past and the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous people from the landscape through pastoral activities. In other instances, Indigenous people are either presented as a saviour or a benign force, able to save the life of a dispossessor or disinterested in performing the kind of belonging to country so envisaged for them. A

challenge that remains is to engage these memories and stories with the kinds of reckoning that call to attention the forgetting or erasing of Indigenous people or to understand how these narratives fuel ‘settler moves to innocence’ (Tuck and Wayne Yang 2012, 9–10; after Mawhinney 1998). This process is not straightforward.

First, it may involve the reorientation of family stories to include those who are currently excluded. This is difficult terrain, as Indigenous people, including the literary studies scholar Alexis Wright (2016), have themselves warned what can happen when others tell their stories. Discussing the field of settler colonial theory, Alissa Macoun and Liz Strakosch (2013, 426) caution that such approaches can act to ‘re-inscribe settler academics’ political authority and re-enact the foundational settler fantasy that we constitute, comprehend and control the whole political space of our relationships with Indigenous people’. Or, to put this another way, we learn about our own settler history and of the transmutation of this settler history into that of a settler descendant and of their varying implications for Indigenous peoples but, nonetheless, we continue to perpetuate its structures regardless (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Cornthassel 2014, 4). This brings me to the second component of the work of these activities, which is to see these processes as ongoing. This necessitates thinking about what stories our descendants will inherit, and as a family and individuals thinking about how our colonial past should involve entailments to Indigenous people in the political present. This may involve disrupting what is the inherited form of these stories, creating new narrative arcs or endpoints that challenge colonial hierarchies of power. Documenting this process using autoethnography as a method, ‘charts ideas in the process of discovery (and thwarting), insisting on the messy, convoluted connections between the cerebral and the visceral. It’s not a matter of writing up your “findings”, but of using the writing itself as a grounds of inquiry’ (Murray 2019, 96).

These questions and ruminations may have methodological salience for a broader audience given the recent pandemic’s changes wrought on performances and remembrances of family across changing terrain. During this time my family performed a particular kind of memory making—on WhatsApp, with my brother now living in Germany and my parents in another part of Australia. The world-wide onset of the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in sustained impacts on the travel potential of many and may result in the proliferation of autoethnography as a methodological approach to research. Unable to travel and limited to their own locations, it seems likely that many scholars, anthropologists in particular, will turn their ethnographic gaze on themselves or those in their immediate geographic proximity (e.g. Povinell 2021). One differentiation in this genre of qualitative analysis and writing has been between evocative autoethnography and that which is analytic (Anderson 2006). This distinction is instructive in the sense that it facilitates an understanding of how and why narratives about the colonial past are able to continue unabated in the present. The imperative should be to keep these provocations in view, lest this becomes a kind of self-congratulatory exercise. I see this as a foundational exploration in my own understanding of what decolonisation could mean for my family and our settler history.

## Notes

1. There is some variance in recordings as to whether Tate actually recorded and observed *Dendrolagus bennettianus*, or if this species was in fact *Dendrolagus lumholtzi*, the latter

being the more commonly known tree kangaroo in Australia (Covacevich 2002; Pearn 1991; Ross 2003; Taylor and Huxley 2021).

2. I have inherited a set of cowrie shells collected in Torres Strait that Tate's wife, Grace (née Fortune), was said to have used to darn his socks.
3. Covacevich incorrectly refers to Thomas Tate as 'George Tate'.
4. A related point here is Paradies' (2020, 5) question as to whether Indigenous people can become settlers.

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