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Abstract

In nations with a record of historical injustice, guilt about the past is deeply implicated in both efforts towards reconciliation and the construction of national identity. This is as true in notionally postcolonial nations, where past injustice is often denied or avoided, as it is in situations where conflict and injustice have been more recent, overt or visible to the rest of the world. Taking the Australian case as an example, this article considers the dimensions of historical, collective guilt, and explores the implications of that guilt for contemporary national identity in postcolonial nations. It argues that until a nation is able to deal with social psychological barriers to addressing historical injustice, it is likely to construct and maintain a narrow and defensive form of nationalism.
Postcolonial guilt and national identity: Historical injustice and the Australian settler state

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a growing awareness of the faultlines and conflict that characterise relationships between Indigenous people and settler states around the world. In Australia and elsewhere it is now widely understood that the treatment of Indigenous peoples at the hands of white settlers and colonial/governmental authorities was harsh, unjust and possibly genocidal (McGarty & Bliuc, 2004 p. 114). Deborah Bird Rose (2004 p. 6) has described the highly problematic contemporary relationships that persist in the wake of these historical wrongs as constituting the ‘ruptured alienation of settler societies.’ Even as the generations alive today struggle to grasp the enormity of past conquest and continuing injustice, they are also searching for ways in which they may inscribe a ‘moral presence’ for themselves and their nations back into the world (Rose, 2004 p. 6). The Australian experience reflects this alienation, joining (although somewhat half heartedly) the international trend of attempting to redress the past, and accepting that such efforts are ‘central to our moral self-understanding’ as individuals, groups and nations (Barkan, 2000 p. xi).

Struggles to acknowledge and deal appropriately with historical injustice are often genuinely made, in the Australian case, for example, through such actions as the 1967 referendum, the formal reconciliation process, and the 2008 apology to the Stolen

1 Although the 1967 referendum is still widely misunderstood as giving Indigenous people citizenship and/or the franchise, the changes to the Australian Constitution that resulted were in fact quite modest, giving the Commonwealth Government the power to make laws in relation to (although not necessarily for the benefit of) Aboriginal people and to allow Aboriginal people to be counted in the census. A
generations.\textsuperscript{2} This article contends, however, that there are significant social psychological barriers—barriers caused by internalised social norms as well as socio-historical context and interaction—to achieving the kind of reconciliation that Settler-Indigenous alienation would seem to demand, and that actions such as those outlined above aspire towards.

Australia’s settler colonial history has produced a specific set of social relations that constrain reconciliatory ambitions. The founding of the Australian state through violence and dispossession has left a deep, psychological legacy with significant contemporary implications. Research undertaken by Reconciliation Australia (2010) in their Reconciliation Barometer suggests that many Australians would like to see an improvement in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, with 87 percent of non-Indigenous Australians agreeing that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is important. But 93 percent of Indigenous people and 73 percent of other Australians believe that these two groups are prejudiced against one another, and only 12 percent of Indigenous people and 9 percent of other Australians believe that the two groups trust each other. But in spite of this desire for change, the difficulty many non-Indigenous Australians have in fully acknowledging the violence, dispossession, and child removal of Australia’s history referendum on a more explicit form of recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been promised for 2012.

\textsuperscript{2} In February 2008, during the first sitting of the new parliament, the newly elected prime minister, Kevin Rudd, made a long awaited apology to members of the Stolen Generations (those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people removed from their families under assimilation policies) in a moving speech that produced an outpouring of emotion around the country.
demonstrate psychological elements of a colonial mentality (Curthoys, 2000 p. 33). This article will contend that these psychological elements, described here as comprising a form of ‘collective guilt’, lead many to continue denying the extent of the harm done in creating the modern Australian nation and the impact of this harm on contemporary social relationships.

Empirical studies from the field of social psychology provide evidence for the claim that, in a range of national contexts, confronting (unavoidable) information about unjust or immoral acts committed by members of a social group to which we belong is highly unpleasant and can pose a threat to social and national identity (Roccas, Klan & Liviatan, 2004 p. 131). David Williams (2008 p. 246) describes the psychological threat that this type of collective guilt poses to an insecure nationalism as being of ‘nuclear proportions’ as it indicates that a settler colonial state like Australia (or the United States in the example of which Williams writes) is not only guilty of occasional wrongdoing, but is in fact ‘rotten to the root.’ Yet, because the descendants of settler and original inhabitant, perpetrator and victim, must continue to live together in the same political territory there is, as Ernesto Verdeja (2009 p. 7) points out, ‘no “exit.”’ Past and present relationships are inescapable.

But despite the unavoidable facts of history, social psychological studies contend that the extent to which a sense of ‘who we are’ as individuals is bound to a social or national identity will also determine the extent to which collective guilt about the past can be experienced. In this way, a seemingly unproblematic desire to feel good about the group or nation to which one belongs can lead to the development of explanations and justifications for immoral and unjust actions in the past; for example that these actions were not seen as wrong at the time, that they were undertaken with good intentions, and so on. For some people some of the time—and for some people all of
the time—these justifications will hold and they will maintain a positive social or national identity. Many Australians today avoid the experience of collective guilt through a rationalisation of colonialism as just, inevitable and ultimately for the good of a ‘primitive’ race. For many other people, however, such justifications will fail at some point. Confronted with historical fact or current day inequality, many people will find themselves unable to sustain their justification for past actions by their group, especially where these actions violate present day moral standards. The widespread experience of collective guilt is the result (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004 p. 4, 5). In Australia, as in other settler colonial states, collective guilt about historical acts has become a constituent part of contemporary national identity.

This type of guilt remains a profound and complex barrier to a national examination of the systemic racism that continues to marginalise Indigenous peoples in Australia and other postcolonial states. Racist ideas were an essential foundation to the colonial project. For Ghassan Hage the crucial link between racist ideas and racist practices, both now and in the past, has been the idea of territory. In the past these concerns may have been centred on establishing the colonial presence in Indigenous territory. Today such worries are more mundane, focussed instead, for example, on perceptions of neighbourhood safety. Racist ideas tend only to inform racist practices when they are accompanied by a belief that we have a privileged relationship to a territory (or a neighbourhood), and this relationship is perceived to be under threat. For this reason Hage suggests it may be more useful to reconceive of ‘racist’ practices as ‘nationalist’ practices, even if it is racist ideas that inform them (Hage, 2000 pp. 31-2). It follows, then, that there is a link between settler colonialism (which is predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous people), nationalism, and the experience of collective guilt.
This article examines these questions in a new light, drawing on social psychology, studies of settler colonialism, and reconciliation theory to explore the relationship between collectively held guilt about historical injustice and contemporary national identity in postcolonial states. The article is concerned with the suggestion posed by Frances Kendall, who argues:

By exploring the ways that we hold collective guilt and shame individually and in the national psyche, we are better equipped to look at the role that these feelings play in our refusal to address our history genuinely and to understand how personal and collective guilt blocks us from moving forward (Kendall, 2006 p. 86).

The article begins by detailing the dynamics of collective guilt before exploring the experience of settler colonialism and the ways in which collective guilt has shaped national identity in the Australian context. The article then considers some common responses to this phenomenon and the way in which it persists through generations. The article concludes that it is only through an honest assessment of the past, and an acceptance of collective guilt about this past, that a nation is able to begin building a less defensive national identity.

**Understanding collective guilt**

The word ‘guilt’ can refer both to feelings of guilt and a determination of responsibility (Lickell, Schmader & Barquissau, 2004 p. 35). The dominant understanding of guilt is as an individual experience of (legal) liability, requiring some form of punishment that may lead to possible reform. This conception of guilt has a long history, with roots in Christian theology and Roman law and later consolidated in the individualism of the Enlightenment, which precluded any
possibility of collective judgment. In this context, understandings of guilt in connection with ‘collective responsibility, liability and atonement’ tend only to be recognised as ‘an irrational conceptualisation of guilt’ (Schlink, 2009 p. 8), if indeed they are recognised at all.

But collective guilt is a concept that transcends narrow legal individualism. While, in the courtroom, conceptions of blame may necessarily rest on individual wrongdoing, collective responsibility remains part of people’s conception of morality and is therefore a feature of ‘everyday justice’ (Lickell et al., 2004 p. 49). It is a psychological rather than a legal experience, in that it may not involve actually being guilty in any commonly understood sense of that term. Thus, although collective guilt is not the same thing as ‘being guilty’ in a legal sense—it cannot be proved, it is not subject to tests of reasonable doubt or balance of probabilities, and so on—it is connected to feelings of a shared, or national, identity and a collective response to historical events (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004 p. x, 3). In other words, collective guilt is only possible as social phenomena—as ‘guilt by association’—when people categorise themselves or others at a group level and recognise that group as active or complicit in causing harm to others (Branscombe, Slugoski & Kappen, 2004 pp. 17, 22). There is some indication that this recognition exists within the Australian population. Murray Goot and Tim Rowse (2007 p. 154) have noted that evidence from public opinion polling shows that ‘most Australians’ admit that it is accurate to observe that colonisation treated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples very badly.

But how is it that these feelings of guilt can be shared among a collective when the majority of individuals within that collective have not directly participated in the commission of any crime? The German jurist and writer Bernhard Schlink suggests
that, rather than collective guilt deriving from a sense of responsibility for someone else’s crime, collective guilt arises from a feeling of ‘responsibility for one’s own solidarity with the criminal’ (Schlink, 2009 p. 12). Schlink is clearly writing of the German context in which individual Nazi ‘criminals’ may be easily identifiable. Nevertheless, his argument is valid beyond the notion of solidarity with individual perpetrators of specific acts. Indeed, much discussion in the wider literature on reconciliation considers the role of ‘bystanders’ in facilitating human injustice (see for example Krog, 1998; Verdeja, 2009).

To draw out the relevance of Schlink’s argument to the Australian context then, we might consider one of the most frequently deployed strategies designed to minimise or avoid collective guilt in the present; that is, the rationalisation that colonisation happened ‘a long time ago’. This type of rationalisation, however, ignores the roots of Australian national identity, forged in a settler solidarity that once seemed crucial for survival. As Henry Reynolds has argued, ‘The shared guilt of the punitive expedition, the complicity in killing, bound participants together in close confederation’ (Reynolds 1998: xvi). Thus, the roots of collective guilt were established in the structures of settler colonialism and in the bonds of solidarity among, and later with, the settlers that remains a part of contemporary Australian national identity.

Schlink suggests that this conception of collective guilt, whether applied in the German or the Australian situation, casts a web that is ‘high and wide,’ entangling every person who stands in solidarity with the perpetrators (Nazis or colonisers) and who maintains solidarity with them after the fact. Solidarity may not mean that individuals are engaged in an active defence of past injustice. More passively, national identification is one such form of solidarity, or what Schlink terms the formation of a ‘community of responsibility’ (Schlink, 2009 p. 14). Such a
community is not something intangible or unintelligible, Schlink argues, but rather it is ‘the tangible intertwining of relationships by real people as they communicate and interact’ (2009 pp. 19-20). In this sense everyone who identifies as members of a particular postcolonial nation, like Australia, may be caught in the web of collective guilt for injustices perpetrated in the past (and present) by virtue of national social identification. For as long as, for example, children in Australian schools are taught uncritical histories of Australian settlement, for as long as Indigenous people remain unrecognized in the Australian Constitution, or for as long as reparations are not made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people dispossessed of their land and separated from their families, the bonds of solidarity with the perpetrators of historical injustices are maintained. The price of this solidarity is that those alive today will continue to bear some responsibility for past actions for which the nation might otherwise feel appropriate shame and disgust. For as long as the options available for severing these bonds, such as restitution or reparations, have not been taken up, then the solidarity—the collective guilt—exists by default (Schlink, 2009 pp. 12-14).

It is evident, therefore, that social group or national identity is a crucial component in understandings of collective guilt. Emotional responses to a nation’s past, whether they be feelings of pride, guilt, or something else, do not tend to stem from individual, personal participation in past events but rather from a shared membership in the category of offenders (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004 pp. 3, 4). In the Australian case, non-Indigenous Australians, and particularly white Australians, are part of the ‘in-group’, the dominant social grouping most strongly associated with the colonisation of the country and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. This identity is policed through, among other things, suggestions of what constitutes ‘un-Australian’ attitudes or behaviour. The reverse is also true. Collective pride in past events is often evoked
as an important part of Australian national identity, whether or not particular individuals participated in these celebrated events. Very few Australians were actually at Gallipoli or on the Kokoda track, and yet these events are commemorated as being about all of us, as moments in our history in which we all share, and which have passed on to future generations an intangible sense of who we are. Collective guilt operates in precisely the same way. When a sense of national identity is connected to the actions of our forebears and ancestors, and where it is known that our forebears and ancestors committed harms and atrocities, it follows that collective guilt may be a salient component of our national identity.

Unlike pride, however, collective guilt produces feelings of distress rather than feelings of pleasure. Research on the phenomenon of collective guilt suggests that it is characterised by three interrelated properties: ‘a focus of attention on the group self, a sense of group responsibility for an immoral act, and an extremely unpleasant feeling that people prefer to assuage through restitution or avoidance’ (Iyer, Leach & Pederson, 2004 p. 263). Indeed, it appears to be a salient aspect of Australian struggles in this domain that much public discourse seems intended to avoid or deny both the fact of historical injustice against Indigenous peoples and any contemporary responsibility for addressing this fact. Despite a high level of media discourse on the contemporary deprivations of many Indigenous people in Australia it seems non-Indigenous Australians are caught in a cycle of remembering and forgetting the violence of the nation’s colonial history (Healy, 2008). It is appropriate, then, to consider those aspects of Australian settler colonialism that contribute to the contemporary experience of collective guilt.

**Guilt and settler colonialism**
Patrick Wolfe (1999 p. 169) suggests that colonialism occurs in three phases: confrontation, carceration and assimilation. The nature of the settler-colonial project requires the active and forceful domination of an invaded territory’s original inhabitants through the repression of their culture, identity and history, the persistence of which challenges the legitimacy of the colonial mission (Rouhana, 2008 p. 73). Indeed, it is evident that settler colonies were and are premised on the elimination of Indigenous societies (Wolfe, 1999 p. 2). In the Australian case, for example, there is, as Stanner (2009 p. 119) has pointed out, more than an accidental correspondence between the destruction of Indigenous life and the construction of European life on Australian territory. Rather there is a ‘functional concomitance’ to these dynamics.

The brutal patterns of colonisation are not unique to Australia. Colonial genocide and oppression have been repeated around the world, in almost all cases reducing the Indigenous peoples of new colonial territory to a very small minority, often on the verge of extinction (Barkan 2000, pp. 159-60). As Lorenzo Veracini (2008 p. 364) has argued, settler societies are premised on the violent and traumatic displacement or destruction of the original Indigenous inhabitants of a territory. The supposedly scientific but in fact always political category of ‘race’—measured by blood quantum and shades of skin colour—has been used to ensure that the population of ‘full blood’ or ‘authentic’ Indigenous peoples is always on the decline, reinforcing the idea of white settler superiority and the apparent dying out of a genetically inferior race (Wolfe, 1999 p. 31).

As the settler state embedded itself in the soil of *terra Australis* the violent conflict of the confrontation phase eventually gave way to carceration and assimilation. By the time Australia federated as a nation in 1901 the official policy had become what was benignly referred to as ‘protection’. Protection policies, which contained Indigenous
people on reserves and missions or in forced domestic and agricultural labour, assumed that Aboriginal people were merely an ancient remnant who would inevitably die out. On many reserves and missions Aboriginal people were prevented from expressing any form of their traditional language or culture. Ceremony was forbidden and even names were replaced with Christian names. The intent of these practices of control and containment may not have been aimed at physical extermination as in the past, but they were genocidal nonetheless.

Over time, national policy changed again and by 1951 Australian settler colonialism had moved into its third phase with the formal adoption of a policy of ‘assimilation’. The underlying assumption of assimilation was that, rather than dying out, Aboriginal people would be absorbed into the white population to live like other Australian citizens. Ostensibly, assimilation was a commitment by the state to the ‘advancement’ of Aboriginal people, rather than a view of their inevitable demise (Morgan, 2006 p.15). Many non-Indigenous people at the time believed that assimilation and advancement were coterminous, and that full engagement and participation in white society would offer Aboriginal people the best way out of poverty and social marginalisation. It was soon clear, however, that ‘advancement’ was really code for ‘more white, less black’. Assimilation policy was also riven by internally conflicting ideas exacerbated by a hangover from the protection era. As Frances Peters-Little (2000 p.4) has noted, Aboriginal people were often expected to assimilate into white society while still subjected to segregation laws that restricted them to reserves and missions.

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3 Many States had adopted assimilation policy earlier than this.
This very brief recounting of certain aspects of Australian colonialist policy is a reminder of the structural violence and injustice that are a part of the colonial project. Despite that fact that the protection and assimilation phases of colonialism were considered to be beneficial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the time, it is evident that such an analysis cannot be sustained today. Public enquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the Bringing them Home report on the separation of Aboriginal children from their families (HREOC 1997) have placed on the public record the confronting facts of the damage done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities through colonial policy. Yet the feeling of moral disgust that may be promoted by the recognition of historic injustices jars with Australian national identity and the official nationalism that is propped up by a more celebratory telling of the Australian national story. The heated public debates that followed the release of these reports, including the so-called history ‘wars’ of the 1990s, underscores this fact.

**Guilt and nationalism in Australia**

The fact that Australia’s national day is celebrated on the anniversary of the European invasion of the territory conflicts with the simultaneous desire to erase that part the nation’s settler colonial history and celebrate only the nation-building aspects of it. As Ann Curthoys points out, a rejection of a more critical version of Australian history is not confined to conservative historians and politicians. Many other non-Indigenous Australians have also rejected the idea that they are ‘invaders’ or beneficiaries of

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4 There is not scope in this article to consider the ongoing process of internal colonisation evident in policies such as the Northern Territory ‘Intervention’.
violent or genocidal practices. Their preference has been to reassert an historical narrative of the nation in which they can feel proud (Curthoys, 2003 p. 187).

In and of itself, nationalism is not a ‘moral mistake.’ Craig Calhoun suggests that an understanding of nationalism should be approached with ‘critical attention to its limits, illusions, and potential for abuse’ but should not be dismissed completely (Calhoun, 2007 p. 1). Calhoun draws attention to what he describes as ‘everyday nationalism’, which ‘organises people’s sense of belonging in the world’ (2007 p. 27). This type of nationalism has an important role in asserting a positive national identity about which citizens can feel good. One of the sustaining narratives that supports a positive sense of everyday nationalism in Australia concerns our purported egalitarianism: we are, in theory at least, the land of the ‘fair go’ (Thompson, 1994). Both settler and immigrant Australians derive pleasure in feeling that as a nation we share the values of equality and ‘mateship’.

Nevertheless, an understanding of the potential benefits of nationalism in people’s daily lives does not diminish the pitfalls of what Benedict Anderson terms ‘official nationalism’, which he describes as ‘a self-protective policy, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests.’ Such policy, he suggests, is designed first and foremost to serve the interests of the state (Anderson, 2006 p. 159). Further, the separation of these positive and negative aspects is not always possible (Barkan, 2000 p. xxxix). Indeed, it is the very form of Australian nationalism—settler nationalism—that means the nation’s past, present and future are ‘intrinsically bound up with the relationship between settlers and Aborigines,’ making the legitimacy of the nation’s connections with the territory on which it was formed our ‘most vulnerable point’ (Moran, 2005 p. 171).
The extent to which individuals in a collective are motivated to protect their social or national identity from this type of vulnerability depends in part on the degree of importance or value that they invest in this identity. Influential in the field of social psychology is the concept of group identification, and it is argued that those who are highly identified with a group, particularly a dominant, high-status, or ‘in-group’ within a nation, are more likely to ignore or downplay the negative actions of their group (Lickell et al., 2004 pp. 39-40). High identifiers are far more likely to defend a nationalist sentiment, including through the denial of past atrocities and current injustices. This is not to say that all those who feel an attachment to a certain social or national identity would be considered high identifiers. Others may feel a strong but critical attachment to their national group that allows them to experience feelings of guilt and moral responsibility. Those fitting the category of high identifiers, however, tend to have a psychological need to glorify their national group that presents a serious obstacle to accepting negative information about their group or national history (Roccas et al., 2004 p. 140).

High identification can make it more difficult to accept negative information about a group or nation’s past, and makes them less likely to incorporate these negative aspects of history into a more robust form of national identity (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears & Manstead, 2004 pp. 97-8). Former prime minister John Howard, for example—himself a very high identifier—used his years in office to advance a reassuring version of Australian history that promoted pride in what he argued is an honourable history (Green & Sonn, 2005 p. 483). During the period of Howard’s leadership the form of nationalism that he advocated, based on narratives about the frontier as ‘a site for the making of the nation’ (Rose, 2004 p. 58), about the bravery of explorers and settlers, and most particularly about the Anzacs (discussed below),
became increasingly difficult to question without being accused of being ‘un-Australian’ and undermining a sense of national pride (Kendall, 2006 p.93).

One of the most concerted efforts to create a more powerful and positive national identity in Australia has been the resurgence of the ‘Anzac myth’ as a narrative of Australian heroism. Mark McKenna (2010) has argued that the increasing prominence of Anzac ‘at the vanguard of a new wave of patriotism’ that emerged in the early 1980s was in part a response to Australian denial of historical injustice and colonial atrocity. Knowledge of Indigenous dispossession was a constant thorn in the side of other national days of celebration that were based on the commemoration of the British invasion and settlement. As the 1988 bicentenary drew closer there was a heightened sense of political anxiety about how the nation would ‘celebrate’ the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Harbour, and an increasingly polarised public debate on the event that McKenna suggests marks the beginning of the subsequent history ‘wars’ that gained public prominence in the years to follow. As Australia Day increasingly became a ‘lightening rod’ for political disputes, Anzac Day emerged as a ‘less complicated and less divisive alternative.’ The events at Gallipoli Cove took on the mantle of ‘the only true crucible of national identity’, accompanied by an unspoken sense of relief that national pride in Anzac need not be haunted by the spilling of Aboriginal blood in the frontier wars, the taking of Aboriginal land and children, or the contemporary effects of these traumas on Indigenous people around Australia (McKenna, 2010 pp. 112-121).

The danger, however, in over-emphasising a narrative like the Anzac myth is that it becomes a ‘touchstone’ that cements a version of national identity that speaks for, and to, only some citizens, leaving the nation as a whole ill-equipped to deal with contemporary diversity (Soutphommasane, 2009 p. 63). But although the Anzac myth
may not be appropriate as Australia’s central narrative, for as long as a substantive break with the past is not achieved the promotion of an inadequate and problematic narrative such as this will be a predictable response.

**Responses to collective guilt**

Internationally, responses to the experience of collective guilt vary widely. The exaltation of an alternative, more positive historical narrative, such as the Anzac myth in Australia, is just one example. Denial of guilt is a common response—perhaps the response most evident in public debate. Social psychologists attribute denial to an ‘interpretative bias’ that sees members of an ‘in-group’ make negative attributions about the behaviour of an ‘out-group’ and positive attributions for their own group’s actions and outcomes. When there is a negative intergroup event the in-group tends to blame external factors rather than accept that they played any causal role in the event (Lickell et al., 2004 p. 38). Thus the problem is seen to lie not with the perpetrators of historical injustice, but with the victims. Exonerating cognitions are formed that minimise the perception of harms done and instead blame the victims themselves for the harms they have incurred (Roccas et al., 2004 p. 135). Denial is found to be strongest among those who belong to ‘dominant’ or higher status social groups, who are less likely to accept their collective guilt for racial injustice (Branscombe et al., 2004 pp. 20, 24-5). Further, those who deny collective guilt are more likely to endorse reparation strategies that aim to restore psychological equity—that is, action that can alleviate their own distress at present day inequality—rather than actual equity in the relationship (Mallett & Swim, 2004 p. 67).

The Australian apology to the Stolen Generations would be a case in point; an example of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) would describe as the ‘cunning of
recognition’ that is typical of settler societies, in which recognition does not provide justice but rather cunningly prevents the need for any fundamental changes to the structural violence of settler colonialism. Choosing to restore actual equity may entail a far more fundamental reassessment of the origins and foundation of the relationship, which in the case of a settler-colonial state such as Australia may be found to be immoral and unjust.

The public denial of collective guilt in Australia was perhaps never clearer than when articulated by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard at the 1997 Reconciliation Convention. In what has now become an infamous speech, in which Howard thumped the lectern as the audience stood and turned their backs to him, Howard argued that reconciliation in Australia would not work ‘if it is premised solely on a sense of national guilt and shame.’ Howard insisted that it would be wrong to

…join those who would portray Australia’s history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism [...] such an approach will be repudiated by the overwhelming majority of Australians who are proud of what this country has achieved although inevitably acknowledging the blemishes in its past history.

Howard’s view of settler colonialism as constituting only minor ‘blemishes’ on an otherwise proud history, is premised on the view that experiencing guilt and shame is intrinsically negative and should be avoided. As a leader Howard would have felt a personal responsibility to defend his country’s honour and deny any guilt for past wrongdoing.
Contemporary international theory on restitution for historical wrongdoing, however, emphasises the important role of ‘guilt, mourning and atonement in national revival and reconciliation’, transforming ‘a traumatic national experience into a constructive political situation’ (Barkan, 2000 p. 345). Indeed, Lorenzo Veracini (2008 p. 364) reminds us that settler colonies like Australia are ‘traumatised societies par excellence.’ In such contexts, social psychologists have suggested that allowing the experience of guilt can in fact be effective in ‘facilitating positive outcomes in intergroup relations’, stimulating efforts towards reparation and repair of the relationship (Augoustinos & Le Conteur, 2004 pp. 251-2).

Gestures in this direction have been experienced in Australia. In the aftermath of the 2008 apology many Australians pointed to the event as an ‘enobling, patriotic moment’, as ‘an instance of one’s country being put right’ following the recognition of past wrongs. Many people felt a sense of a burden being lifted, and enjoyed a moment of hope that this was finally an end to the culture war that ‘had so deeply scarred the national soul’ (Soutphommasane 2009: 4, 15). It is likely, however, that those feeling a sense of relief following the apology were those who might be described as having a low level of national identification. Social psychological research suggests that, for low identifiers, the act of apology tends to be welcomed as a means of demonstrating their willingness to confront the past. For high identifiers, however, apology is more likely to be construed as threatening to the national image (Doosje et al 2004: 108).

There are limits too to the type of forgiveness that is possible following the making of an apology. There are many wrongs—including the gross injustices that were a constitutive part of Australian settler colonialism—that can never be put right. Nevertheless, past wrongs can be effectively acknowledged. Thus, while an apology
may only be endorsed by some sections of the community and will not fully alleviate the distress about past injustice, because on its own such an action can only partially restore equity (Mallett and Swim 2004: 67), the act of apology is still a constructive response to collective guilt. Confronting the past and acknowledging collective guilt in this way may provide necessary impetus for constructing a revitalised national identity that is less defensive and anxious about the past (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004 p. x).

There have, of course, been other moments in Australia’s history that presented opportunities to review the merits of settler nationalism and confront the past more fully. Elizabeth Povinelli suggests that the Mabo and Wik judgments provided one such moment, when, in the years following:

…Australian subjects sent themselves a national postcard addressed to the general question of historical accountability: How should Australian nation-building be remembered and from whose perspective? What would this nation-building look like from the perspective of Aboriginal history? Would it seem like a bloody, illegitimate ordeal, a rotten deal forged on the back of blind prejudice and material greed? Indeed, should the eventfulness of colonialism be figured in the past

\[\text{In 1992 and 1998 the High Court of Australia handed down two landmark decisions. In Mabo the High Court determined that although the communal ownership of land by Aboriginal people could not be recognised as a proprietary interest in common law, it did constitute a unique form of title to land—Native Title—that had existed prior to colonisation. Wik held that the granting of statutory interests did not necessarily result in the extinguishment of Native Title, thereby allowing for co-existence of native Title with pastoral leases.}\]
tense? Did colonialism happen or was it happening? In the present, could the nation—or each and every person within that nation—be responsible for events of the past? And could responsibility be decided decisively in the manner of a court case? Could copping the sins of the past liberate the present from that evil, or would it create new problems—opening, for instance, the state’s coffers for reparation claims? On radio and television, in beer and parliament halls, in newspaper columns and amid columns of cheering and jeering demonstrators … public pundits, parliamentarians, and other citizens debated a new counterintuitive model of national cohesion registered in these two High Court cases. They argued about whether a patriotic nationalism could arise from the sackcloth and ashes of public accounting of a nation’s shame … (Povinelli, 2002 p.154).

Povinelli suggests that ‘finding’ native title in the wake of Australia’s colonial history was a decision with far more than legal implications. Rather, the Mabo and Wik decisions provided a ‘litmus test’ concerning Australia’s preparedness to take responsibility for the suffering experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because of our ‘national dream’ (Povinelli, 2002 p. 154).

In retrospect it seems evident that Australia failed this test in another instance of Povinelli’s ‘cunning of recognition’. In response to a moment in which it was possible to break with the perpetrators of Indigenous dispossession through meaningful recognition such as the development of effective reparations, Australia chose instead to reaffirm these bonds with legislation that codified native title in only the most limited terms. Perversely, however, in making the choice to opt out of a meaningful form of reparation following the native title decisions, a new generation became
identified with a form of nationalism premised on the denial of historical injustices. In the process the nation’s collective guilt became newly politicised and contested (Subasic & Reynolds, 2009 p. 249), opening new divides in the national identity rather than unifying the nation as those who advanced a more celebratory narrative had promised.

For some the Australian apology over a decade later was a step towards getting reconciliation ‘back on track’ (Auguste, 2010 p. 321), but there are many other steps that can be taken to build on the moment of apology. Bashir Bashir suggests that these might involve:

…activities such as the creation of national symbols, public holidays, museums, memorials, and introducing new curricula in the education system to commemorate the past injustices. The talk of these activities is not to romanticize and perpetuate guilt or victimhood. Rather, they are significant because of their social and pedagogical influence. They help citizens to understand differently their history and its connection to current political, social, and economic inequalities (Bashir, 2008 p. 57-8).

Australia has taken some of these steps, albeit in a tentative manner. There is a new—and hotly contested—national history curriculum, there has been much wringing of hands about whether the National Museum of Australia achieves the right balance between tales of genocide and tales of settler heroism (see Windschuttle 2001, Casey 2002 inter alia) and there has been an unproductive debate about whether the national war memorial should commemorate the war waged by Aboriginal people in defence of their country (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2009). But there continues to be
great resistance to advancing these proposals; resistance that this article contends is grounded in collective guilt and the fear that fully acknowledging past wrongs will somehow diminish the nation.

**Conclusion**

The phenomenon of collective guilt is not unique to Australia. Around the world other settler colonies are also grappling with legacies of historical injustice and their implications for national identity and contemporary politics. Attempts to recognise the past are not infrequent, but are often met with resistance and backlash. Nevertheless, as Elazar Barkan has argued, for the necessary work of restitution to take place at some point:

…government and public opinion have to recognise that accepting responsibility for the injustice, assuming the burden of guilt, and paying restitution are in their best interests. At a minimum such demands often dramatically contradict the public’s self-perception and necessitate the rewriting of a heroic national history as one that inflicted pain and suffering and even perpetrated crimes. A creative and feasible plan for restitution thus has to stimulate a serious public discussion (Barkan, 2000 p. 328).

Australian history is replete with attempts to acknowledge past wrongs and this history has not been without its moments of success. Some of the most transformative moments have come about when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have worked together through the intercultural connections that have occurred since the beginning of colonisation. The work of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in generating support for the 1967
referendum\textsuperscript{6} was one such adaptive moment, as was the grassroots reconciliation movement that culminated in the mass bridge walks for Corroboree 2000\textsuperscript{7} and, most recently, the 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations. Each of these was a moment when change seemed possible, when there was a sense that Australia might recast its national identity through a full acknowledgment of the wrongs that had been done in the past. And yet in each case, this hope remained only partially realised. Faced with the challenge of acknowledging historical collective guilt, political will failed. In the case of the failed formal reconciliation process (1991-2001) it could even be argued that the nation made a substantial retreat from the momentum for change that was evident in the early 1990s.

It may be counterintuitive, but continued denial of the past comes at great cost. Colonisation not only damages Indigenous people, it also disfigures the coloniser (Memmi, 1965 p. 147). For a nation to continue to insulate itself and its citizens from the confronting reality of its past requires ignoring the accountability that gives individual lives and the lives of the nation ‘moral gravity’ (Rose, 2004 p. 47). At the

\textsuperscript{6} The grassroots campaign led by FCAATSI exhorted Australians to simply ‘Vote YES for Aborigines’ and produced the highest level of support (90.77 per cent) from voters ever recorded in an Australian referendum. In fact the reforms in the 1967 referendum were quite modest, giving the Commonwealth Government the power to make laws in relation to (although not necessarily for the benefit of) Aboriginal people and to allow Aboriginal people to be counted in the census.

\textsuperscript{7} In 2000 a mass walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, culminating in a formal event known as Corroboree 2000, marked the end of Australia’s troubled formal reconciliation process, begun in response to a recommendation emerging from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, but widely considered to have been derailed by former prime minister John Howard’s focus on what he termed practical reconciliation.
same time, however, if a nation is to ‘detraumatise,’ people must find ways to leave the past in the past, while also embracing the need for remembrance (Schlink, 2009 p. 36). It is only when a nation has found the ability to acknowledge past wrongs and break the bonds of solidarity with the perpetrators of historic injustice that the past can become history. When this is possible, the past will no longer dominate national identity. Rather, over time, history will become integrated into a contemporary understanding of the nation that includes the proper recognition of historical injustice along with tales of nation building triumph.
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