

## Article

# Decolonizing the Intercultural: A Call for Decolonizing Consciousness in Settler-Colonial Australia

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Received: 26 June 2019; Accepted: 1 August 2019; Published: 6 August 2019



**Abstract:** Throughout this article I make a case for decolonizing consciousness as a reflexive orientation that reforms the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous life-worlds are navigated and mutually apprehended in a settler colonial context. I consider how through decolonizing dominant habits of thought and action an intercultural dialogue responsive of diverse and mutually informing realities may be cultivated. This article aims to first introduce the key characteristics of ‘decolonizing consciousness’, this being reflexivity, deep listening, and border thinking. Using the Darling River in New South Wales, Australia, as a backdrop, I consider how place and environment are agents and facilitators of a contested intercultural dialogue where Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies often come to head. Drawing on fieldwork conducted with Aboriginal residents in far western New South Wales, as well as literature on decolonizing theory and Indigenous knowledge systems from different socio-cultural contexts, I argue that intercultural dialogue begins with reflexive contemplation of how one’s lived experiences is embedded in the realities of others.

**Keywords:** interculturalism; colonialism; decolonizing theory; indigenous societies; kincentric ecologies; border thinking; reflexivity; decolonizing consciousness

## 1. Introduction

*They don’t care. It’s a care factor. They get up in the morning, they go to work. They get a feed. Three meals a day, probably more, and have a few drinks in the night. They don’t give a shit. They don’t care. They don’t care where their water comes from. They don’t care about their food where that comes from, as long as they have it.*

(Barry Stone, personal communication, 24 September 2016)

*We wanted to be a voice and to stand up for the river people. And it’s time that we started speaking up for it, you know. We always been speaking up for it but our voice wasn’t being there. Our voice just wasn’t being heard.*

(Murray Butcher, personal communication, 27 September 2016)

Expressed to me during the conversations I had with Aboriginal residents in far western New South Wales, Australia, these quotes encapsulate the complexities and frustrations associated with living in an intercultural colonial setting where different ontologies and knowledge systems clash and compete for recognition. Within settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, the epistemologies and axiologies of dominant populations are often prioritized and emphasized in ways that obscure and overshadow those of Indigenous populations. The above statements were made in reference to the mistreatment of the Barka (also known as the Darling River), a vital source of cultural, social and

economic life in the region. They represent the views of many Aboriginal people in the area who feel as though their voices, cultures and concerns are either not heard or are simply dismissed. Political and popular discourses often promote a rhetoric of an era of post-coloniality marked by multiculturalism and the ‘intercultural’—a term suggesting a fluxing between different ways of knowing, being and doing—the *inter* dimension of the intercultural however is heavily weighed on the epistemologies of dominant populations.

Throughout this article I draw on my own and others’ ethnographic fieldwork as well as wider literature pertaining to coloniality to explore the intercultural through a decolonizing lens. I suggest that decolonizing involves an ontological shift through which the knowledge, testimonies and insights of Indigenous populations are confronted and embraced—primarily by non-Indigenous people—in ways where they are recognized as having equal legitimacy. Decolonizing requires the recognition that Indigenous knowledge and lived experiences shape understandings of the world just as much as non-Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being. Furthermore, lived experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are interconnected and impact one another in both positive and destructive ways. Decolonizing therefore requires that members of intercultural settings actively, responsively, and reflexively engage the *inter* aspects of the intercultural in order to better understand the ways in which they collectively shape each other’s realities.

After outlining the field location of my ethnographic research and the methodology I applied, I enter a discussion that frames the Darling River as a contested frontier where non-Indigenous and Indigenous understandings of place intersect. I then introduce the term ‘decolonizing consciousness’ and explore how decolonizing involves individual and collective confrontation of the impact a continuing coloniality has on Indigenous populations and the power imbalances that arises from it. I argue that a decolonizing consciousness can potentially be cultivated and developed through an engaged contemplative process involving responsive reflexivity and deep listening whereby one’s potential role and possible complicity in coloniality is confronted. Through engaging in a form of border thinking one may enter a conscious space where they are able to retain their own worldviews but also have the confidence and commitment to rise above and envision the world in uniquely different ways. It is through occupying such a space that effective assessment of the intercultural can occur.

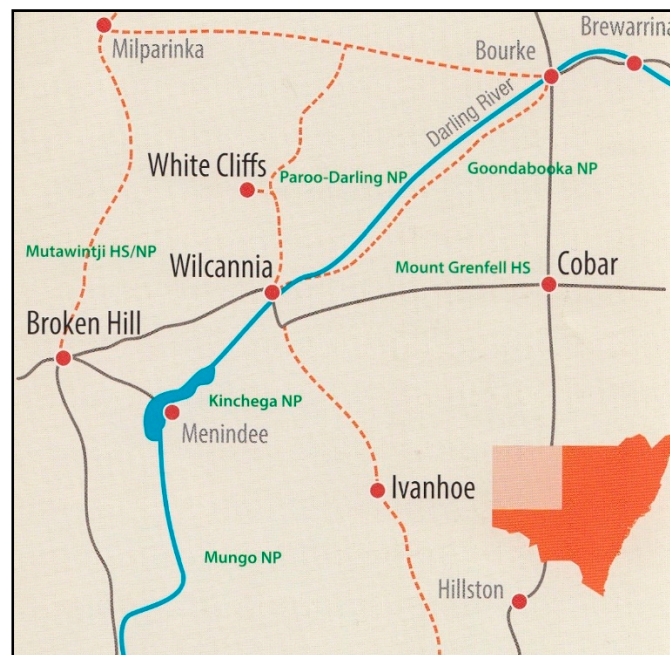
Drawing on ethnographic research from my own experiences in far western New South Wales, as well as studies conducted with other Aboriginal language groups, in the concluding sections of this article I discuss the intercultural in relation to the conceptual theme of water. I consider how rivers are agents of the intercultural and facilitators of competing and clashing epistemologies and axiologies towards place. Through the act of protest, Aboriginal residents of far western New South Wales have demanded that their voices be heard and that wider non-Indigenous Australia respond in a decolonizing manner. This article is a response to such a call. Through my interactions with the Aboriginal people I collaborated with, as a White non-Indigenous male, this call for reflexive contemplation of settler-colonial positionality has become my own academic and personal pursuit.

## 2. Field Site and Methodology

Before I unpack the characteristics that shape decolonizing and the intercultural, it is first necessary to acknowledge the foundations upon which this work developed. Over July to October 2016 I conducted fieldwork in far western New South Wales, Australia, as part of a PhD where I set out to investigate Indigenous art, identity and culture within a colonial setting. This research was conducted under the rules of the Declaration of Helsinki of 1975 (revised in 2013) and had ethical approval from the Human Research Advisory Panel at the University of New South Wales (HC approval number HC16519). It was partly funded by an internal grant from the faculty of Arts and Social Science at UNSW.

During fieldwork I was based in Broken Hill (see Figure 1 below), a remote mining city situation 1160 km west of Sydney. Broken Hill is known internationally as the birthplace of BHP, what is now the world’s wealthiest mining company. Field research was also conducted in the neighboring towns

of Menindee, located 114 km south east of Broken Hill, and Wilcannia, 155 km from Menindee. It was in these locations where I met and interviewed many of the contributors. During this time a series of interviews and participant observations took place. Fifteen collaborators were interviewed, eight of them twice. The majority identified themselves as Barkindji and Ngiyampaa but many also had kinship ties to communities in the lands belonging to Noonga (in Western Australia), Dieri (South Australia), Larrakia (Northern Territory), Worimi (north coast of New South Wales) and Mununjali (Queensland). In addition to this, collaborators had ethnic ties to Europe, Samoa, and in one case Apache.



**Figure 1.** Broken Hill, Wilcannia, and Menindee (Broken Hill City Council 2016).

Whilst I acknowledge the benefits of conducting prolonged ethnography over several years, my main focus during the relatively short but intensive fieldwork period centered on how social interactions with Aboriginal people can encourage reflexive insight into one's own habits of thought and action. To expect that through the practice of ethnography alone Indigenous people will benevolently provide all the 'ingredients' (Smith et al. 2018) necessary for non-Indigenous researchers (and the wider non-Indigenous community) to 'decolonize' is somewhat misguided. This is the case because decolonizing involves an ongoing reflexive engagement.

Research extends beyond the field site and relates to personal experiences acquired over the course of a person's life. Ethnographic interpretation and meaning may further change in relation to future experiences and events that are yet to transpire. Such insights may not always be directly related to the topics researchers set out to investigate during fieldwork, or the information that collaborators choose to share. Rather, it arises out of a committed and engaged process of reflexivity where the world is understood in relation to fluid and emerging encounters.

It was through my own process of reflexivity that the necessity of developing a 'decolonizing consciousness' emerged. This has since challenged me to rethink terms such as the 'intercultural' and reconsider what it actually means in regards to Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. This reflexive contemplation was encouraged by the conversations I had with some Aboriginal people of far western New South Wales. Through the stories and lived experiences they shared, I grew to understand the socio-cultural importance of the Barka and the impact its mistreatment has had on local communities. As my time in far western New South Wales advanced, so did my understandings of the deep complexities that arise within settler-colonial contexts and the mutually informing, but often contested, spaces that emerge from them.

### 3. The Barka: A Contested Space

The destruction and mistreatment of the Barka, which is also known by its colonial name of the Darling River, is seen by some Aboriginal people in far western New South Wales as a direct attack upon Indigenous cultures and identities. This is akin to what some described to me as an ‘eviction’, or the more confronting notions of ‘cultural genocide’ (Moses 2004, 2008; Wolfe 2006; van Krieken 2004) or ‘culturicide’ (Fenelon 1995). In describing one of his artworks, *The Great Darling Eviction*, Clinton Kemp, a Dieri man from Lake Eyre in South Australia, stated that greed and mistreatment of water has threatened the displacement of human and non-human cultures:

That one’s just about greed and water. All the water that they’ve used is for cotton. There’s this big massive dam, as soon as you go across the river . . . no water comes down at all. It has a massive impact. Cus they say all the lakes there are man-made, but you have the river there, the river wasn’t man made.

(Clinton Kemp, personal communication, 8 September 2016)

Actions relating to man-made interventions upon the environment—in this case pertaining to the use of water to sustain the cotton industry—can be seen as acts of a continuing coloniality for they have led to an eviction through severing Indigenous cultural connections to place. This was further expressed by Barry Stone, a man with ties to both Barkindji and Ngiyampaa language groups, who spoke of how water mismanagement has directly resulted in Indigenous people’s forced relocation:

Heaps of people left when the water went. And that’s what they’re trying to do. Drive everyone away from the river so they can come and do what they like to it. And its been going on. They want us all away from here, they want everyone to move to the cities. Easier to maintain, keep em in line. We don’t want to go.

(Barry Stone, personal communication, 24 September 2016)

Whilst terms such as ‘genocide’ can be confronting, I do not use it flippantly or simply for the purpose of provocation. When Indigenous cultures are contextualized through kincentric relations that are embedded in place, harm to place has ripple effects that directly impact how Indigenous populations engage their ontological senses of being. To threaten or destroy place is to threaten the very relational bonds embedded within it. Sullivan et al. (2010) write of the mutual relationship between Indigenous people and rivers by documenting how the river is a participant in their social interactions and everyday lived experiences. The stories attached to these experiences, which may be as simple as having a successful day of fishing, reinforce one’s responsibility to protect and care for the river that equally protects and cares for them. Both culture and environment become essential to understanding ecological management, as people’s physical, social, and mental health is intertwined with their surroundings. This means that ‘if the story is lost, so is the river’ and the ‘death of the river’ is equated with ‘the death of a people’ (Sullivan et al. 2010, p. 262). Confronting the notion that a particular act may be ‘genocidal’ and threaten the culture and livelihood of Indigenous populations is something that is essential to decolonizing.

Amongst the Aboriginal people I spoke with throughout the course of my ethnographic fieldwork, there was a general feeling that those who lived on the east coast of Australia were disconnected from the realities faced by inland communities. Non-Indigenous populations often see the lived realities of Indigenous communities as belonging to remote outback locations—physically and ontologically peripheral. The very term ‘outback’ conveys a mythical space beyond, and describes remote and or rural locations reflective of a Euro/urban-centric perceptual habit where cities such as Sydney are seen as existing ‘up front’, the rest falling behind (Rose 2004). Many Indigenous people saw the disconnect of east coast Australia as arising out of a lack of care, motivated by greed and profit. Murray Butcher, a Barkindji man and activist who is currently living in Wilcannia, felt that those east of the Blue Mountains simply did not know what was happening:

Most of the people, populations, live along the coast and the majority of those people probably don't know at all what's going on inland Australia. As long as they got their markets to get em food and got water from out of their taps, they feel safe. But when Australia realizes what's happening to the inland rivers of Australia and to the land around it, you know. That is we don't start looking after these thing, these things are gonna crash and then it gonna do nothing for no one.

(Murray Butcher, personal communication, 27 September 2016)

Murray spoke of how the impact on the river has had a 'tearing effect' on Country and the communities that live alongside it, commenting on how 'it's like a web. You know, you're pulling pieces away and that web getting weaker and weaker'. Hokari (2011, p. 105) writes that for the Gurindji in central Australia, social relationships form a 'web of connection' in which relationships are built and maintained through negotiated interaction with ancestors as well as the land, waters, Dreaming, and Law. Whilst human interaction is most predominantly studied within social sciences, when positioned within an Indigenous epistemology it should also incorporate a complex network of relations that includes interactions with, and between, different beings and entities (Langton 2002a; Rose 2009, pp. 106–22). This includes, but is not limited to, interactions with the geological, geographical, historical and biological layout of the world. In this case, the Barka is a key agent in the web of connection for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, not only in far western New South Wales but also the wider population whom are implicated in the same webbing.

The tearing that Murray speaks of applies to the fragmentation of the web of connection in the way that urban (particularly non-Indigenous) populations have become distanced and disconnected from the means by which water, food, and industry is sourced. This means that the consequences for local communities, resulting from the demand for such goods and services, often goes unrecognized, unacknowledged, or is inadequately responded to. The comfort that comes from the perception of having an abundant supply of food and water was also echoed by Barry Stone who saw wider Australia's unawareness as arising out of a lack of care, rather than ignorance:

They don't care. It's a care factor. They get up in the morning, they go to work. They get a feed. Three meals a day, probably more, and have a few drinks in the night. They don't give a shit. They don't care. They don't care where their water comes from. They don't care about their food where that comes from, as long as they have it.

(Barry Stone, personal communication, 24 September 2016)

Mirroring Barry's comments on wider non-Indigenous Australia's lack of care, Crunchie and Gerard Bennett spoke of the government's lack of concern and the double standard of politicians who make the policies that have influenced the context that has led to the river system becoming poisoned, whilst protecting their own health and financial interests. Crunchie and Gerard have ancestral ties to Larrakeyah in the Northern Territory through their father, and to Menindee (where they currently live) through their mother. Despite having running water, every morning Crunchie has to get up at 7 a.m. and walk outside to his tank to draw water. He then boils it several times before he can drink it. When I asked whether he could drink it directly from the tap, Crunchie laughed in an impassioned manner and declared that it is 'poison'. Crunchie noted that if the same water were placed in front of policymakers then the situation would be very different: 'You know the politicians, the politicians . . . you see these fucking MPs sitting in fucking Parliament House. They'll sit back with a fucking clean glass of water, I hope that fucking water dies for em' (Crunchie Bennett, personal communication, 24 September 2016).

Barry Stone also uses tank water and despite his enthusiasm for boating and fishing he will not eat the fish he catches out of concern over the industrial toxins and poisons that enter the river upstream. He expressed to me that instead of eating the fish he catches he'll, 'go to the shop and buy frozen fish. I ain't eating that shit.' As a result of water's cultural significance to local Aboriginal



populations in far western New South Wales, a contaminated water supply is dangerous not only because it risks one's physical health, but also because it disturbs the place in which a sense of identity and cultural personhood is established. Risk to the environment is risk to one's physical and cultural health. Crunchie's statement that he hopes the water that politicians drink 'dies for em' exemplifies distrust and his frustration at what he sees as double standards.

Instances such as these are unfortunately common occurrences for Indigenous populations within settler-colonial settings. In this case, the Barka and its surrounding catchments and environment provides a backdrop of competing and clashing interest where Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies come to head. It is through engaging and unpacking competing social interactions that a greater understanding of the pervasiveness of coloniality and its wider social impact may be gained. Confronting this is the first step towards developing a 'decolonizing consciousness', a term to which I now discuss in greater detail.

#### 4. Decolonizing Consciousness

Through his extensive research on global coloniality, sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2007) writes of how the power to set the perimeters and conditions under which certain populations, in this case Indigenous Australians, live, results in social hierarchies that create a 'power matrix' where different knowledge systems intersect, interact and compete. It is at this point of intersection that the political dimension of interaction arises and power imbalances result. Grosfoguel (2007) acknowledges that colonization and the dominance of particular knowledge systems are maintained through organized institutions (such as the government, education, and the legal justice system), but it is ultimately through everyday interaction that colonial difference is enforced. In his discussion of orientalism, Edward Said (1979, p. 12) also observed that colonialism distributes 'geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts' that create and maintain a consciousness of hierarchical difference within the imagination of everyday citizens.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* has become a pivotal text within decolonizing theory, being referenced as a major influence in much of the current academic work addressing the topic, in a range of disciplinary fields (Sherwood 2009, 2010; White and Tengan 2001). In her work, centering on the Maori experience in New Zealand (but presenting an epistemological frame that can be adapted to other Indigenous groups), Smith (1999, p. 64) highlights the impact coloniality has had on Indigenous populations and outlines strategies and methodologies that may assist in unlearning the colonial bias that permeates settler-colonial environments.

For Smith (1999) decolonization requires the engagement with imperialism and colonization on 'multiple levels' where the epistemological habits that maintain Western authority are contextualized in relation to Indigenous experiences and knowledges. To decolonize therefore is to decolonize 'the mind' (Smith 1999, p. 108; Clammer 2008; Clammer et al. 2016) and challenge the very habits of colonial Eurocentric thought, many of which are pervasive and form tacit roles in everyday life. Decolonization may emerge out of shifting epistemological authority in favor of the knowledges, languages and cultures it (either inadvertently or deliberately) subjugates.

Patrick Wolfe (2006, 2016) argues that to understand settler-colonialism in an Australian context, the invasion of European settlers needs to be understood as an ongoing structural process rather than a historic event. Decolonization calls for the knowledge that maintains and reinforces such structures to be exposed and contextualized in order to address its impact. Similarly, Frantz Fanon (1963), an influential scholar on topics relating to post-coloniality and an activist in counter-colonial uprisings/revolutions, expresses skepticism at framing decolonization as an institutionalized project or academic discipline. He forewarns that when decolonizing theory becomes part of Eurocentric epistemologies it runs the risk of becoming an extension of the very process it aims to overcome by obscuring the conditions that bring its violent and destructive nature into being. For Fanon (1963), decolonization is not merely an undoing of the colonial and political apparatuses that maintain its authority, but rather a reflexive engagement with one's participation in colonization's continuing existence.

Fanon (1963, p. 23) writes of European settlement as an act of ‘savagery’ that should not be ‘rooted out’ or masked by a discipline that promotes the rhetoric of decolonization but rather used as a means to investigate one’s implication in the continuation of coloniality. Freire (1993) echoes this sentiment in stating that coloniality has equally dehumanized the settler population that has failed to understand the conditions that gave rise to their privileged position within public life. Like Smith (1999, 2012), Wolfe (2006, 2016) and Freire (1993), Fanon (1963) argues that decolonization will not come about from an enforced initiative but rather through unpacking the conditions and structures that give rise to its ‘form and content’. Fanon (1963, p. 35) writes: ‘Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content’.

Tuck and Yang (2012) also challenge dominant academic discourses that promotes anti-colonial rhetoric without confronting, engaging, and actively responding to the everyday structures that enforce and maintain coloniality. They argue that decolonization is often presented within hegemonic discourses as an abstract metaphor that calls for ‘solidarity’ and ‘reconciliation’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. In doing so, it fails to unsettle the underlying colonial structures that maintain Eurocentric epistemic privilege. Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonizing discourses are often associated with the fantasy of promoting settler colonial ‘innocence’ where so-called benevolent anti-colonial gestures or research is presented as remedy for past colonial violence. Such a stance neglects to recognize non-Indigenous positionality and complicity in the continuing and present structures of coloniality. Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 19 original emphasis) go so far as to question ‘whether another settler move to innocence is to focus on decolonizing the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization; to allow *conscientization* to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land’.

Engaging confrontive notions such as these is a necessary part of decolonizing for it encourages critical thought into the implications of knowledge and the positionality of those who disseminate it. In this case, it has provoked my own consideration into whether ‘decolonizing consciousness’ is the empty anti-colonial metaphor that Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against. Will non-Indigenous cultivation of new habits of thought translate into praxis and address the violence of coloniality in ways that not only acknowledges but seeks accountability for occupying what is essentially stolen land?

Although there is no simple answer to the question of how to decolonize, this article presents a series of conceptual frameworks that can be used in ways to prompt, promote and encourage an internal dialogue. This dialogue, informed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, may contribute to greater understandings of the conditions of coloniality as well as one’s role within it. I therefore do not claim that this work serves as a guidebook that provides concrete steps that if applied may help someone to decolonize. Indigenous academic, Juanita Sherwood (2009, 2010) argues that decolonization cannot be reduced to a fixed set of methods or ‘abstract universals’ (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, p. 209), for each methodology needs to be tailored to the research, people, and communities whom it focuses on (Rose 2004). Decolonizing consciousness therefore is not the ‘sole activity of decolonization’ (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 19) but it nonetheless refers to an ongoing process and commitment to unsettle dominant understandings of settler-colonial relations. This is the first step that may lead towards putting decolonization into praxis.

To avoid presenting decolonization as a discipline, event, or initiative that may be implemented and enforced, I have embraced the term ‘decolonizing consciousness’ to represent its existence as an ontological state of being. A decolonizing consciousness exposes and transcends the ‘invisible regime of power’ (Moreton-Robinson 2004, p. 75) and counters dominant presentations of Indigeneity (Malkki 1992; Appadurai 1988; Rossi 2007). It is a habit of thought and a means of engaging the socio-historical processes that bring coloniality into being whilst defining hegemony.

Like a form of meditative contemplation, a decolonizing consciousness involves non-Indigenous populations gaining an awareness of their self in relation to an Indigenous presence in the immediate moment. Rather than applying steadfast and bounded strategies that impose methods aiming to resolve

a so-called Aboriginal/non-Indigenous ‘problem’, I argue that the very problem needs to be defined in relation to the self, and also the diversity and nuances of individual and collective populations. As the social conditions that contextualize the ways in which people develop and negotiate their identity are fluid—shifting across time and place—responses to coloniality and intercultural dialogue must be equally fluid, adaptive, and reflexive.

Reflecting on her experiences as an Indigenous academic, [Hunt \(2014\)](#) expresses how her responsibilities towards Indigenous communities often clash with the epistemological and structural demands of a Eurocentric colonial academy. For her, the violence of coloniality is something constantly encountered. In reference to her attendance at academic conferences, [Hunt \(2014, p. 28\)](#) writes, ‘the voice I raise is at once Indigenous and scholar, though it feels impossible to be heard as both at the same time’. During a roundtable discussion on decolonizing dialogue, Hunt states that coloniality is embedded within national consciousness through naturalized invisible violence where ‘our dehumanization is inherent in how the nation itself comes into being’ ([Holmes et al. 2014, p. 554](#)). She sees her identity as an Indigenous scholar as something that clashes with dominant hegemonic discourses and practices, leaving her to question whether Indigenous epistemologies will or can be embraced within an academy that naturalizes Eurocentric epistemic superiority.

[Hunt and Holmes \(2015\)](#) argue that decolonization involves critical interrogation of one’s social position, a confrontation of white privilege, and non-Indigenous accountability for past and present violence. Decolonizing dialogue begins with establishing what they call ‘consensual allyship’ where Indigenous voices are centered and relationships formed between settler and Indigenous populations as means to understand ‘interconnected identities and positionalities’ ([Hunt and Holmes 2015, p. 163](#)). Decolonizing is a process of understanding one’s role as both colonizer perpetrator and colonizer-ally ([Regan 2010](#)). When reflecting on her experiences of teaching decolonizing discourse to her non-Indigenous daughter, however, Holmes ([Hunt and Holmes 2015, p. 165](#)) writes of how she remained conscious of not associating Whiteness (or rather White people) directly with oppression. Instead, she focused on the *production of Whiteness* ([Moreton-Robinson 2004](#)) and its implications within settler colonial society. In here lies an essential lesson of decolonizing for it involves a critical engagement with the contextual setting that brings coloniality into being and manifests in everyday thought and action.

As discussed above, strategies aiming to promote social justice, reconciliation, and inclusion often mirror Eurocentric epistemological superiority, reinforcing the hierarchies of coloniality. Non-Indigenous discourses that aim to highlight the presence of coloniality whilst offering strategies to counter its impact will not necessarily lead towards decolonization. After documenting and assessing the websites of over 200 initiatives aiming to change non-Indigenous understandings of Indigenous peoples in Canada, [Davis et al. \(2016\)](#) found that dominant discourses were often void of a critical engagement with colonization. Rather than promoting liberal goals of ‘raising awareness’ of Indigenous cultures and struggles, [Davis et al. \(2016, p. 13\)](#) argue that decolonizing requires that we do not ‘lose sight of the need to “unsettle” the settler colonial logic, narratives and practices embedded in everyday life’.

[Barker and Pickerill \(2012\)](#) make a similar observation in relation to anti-colonial anarchist movements in Canada, documenting how anarchists often align their own agendas with Indigenous activism. The problem with such alliances is that it runs risk of appropriating Indigenous thought within colonial constructs, reinforcing coloniality through its efforts to create solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous anti-colonial struggles. [Barker and Pickerill \(Barker and Pickerill 2012, p. 1718\)](#) argue that as ‘place’ lies central to Indigenous ontologies and activism, ‘anarchists must seek to connect to Indigenous peoples’ struggles through place rather than through community solidarity and affinity-group building’. Through understanding Indigenous relationships to place settler populations may begin to better understand the pervasiveness of coloniality and engage in a process of decolonizing rather than a form of anti-colonialism that remains rooted within Eurocentric epistemologies.

[Malpas \(1999\)](#) explores the conception of ‘place’ through a phenomenological lens that frames the environment as a manifestation of a person’s sense of being. This is brought into existence through the



ways that spaces are dwelt in, as well as the memories and lived experiences that are attached to them. Place is not only a reflection of a person's sense of being in the world but also acts as an agent that engages people in return. Writing on how place is intermeshed with the ways that people self-identify, and how it serves as a means to articulate such an identity, Malpas (1999, p. 194) comments that:

our encounter both with ourselves and with others, and our grasp of the identity of ourselves and others, is always situated within and articulated with respect to particular places and with reference to specific objects and surroundings.

Using an example of a bridge, Malpas (1999) discusses how the structure is built as a result of the presence of a river that imposes itself upon a person's consciousness. The bridge becomes a manifestation of place informed and defined by the river, embedded within the memories and lived experiences attached to it. For Malpas (1999, p. 184), memory and experience are intermeshed with place and cannot be articulated without being located in a specific space and time.

Larsen and Johnson (2012) argue that Indigenous geographical research provides insightful ways of understanding the intercultural as they emphasize knowledge that arises out of emerging encounters and relationships embedded with and within place. Within colonial contexts, such understandings 'constantly challenges the hegemonic Western construction of a self-contained, standalone subject alienated from the worldly objects of its concern' (Larsen and Johnson 2012, p. 11). For Larsen and Johnson (2016), 'placework' lies at the heart of decolonizing. Placework is described as ways of 'thinking, acting, and being grounded in the agency of place that are attentive to the ways specific places manifest this agency'. To better understand Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations within intercultural colonial settings, one must become aware and responsive to how different beings—both human and non-human—interact with one another as well as with place itself for 'co-existence is grounded in the agency of place' (Larsen and Johnson 2017, p. 183).

As coloniality creates spaces of contention, decolonizing requires non-Indigenous populations to not only acknowledge the existence of such contention but seek to understand and contextualize the diverse ways in which other beings interact with place. This contextualization can be aided through Indigenous epistemologies that teach how places are not merely 'presentations' of the world, but rather active agents of an emerging existence that is constantly coming into being (Larsen and Johnson 2016, p. 156). As the land and relationships are continuously changing, researchers need to remain present, flexible and engage in a process of discovery.

Places are agents that speak, create, and teach; they have autonomy that is equal to the diverse beings that live and interact with it and ultimately bring place into being (Larsen and Johnson 2016). Places are ways of understanding and reflections of one's self. Indigenous knowledges offer holistic understandings of place 'in which myriad human and non-human beings are interconnected via genealogies contained within a landscape' (Larsen and Johnson 2012, p. 10). As the world is understood in diverse ways, however, places are also politicized sites of struggle for Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial settings (Johnson 2010). Citing Howitt and Suchet-Pearson (2003, p. 557), Johnson (2010, p. 833) argues that through acknowledging diverse and contested understandings of place, the first steps towards finding common ground between settler and Indigenous populations may be taken. Elsewhere, Larsen and Johnson (2017, p. 188) write that 'place is helping us recognize each other and our interdependencies as a first step in decolonizing our relationships'. Decolonizing calls for non-Indigenous settler populations to face and confront place, embracing it in a way that highlights how it is a reflection of an ontological self that is mutually dependent on others.

## 5. Reflexivity, Listening and Border Thinking

Before the so called 'other' can be understood within intercultural contexts it is necessary to first identify and engage with one's own positionality and the personal biases that are brought into social interactions. Smith and Jackson (2006) write of how decolonization is a task that involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It requires that researchers take responsibility by confronting

the history and role that their disciplines have had and continue to have on Indigenous populations. For them, artefacts are not merely reflections of culture but also symbols of the power to control and know Indigenous people from a Eurocentric positioning (Smith and Jackson 2006, p. 312).

Writing from the perspective of Indigenous researchers and their application of Indigenous research methods, Martin and Mirraboopa (2003, p. 212) state how reflexivity ‘challenges us to claim our shortcomings, misunderstandings, oversights and mistakes, to re-claim our lives and make strong changes to our current realities.’ Rose (2004) speaks of the importance of remaining open and engaging others in a dialogue where the conditions that shape one’s reality are acknowledged; a process that requires the confidence to confront information that may not always be expected, and could potentially cause discomfort. Rose (2004, p. 22) observes how:

Openness is risky because one does not know the outcome. To be open is to hold one’s self-available to others: one takes risks and becomes vulnerable. But this is also a fertile stance: one’s own ground can become destabilised. In open dialogue one holds one’s self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed.

For Smith (1999, p. 144; 2012), decolonizing research involves becoming responsive to the testimony that researchers encounter, allowing the information shared to inform one’s response whilst ‘silencing certain types of questions’ that maintain Western authority. Listening, when placed within an Indigenous epistemological context, is an active and dialogical process defined through continuous sensory engagement with one’s surrounding environment (Atkinson 2002; Martin 2008; Rose 2004; Sherwood 2009, 2010; Smith 1999, 2012; Ungunmerr 1988). Through entering a conscious state where people are willing to open up and become receptive to the knowledge and information they encounter they may come to new understandings about their own social position and the ways in which they are interconnected within a web of relations (Hokari 2011, p. 105). Listening therefore is key to gaining new insights about one’s self and others for it encourages reflexive engagement by exposing socio-cultural differences that arise out of interactions with others.

Engaged listening means seeking to understand knowledge in its fullest capacity. It is more than a physical sensory phenomenon where sounds or words are passively encountered. Listening demands that a person becomes conscious of the meaning of particular phenomena, locations, objects, persons, places, and knowledge on a deeper ontological level (Hokari 2011). To ‘hear’ is to be able to comprehend and contextualize something in relation to its position within a much larger and complex knowledge system. To ‘know’ something is to have the ability and knowledge to understand how numerous factors contribute to its ‘meaning’ at a moment in time, in relation to particular circumstances and within a particular context.

Listening contributes to how many Aboriginal people familiarize and position themselves within the world; one reason for this being the emphasis placed on oral traditions (Eckermann 2010; Rose 2004; Sherwood 2010; Smith 1999). Kearney (2009) writes of how senses and emotions influence the ways in which Yanyuwa, in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory, interact with their environment, and the sentient beings that live within an Indigenous Country. For Yanyuwa, a distinction is made between listening, hearing and seeing. Whilst all individuals are capable of ‘listening’, some are unable to ‘hear’ (Kearney 2009, p. 217). Kearney (2009) highlights that for the Yanyuwa, hearing is directly associated with the attainment of knowledge. To hear is to be able to communicate and engage with one’s ancestral links that connect Aboriginal people with Country, the wider cosmological order that is based upon kincentric networks of relatedness (Salmón 2000; Rose 1996, 2009; Seton and Bradley 2004; Langton 2002b, p. 95). The inability to ‘hear’ is associated with remaining ignorant of such connections and occupying a childlike state, reflected through Yanyuwa expressions such as ‘murdirrinarra’—indicating a position that is ‘deemed foolish, incapable of knowing and “mad”’ (Kearney 2009, p. 217).

Hearing is often associated with ceremony and initiation rituals in which knowledge is imparted to those who are deemed ready, receptive, and are permitted by Indigenous Law to receive it.

Sansom (2010) writes of how listening is associated with receptiveness and a willingness to embody new knowledge. Documenting the initiation of young Aboriginal men in Darwin, Sansom (2010) observes how the rite of passage involves not only imparting knowledge, but also a public testing of how receptive initiates are to the information passed on to them. Those who fail to demonstrate their receptiveness are judged as being ‘deaf’ as a result of their inability or refusal to ‘listen’. ‘Deafness’ is therefore associated with the failure to comprehend and thus demonstrate that knowledge has been embodied.

Since the late 1980s Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, an Indigenous elder from Ngangikurungkurr Country in the Northern Territory, has advocated for the concept of ‘dadirri’ to be applied to academic pursuits and social endeavors aimed at empowering Indigenous communities (Ungunmerr 1988; Sherwood 2010, p. 252; Atkinson 2002, p. 16). Dadirri is a term that has many meanings but one that Ungunmerr-Baumann translates as ‘listening to one another’ and ‘deep listening’. Ungunmerr-Baumann uses the phrase as an Indigenous epistemic term in which an ‘inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness’ takes place (Ungunmerr 1988). It is through entering meaningful reflection, which she likens to contemplation, where a person may sit, be still and listen: ‘Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call “contemplation”’ (Ungunmerr 1988).

For Ngangikurungkurr people connection to Country and the importance of the river flows throughout their lives, as reflected in language and culture. Similar to the Barkindji, whose name translates to ‘river people’, the term dadirri has connotations of the importance of water and Ungunmerr-Baumann speaks of it as a process that recognizes the ‘deep spring’ that already exists within people. It is a process where knowledge and information ‘sink quietly into our minds’ through remaining still, aware and receptive. It is through silence that one’s interconnection with the surrounding Country and all beings in it may be best understood.

Vazquez (2017) also speaks of decolonizing as a process of reconnection. It is a response to Eurocentric colonial ontologies that are born out of a modernity that objectifies the world and emphasizes the falsity of a self-sufficient self which is disconnected from ‘our linkages to what has been lived, to the grounds of our historical existence’ (Vazquez 2017, p. 8). Rather than reinforcing notions of a presence that is grounded in empty time and space—which Vazquez (2017) equates to a form of ‘earthlessness’ caused by the ‘violence of unworlding’—decolonizing is a process of reconnecting with relational worlds. It is a reorientation of the self towards interconnected realities that are reconfigurations of our shared historical experience. Vazquez (2017, p. 13) writes that decoloniality requires a ‘fundamental change in the relation to the world, a change that requires the articulation of a different mode of realization, of worlding the world’.

Atkinson (2002) is a Jiman (central west Queensland) and Bunjalung (northern New South Wales) Indigenous academic. In her seminal work *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (Atkinson 2002) Atkinson reflects on her role as a member of the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council in far north Queensland. She writes of how elders would pull her aside after meetings to speak of their own, and their communities’ experiences with trauma and violence, and the social concerns that were harming them. She observed that the consensus amongst community leaders was that they were not being listened to.

Atkinson (2002) uses dadirri as a methodological principle to inform her own research whilst advocating for its application by any person, organization, or governmental body engaging Aboriginal communities. In doing so she highlights that Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing the world are rooted in human experience, engagement, and dialogue with one’s surrounding environment. Dadirri teaches any person who is willing to embrace it, to listen in an active and engaged manner (Atkinson 2002; Sherwood 2010). It is about building relationships, developing trust, and engaging in reciprocity with others whilst demonstrating a genuine motivation to listen and learn from an open and receptive position. As Vazquez (2017) would argue, it is a process of ‘worlding the world’. Dadirri is a reflection of the intercultural in its purest, most open and accepting form.

During his fieldwork with the Gurindji in central Australia, Hokari (2011, p. 91) also discovered the importance of stillness and quiet contemplation, which he used as a means of learning how to 'pay attention' and 'listen' to his surroundings. Similar to Smith (1999, p. 144; 2012) call for 'silencing certain types of questions', Hokari found listening enabled him to become aware of the noise created by his own thoughts. Hokari (2011, p. 92) discovered that the epistemological habits he was taught obstructed his documenting Gurindji history in ways that reflected Gurindji understandings of the world. He used silence as a way to engage his surrounding environment and allow knowledge and insights to come to him without being distorted by his preconceived notions of the world.

Hokari's insight arose out of his observations of the ways in which Gurindji people, specifically elders, interacted with their surroundings and how such interaction came to inform the epistemologies that explained the world. Comparing this to the manner in which he was accustomed to pursuing knowledge, Hokari (2011, p. 91) reflects:

I usually try to understand the world by asking and searching. However, Gurindji people demonstrated to me how to know the world by simply being still and paying attention. The art of knowing is not always the way of searching, but often the way of paying attention.

Throughout his insightful study Hokari (2011, p. 91) reflects upon his own positionality as a Japanese man conducting research in an intercultural setting far removed from his home. What Hokari endeavours to pursue—and does so masterfully—is challenge the manner in which non-Indigenous people see a presumed reality. For Hokari (2011), reality is a social construct that not only frames the manner in which people come to view and be within the world, but also informs the ways in which they perceive others. 'The art of knowing is not always the way of searching' (Hokari 2011, p. 91), for searching implies that there is a specific thing or idea that is being sought.

Through becoming silent and paying attention a person is more receptive to insights that are not based on personal bias, but 'being' and existing on a sensory and emotional level. Whilst Hokari does not identify his research as pursuing a project of 'decolonization', his methodologies encapsulate the process required to build decolonizing consciousness and engage in a constructive intercultural dialogue amongst those who may have competing ways of being in the world. Through learning how to listen and pay attention to what Indigenous epistemologies can offer, and suspending epistemic bias, the structures and ideologies that continue to inform coloniality can begin to be questioned through 'responsive reflexivity' (Kearney 2017, p. 195).

Responsive reflexivity, a term coined by Kearney (2017), refers to a habit of thought where one's self-awareness is positioned in relation to others as a means to better understand the conditions that inform their interactions and also the wider causes of socio-cultural conflict. Like the definition of 'personal reflexivity' provided by Finlay and Gough (2003, p. 37), reflexivity requires more than merely becoming conscious of one's emotional responses to social phenomena. It also requires a wider contextualization to better understand the circumstances that surround and provoke such responses.

Kearney (2017) demonstrates how simply 'having knowledge' of the harm inflicted upon others without engaging it on a personal level is to take the position of spectator, where one becomes removed from the realities of others, as well as their possible accountability in doing harm (Kearney 2017, p. 196). To confront and engage the testimony of those who have encountered harm is to participate in a manner that provokes a 'response'—whether this is an emotional reaction to the information confronted or greater awareness of the context and circumstances surrounding colonial harm (Kearney 2017, p. 198). Freire (1993, p. 31) also writes of the importance of confronting one's relationship and involvement within the oppression of others:

Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed. Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not do. Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary (sic); it is a radical posture.



By confronting how non-Indigenous people's thoughts and actions impact and inform the lived experiences of others, whilst becoming aware of how they are morally received, a sense of discomfort and decentering of one's very position in the world may arise. Mackey (2014) discusses such decentering in relation to Indigenous land rights in Canada where non-Indigenous 'fantasies of entitlement' are challenged through an Indigenous presence that highlights the pervasiveness of a continuing coloniality as well as the falsity of Eurocentric superiority. Mackey (2014, p. 250) suggests that decolonization may arise from settler populations embracing *uncertainty* where they learn to live 'without the entitlement to know everything'.

In *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*, Freire (1993) discusses how decentering involves a person to not only envision their self as a potential oppressor—that is one that is entitled to know everything—but rather enters into a state of solidarity with those who are potentially oppressed. Solidarity however does not mean embodying the experiences of others as one's own, as this is in danger of continuing the 'paternalistic treatment of the oppressed' that Freire (1993, p. 31) warns against. Solidarity rather involves engaged dialogue between those with different lived experiences and who may view socio-historical events in radically different ways. Decolonized intercultural dialogue therefore must acknowledge and confront the position from which one speaks or listens and acknowledge one's uncertainty and limitations.

Where Mackey (2014) argues for non-Indigenous acceptance of 'uncertainty' as a means to aid decolonizing, Audra Simpson (2007, 2014, 2017) argues that 'refusal' plays an important role. For Simpson, disseminating Indigenous lived experiences through methods such as think description (which is often applied to ethnographic research) can be problematic as it often presents Indigenous populations as subjects of a White colonial gaze. Simpson argues that within settler-colonial discourses 'recognition' of Indigenous peoples, as well as their lives and struggles within colonial settings, is often presented as if it were the remedy of historical injustice. To do so is to deny Indigenous people's voices and cause further epistemic violence by re-presenting Indigenous narratives through a White colonial lens. To counter this, she presents a method of 'ethnographic refusal' that aims to disrupt the 'conceit of easy politics' (Simpson 2017, p. 29) and provoke deeper engagement with the colonial structures that *accounts* for history.

Simpson (2017, p. 29) describes refusal as 'a possibility for doing things differently, for thinking beyond the recognition paradigm that is the agreed-upon "antidote" for rendering justice in deeply unequal scenes of articulation'. Listening with decolonizing consciousness involves recognizing Indigenous sovereignty and honoring Indigenous people's right to respond to colonial apparatuses by refusing to be presented as colonial subjects. Through ethnographic refusal, Simpson calls naturalized White epistemic privilege into question and demands that researchers confront their own moral and ethical responsibility to highlight and counter the colonial structures that are embodied in everyday Eurocentric thought and action.

As previously discussed in relation to responsive reflexivity, simply acknowledging that socio-cultural differences exist within a space called 'the intercultural' will not necessarily encourage new modes of thought conducive to decolonizing. Acknowledgement must lead to critical and reflexive engagement by those who live within such intercultural spaces. Mignolo (2000, 2007, 2011, 2012) argues that in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which coloniality manifests itself within one's very sense of being, a new epistemology that embraces diversity is needed. In a process he describes as 'border thinking', Mignolo (2000, 2007, 2011, 2012) advocates for a conscious state that transcends the perceived centrality of one's self and focuses on the manner in which a range of epistemologies meet and interact. The term 'border' is used to articulate a space or interface, rather than a divide or split (Lugones 2010, p. 753), which exists between the dominant epistemologies that shape colonial and nationalist conceptions of the world and local subaltern histories that are drowned out by their dominance (Bhabha 2004; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, p. 206).

Border thinking provides an opportunity to understand colonial difference in a new light that better reflects diverse realities of competing knowledge systems. Indigenous epistemologies therefore



are embraced as a means to open a dialogue where coloniality can be framed in relation to local, in this case Indigenous, histories. Border thinking alone, however, does not bring about greater awareness or recognition of the ways in which Indigenous or non-Indigenous populations present and understand the world, but aims to move 'beyond' them, and in doing so disorientate bounded singular definitions of populations (Bhabha 2004). It is a means of rethinking the world and provides an opportunity for a new ontological and epistemological space to open up (Mignolo 2012, p. 175).

Mignolo (2011, p. 275) encourages scholars of colonization to confront the language and 'terms of the conversation' used within discourses of coloniality, for language does not merely represent the topics presented, but reflects the particular socio-historical and cultural context from which one speaks (Mignolo 2012). To simply acknowledge that hybridity can exist between different populations is not enough, nor is the declaration of a marginal third space. Border thinking is not a simple matter of disseminating knowledge about 'the other' in a language or epistemic frame different to one's own. Competing epistemologies need to be critiqued at the point of their intersection, or they are in danger of becoming a politicized extension of Eurocentric epistemic coloniality (Laurie 2012; Michaelsen and Shershow 2007; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

Border thinking involves confronting the epistemic imbalances that exist within dominant discourses by engaging the knowledges of 'subaltern' populations (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). By assessing and engaging the epistemologies of different socio-cultural groups—within the same analytical space—a better understanding of the 'border' that exists between them may arise. Borders, therefore, are not only physical but are also epistemic and refer to the space that exists between different populations where the 'struggles that take shape' around their 'changing relationships' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 18) may be exposed. It is through engaging such struggles and the socio-cultural and epistemic conditions that give rise to them that better understandings of what decolonizing means and requires transpire.

In the next section I discuss how 'water' is an agent and facilitator of intercultural exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Water, rivers, and the theme of fluidity serve as conceptual aids that provokes deeper engagement with the conditions of coloniality and encourages awareness of the interconnection between different sentient beings, both human and non-human. Water therefore is an effective way of thinking about decolonizing.

## 6. Water as Intercultural

Kincentricism is an epistemic label Salmón (Salmón 2000, p. 1328) adopts to classify Indigenous people's understandings of the relationships formed in and with Country. Kincentric ecologies encourages a habit of thought where geographical landmarks, features, natural phenomenon, flora, and fauna are envisioned as components of an interlocking meshwork (Ingold 2011, 2007) where humans and non-humans are equal and mutually informing agents. This counters western epistemologies that present dualities that separate the 'natural environment' from 'human culture' (Ingold 2000; Seton and Bradley 2004). In the following section I discuss how intercultural dialogue is reflected through competing and contrasting understandings of water and rivers.

Krause and Strang (2016) embrace water as a conceptual method through which the social relationships between humans and their surrounding environments—and the ways that such environments influence social relationships in return—can be unpacked in closer detail. They present water as an active agent that shapes and mirrors the context in which people understand and interact with the world. As water is integral to all living beings (human and non-human), understanding the ways in which people think about and interact with it means that it becomes an insightful 'object of evaluation and contestation' (Krause and Strang 2016, p. 643). This highlights the wider social contexts that provide insights into social relations in general.

Writing within the context of the Dharawal who live along the Georges River in the south-western suburbs of Sydney, New South Wales, Goodall and Cadzow (2009) document how the river played an essential role in the lives of the local Aboriginal populations within an area where increased

colonial contact, urbanization, and development was occurring during the early years of European settlement. Through presenting Aboriginal oral histories and testimonies, as well as drawing upon a range of colonial accounts and sources that document Indigenous/settler interactions, [Goodall and Cadzow \(2009\)](#) demonstrate how the Georges River was an agent of communication and movement that connected people, places, and ideas. They observed how rivers provided paths of movement and communication that expanded social networks amongst Aboriginal people, as well as between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous populations ([Goodall and Cadzow 2009](#), p. 29).

For the Dharawal ([Goodall and Cadzow 2009](#)), the river was a colonial frontier where different ontologies and ways of being merged and clashed. It also provided a means of communication and transportation that resulted in a diversity of lived experiences and encounters that varied amongst people. This helped shape the manner in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people came to understand and negotiate their own social position and understandings of the world. The river, although embedded within Aboriginal culture, is also a link between two worlds, for it is not bound to a specific location but rather is fluid and has the ability to carry water and resources over vast distances. The fluidity of water and its transformative nature is also highlighted in the work of [Strang \(2006, p. 149\)](#), who draws a parallel between the fluidity and transformative nature of water with a flexible and adaptive identity that 'is never static' ([Krause and Strang 2016](#); [Strang 2005a, 2005b](#)). For [Strang \(2006\)](#), social behavior and the manner in which the world is engaged is as fluid as water.

Within a colonial setting such as Australia such fluidity refers to the complex manner in which competing ways of knowing and being inform one another. This creates a setting that is shaped not only through tension and disjunction arising out of difference, but also through the ways in which such difference is confronted, understood, negotiated and responded to. [Goodall and Cadzow \(2009, p. 19\)](#) observe that 'place' can have multiple meanings that shift across time and space, reflecting the diverse social interactions that happen within them. Place therefore comes to represent the past and present, one's immediate location and spaces that may be physically located elsewhere. Interactions with and within place are ways of connecting to one's homeland, as well as ancestors past and present, but are also a means of engaging and maintaining ontological understandings of the world.

[Krause and Strang \(2016, p. 634\)](#) write that 'water flows are fashioned by a combination of topography, power relations, built infrastructure, institutional arrangements, property relations, money and market forces, ideologies, social networks, and the properties of water itself.' These wider social themes, which may be read through an investigation of water were evident during my time in far western New South Wales where there is much debate regarding the flow and health of the Darling River which flows throughout the state and is a vital source of environmental, economic and cultural existence in the region. The debate which predominantly centers on the use of water for mass irrigation by large scale industries, touches each of the features identified by [Krause and Strang \(2016, p. 634\)](#).

Intervention upon the river's flow impacts its topography as the river flows throughout Country and shapes its physical layout, providing links between different cultural sites and communities. The river is also an important space where social networks are developed and maintained through activities such as fishing, and for the congregation of Aboriginal people ([Toussaint 2014](#)). It is ingrained with power relations that not only concern the government, private industry, and the commodification of water resources, but also speaks to the power of humans in general, whose actions impede and attempt to control a setting upon which other non-human beings, flora, and fauna rely. The power of human dominance over water is evident in the built infrastructure that enables water extraction and transportation into mass storage lakes where it is used to sustain industries such as cotton farming, as well as turning it into a commodity ([Goodall 2008](#); [Marshall 2014, 2016](#)). Its association with industry opens a discussion relating to institutional arrangements between the government, who are in a position of power to regulate water usage, and irrigation lobbyists whose primary concern relates to money and the market.

It is for these reasons that the Barka, or Darling River, is an intercultural contested entity where different epistemologies, and the axiologies that arise from them, clash with one another. The river is a

facilitator of an agonistic intercultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations where different understandings of the environment come to a head and may be exposed. Rivers do not only flow through physical space but also flow through time, contextualizing the present moment in relation to events that have occurred in the past, or acting as signifiers of situations to come. They are also direct links to Indigenous historic accounts that maintain ancestral connections through the stories that are experienced and shared in relation to it.

## 7. The Barka: 'Waking em up'

In the opening section of this article I discussed how the Barka, also known as the Darling River, provides a backdrop of competing and clashing interests where Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies come to head. In far western New South Wales Indigenous citizens are competing against Eurocentric colonial interests that treat water as a commodity to be bought, sold, and exploited for economic and anthropocentric purposes. In this final section I document how local Aboriginal members are demanding that their voices be heard as means of overcoming the denial and disconnect that many non-Indigenous people have towards the 'web of connection'.

In June 2016, Barry Stone, with the help of other community representatives such as Murray Butcher, aimed to gain public recognition and greater exposure of the drastic impact that big agricultural industries have on the river. Staging a protest on Wilcannia Bridge, Aboriginal community members shut down the bridge in order to disrupt the flow of land movement by preventing access from east of Wilcannia to the west. Similar to the disruption of the flow of water caused by cotton cultivation, this protest prevented access to towns such as Broken Hill. Barry Stone spoke of the protest as arising out of the neglect of government officials to engage with the community's concerns:

The Prime Minister wouldn't talk to us, the Labor minister wouldn't talk to us, and we were talking, and everyone was so pissed, and I said well let's shock it all. It's the only way we're going to get anything done here is shock them. I said, 'How bout we shut the fucking Wilcannia Bridge off. Why not take out the Wilcannia Bridge?'

(Barry Stone, personal communication, 24 September 2016)

Members of the community felt that their voices were not being heard or taken seriously by State and Federal Governments. Despite speaking out, Aboriginal voices were obscured by an overbearing government system that remained locked within a particular ontological approach that prioritized the interests of some over others. In this case, the perceived prioritization of large-scale irrigators and water lobbyists over community members and Indigenous populations. Efforts to raise community concerns through political channels were seen by many local Aboriginal residents such as Murray Butcher as 'falling on deaf ears'. Murray reflects on how he believed that Aboriginal people simply were not being listened to, which prompted further activism:

So, we wanted to go down to be a voice and to stand up for the river people. And it's time that we started speaking up for it, you know. Um, We always been speaking up for it but our voice wasn't being there. Our voice just wasn't being heard.

(Murray Butcher, personal communication, 27 September 2016)

Barry spoke of his efforts to organize a meeting with the Prime Minister in Canberra, which was met by a generic letter of acknowledgement but decline to meet in person. The lack of community engagement by politicians was seen by Barry as a sign of disrespect. This came to fruition when a week after consulting civil servants and politicians in Canberra, Mark Coulton the local federal parliamentary representative, travelled to Broken Hill for the annual agricultural fair. Barry's criticism lay in the fact that consultation could have been organized around this visit, saving local residents time and money. Similarly, the then Premier of New South Wales, Mike Baird, travelled to Broken Hill and Menindee a day before the protest was staged to announce measures aiming to 'drought proof' communities such as Broken Hill, but failed to meet or 'show face' (Smith 1999, p. 15) in Wilcannia. Both of these public

representatives failed to consult the Aboriginal community in a way that communicated a willingness to listen and engage with local concerns.

The pipes that currently pump water to Broken Hill can be seen running along the Silver City Highway connecting Menindee to the more urban centers. As you approach Menindee a series of placards and cross gravestone markers run alongside the pipe system, symbolizing the death of the river and its impact on fauna and flora and local businesses. Many challenge the argument put forth by the then premier Mike Baird that the lack of water is primarily the result of drought, and fear that rerouting water through pipes is a means of circumventing the fact that communities such as Broken Hill, Menindee and Wilcannia, are reliant on water that flows down from the north east. One man I spoke with felt that the release of water by the government was used as a means to keep the community quiet and to ‘pay them off’.

Whilst the pipes attempt to provide some form of water security, they also create a disconnection between the life source, that is the Barka, and all who rely upon it. This can be likened to a colonial mentality that defines, controls, and creates a hierarchy of interests in accordance with one’s own egocentric positioning. Instead of engaging with Country, the pipeline signifies an attempt to ‘master nature’ as a means to control, distribute, and allocate water in accordance with how those in power see fit.

The protest was staged over a weekend and the bridge shut down, preventing vehicle access to Broken Hill. It gained significant support on social media with Barry stating that the event had over 15,000 responses on Facebook. Despite having a smaller turnout of approximately 50 to 100 people at one time (and a significant police presence to match it) the news media picked the story up and for a brief moment the Barkindji, Ngayampaa, and other Aboriginal language groups ‘got the attention of Australia. Which was pretty good. We woke them up a little bit’ (Barry Stone, personal communication, 15 September 2016).

Murray speaks of the river as a Mother (Forsyth 2016) who provides and sustains life. The day after the protest, which ‘called’ and ‘sung’ out messages pertaining to the health of Country (Kearney 2017, p. 59; Langton 2002a, p. 262), Mother Nature responded with heavy rains that began to flow into the Menindee Lakes. Barry reflects on this stating how ‘I’ve had a few people comment on the rain and the weather since we shut the bridge. I’m going yeah, right, Mother Nature has said: “there you go, now look after it”. “Yous asked for it, there you go, now look after it”’ (Barry Stone, personal communication, 15 September 2016).

## 8. Conclusions

When Aboriginal residents of far western New South Wales, such as Barry Stone state that non-Indigenous members of the more populated cities on the east coast of Australia ‘don’t care’ and that they remain impassive towards where their food comes from ‘as long as they have it’, he is speaking of a breakdown of a constructive intercultural dialogue. It is a disconnect that emerges from both a neglect to listen and a colonial state that prioritizes non-Indigenous habits of thought and praxis over Indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, when Murray Butcher declares that it was time to ‘be a voice and stand up for the river people’ he was not only affirming his Aboriginal identity as a Barkindji man but was also engaging in an intercultural dialogue that spoke for the river itself—a living sentient being and an agent caught in an environmental crisis of competing interests.

In this article I have discussed how decolonizing consciousness offers an effective and insightful conceptual framework through which terms such as the ‘intercultural’ can be rethought in ways that are representational of diverse worldviews and ways of being. Within settler-colonial settings such as Australia, decolonizing consciousness refers to ontological, epistemological and axiological habits of thought and praxis through which each individual is called upon to reflexively engage her or his own understandings of the world and confront how their actions impact and are intertwined with the lived realities of others. The protest on Wilcannia Bridge is one example of an attempt to provoke a decolonial response that invokes a moral introspective reflection from the wider non-Indigenous

community. It is a means of speaking out and demanding a reconnection to place in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous, flora and fauna, human and non-humans are all implicated.

As terms such as *dadirri* articulate, in order to truly embrace the intercultural, it is first necessary to take a step back, quieted one's taken for granted thoughts and visualize the world from other perspectives. It requires an active still awareness and confidence to challenge the very ways in which a person lives and interacts. Decolonizing however does not require non-Indigenous people to abandon the ontologies and knowledge systems that have helped shape their very understandings of the world, but rather calls for quiet contemplation where one's foothold in the world can be reflected on in a constructive and responsive manner. Socio-cultural difference does not have to lead to an "us/them" antagonistic dynamic but rather should be embraced in a way that leads towards constructive contemplation of how difference may contribute to new habits of border thinking which embraces and accommodates for difference.

The intercultural should not only consider 'human cultures' but should equally apply to non-human sentient beings. This includes flora, fauna, and other geographical, geological and ecological phenomena such as water and rivers. The intercultural requires one to see how their reality is shaped and integrated within a complex meshwork of mutually informing interactions. Indigenous knowledge systems offer insightful and effective ways of understanding such mutuality. Such knowledge is foundational to comprehending the coexistence of the different agents—each with their own competing and complementing cultures—that come to shape each other's reality and the world at large.

Despite the growth and advances of modern human technologies, human populations will continue to ask and rely on 'Mother Nature' to provide the building blocks of human existence. With this however comes the moral responsibility to enter an intercultural dialogue that considers the health and wellbeing of all that sustains human and non-human prosperity and well-being. To continue Barry's comment made in reference to the flow of the Barka proceeding the protest in Wilcannia, if we ask for the exploits that sustain our very existence, we then have a moral reasonability to care and look after the environment in return. Decolonizing intercultural dialogue may be the first step to understanding and responding to such responsibilities. This begins by non-Indigenous populations seeking and holding their self-accountable to both Indigenous epistemologies as well as critically engaging with one's own implication in the continuing pervasiveness of coloniality.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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