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The inheritance and repetition of colonial practices of dispossession

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Pratichi Chatterjee** 

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Abstract

State processes of land dispossession rely on multiple modes of power such as domination, legitimisation, pacification, and deceit to achieve their aims. This article analyses how governments in Australia have drawn on these varied forms to redevelop inner city areas in Sydney which are important to Indigenous communities. It analyses three redevelopment practices that targeted the suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo between 2005 and 2019. First, domineering planning structures used to marginalise Indigenous housing in Redfern. Second, racist tropes that have worked to legitimise this authoritarian approach and the resulting dispossession. Third, community consultations, that attempted to placate residents impacted by redevelopment, with culturally inclusive participation, but that maintained a deceitful silence on the question of colonisation. The article shows how authoritarian state planning, racialised legitimisation, and colonial pacification and deceit wielded in Redfern and Waterloo, are directly inherited from and/or reproduce historic colonial nation and city building agendas. On this basis, the article claims that settler colonialism can be understood as a self-perpetuating process, where practices of dispossession, developed at a given time, can set precedent for and be reworked into later programmes of land dispossession.

Keywords

Settler colonialism, dispossession, urban redevelopment, Australia

Introduction

For decades, political leaders in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) have led redevelopment agendas to transform the neighbouring inner Sydney suburbs¹ of Redfern and Waterloo. Both are significant for Aboriginal residents, and low-income and culturally

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diverse communities, because of their expanse of public housing in an increasingly gentrifying inner-city, the presence of community-based services, and their historic role in advancing the Aboriginal land rights movement. Different state proposals, announced between 2004 and 2015, to transform the area by “deconcentrating” Aboriginal owned housing, known as The Block, and redeveloping the Waterloo public housing estate, home to many Aboriginal tenants, hold important lessons for those trying to understand how settler colonial dispossession *continues* to function through urbanisation.

The article approaches the persistence of colonialism, in government-led redevelopments, in two ways. It identifies multiple and distinct modes of power – domination, legitimisation, pacification and deceit – mobilised in recent efforts to marginalise urban Aboriginal space in Redfern and Waterloo. *Domination* has been exercised through state development bodies’ accumulation of planning powers in order to control and disperse Indigenous-owned housing in Redfern. Racialised tropes that denigrate urban-based Aboriginal communities have informed political rhetoric used to *legitimise* such dispossession. While *pacificatory* gestures to include Waterloo’s culturally diverse resident base in public consultation have relied on a structural *deceit*, where a narrow multiculturalism that advocated inclusive participation, in fact, has evaded fundamentally political questions of colonisation and dispossession, on which Australian cities are founded. The article situates these more recent happenings in historic processes of nation-building and city-building, to make sense of, and to contextualise the workings of power in a longer trajectory of colonisation. It shows how the redevelopment programmes targeting Redfern and Waterloo have drawn directly on, and reworked into contemporary settings, former practices used to expand and maintain control over Indigenous land. The article discusses specific historic practices of authoritarianism embedded in past projects of colonial-nationalism at both state and federal levels; the use of long-standing racist narratives, dating back to at least the late 19th century, which cast Aboriginality as anomalous with the alleged modernity of the settler colonial city; and finally, the ethos of Australian federal multiculturalism, developed in the 1970s, which lacked substantive engagement with the nation’s colonial foundations, and Aboriginal demands for land and self-determination.

In analysing the continual but shifting work of different machinations of occupation/dispossession, the article contributes a fine-grained analysis of how colonisation operates through different modes of power to make urban space. It further presents a way of tracing colonisation’s persistence, through self-perpetuation, where historic methods of exercising control over Indigenous land, are available for adaptation and re-use in later projects.

Two implications follow. First, the importance of seeing colonial place-making as not confined to a given period, but capable of casting a long shadow. The propensity of colonial practices, to work across time, brings urgency to the question of rethinking how we might build cities differently. It also suggests a need to consider the possibilities for political action that adopts a wider time horizon, and works to prevent, not only, immediate damage, but seeks to intervene in the building up and passing down of dispossessionary precedents.

Second, “settler cities”, as culturally diverse places, are especially prone to deceit and pacification that enable a limited form of multiculturalism to shape urban decision-making, which appears inclusive, but lacks engagement with colonial/anti-colonial politics. If community participation in making city space is to be reworked, such that it acknowledges colonisation as ongoing, and restructures decision-making guided by that knowledge, then settler inclusivity and diversity efforts require transformation through substantive reflection on how inclusive participation can align with Indigenous political claims of self-determination.

Methods and ethical considerations

The research for this article was carried out between 2016 and 2019, as part of my doctoral work. It draws on a small subset of the project. Sources include parliamentary transcripts, government reports, legislation, online community/activist productions, news media, academic articles and notes from public meetings. The analysis comprised a close reading of the more recent of these sources, dating 2005–2019, to identify different practices mobilised in redevelopments in Redfern and Waterloo, which have undermined urban Aboriginal space. I turned to older sources, dating from between the late 19th century and the 1980s, to make links between these more contemporary redevelopments, and historic programmes of colonial nation and city building. This moving between the past and the present allows the article to identify where older methods of implementing urban and national change, have been passed down and reframed into newer programmes of land development.

I was not able to undertake primary research in collaboration with Aboriginal residents in Redfern and Waterloo for this project, which is a limitation of the work. Some context is important for the ethical questions this raises, given my position as a non-Aboriginal and non-Australian researcher. For approximately 18 months I supported an activist group advocating for tenant interests during the Waterloo Estate's redevelopment. The group was not dedicated to specifically Aboriginal concerns, but it had direct support from and the involvement of key Aboriginal activists. For a limited period it was an important mechanism for voicing Aboriginal tenant demands. Along with other academics I carried out work in support of the group, interviewed residents, and informally agreed to share outputs as a way of ensuring accountability. Political and ethical differences eventually led to key Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters withdrawing from the organisation, as did I and other researchers. It subsequently became difficult to develop a way to share work, receive feedback, and broach the prospect of more formal collaborations.

The project occurred at a time of significant interest in Waterloo, with residents responding to multiple demands for engagement on different research and research-like projects, including the NSW government's consultation. While tenant members of the activist group were broadly supportive of involvement from myself and others, they also criticised the demands on their time which were uncompensated. In these circumstances, I did not feel I could request, and enter into an ethical research partnership with either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal tenants.

In light of the above, I have tried to maintain the working of settler colonialism as the article's primary focus, as opposed to Aboriginal experiences, negotiations and resistance to this, although I mention some important examples. I draw on Aboriginal commentary from records made for public listening and reading, where these shed light on the colonial relation, or offer insight missing from colonial viewpoints. Articles such as this, which focus mainly on colonial power, have a tendency to present it as totalising, in a way that can depersonalise and overlook the lives and agency of those who confront it. It is not my intention to present such a framing here. In drawing readers' attention to the research context, I hope they are able to maintain an awareness that Redfern and Waterloo, and Sydney as a city, whilst being sites of colonisation, are also sites of multiple resistances led by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, with their own personal histories, shaped by the wider societal context in which they live.

The article's focus on how colonial power produces city space, does, however, contribute to a deeper understanding of the urban political-economy in settler-colonies (Dorries et al., 2019), and like other such scholarship, challenges a long-standing hegemony that urbanisation is outside of 'colonial spatial negotiations' (Blatman Thomas and Porter, 2019; Dorries

et al., 2022; Hugill, 2019). The article's tracing of the "continual doing" and persistence of settler colonialism (Estes, 2019) is particularly useful in revealing the extent of work needed to expand and sustain such a project, contributing to an undermining of dominant norms entrenched in settler cities, which see colonisation as a completed endeavour.

Theoretical perspectives on settler colonialism and dispossession

Viewing settler colonial urbanisation through the writings of Yellowknives Dene theorist, Glen Coulthard (2014) and the late Cole Harris (2004), both from the Canadian context, brings important insights to understanding how colonialism persists. Specifically, their analyses examine multiple modes of power, used to expropriate and maintain control of Indigenous land. Coulthard (2014) and Harris (2004) both identify *domination* through physical violence, as a key mechanism of dispossession, especially in historic frontier confrontations between settlers and Indigenous societies. While use of physical force has never abated in settler colonies, scholarship on later periods of colonial rule has emphasised domination exercised through state policy and by administrative means, as seen in the management of oppressive land reserve systems, established to locate Indigenous people outside of urban centres and townships (Estes, 2019; Jackson, 2017). Like physical violence, such systems exerted power *over* Indigenous communities, restricting mobility through negative sanctions or their threat (Goodall, 2008).

Unconcealed domination, however, rarely works alone. Harris's (2004) scholarship, in particular, examines the role of racist discourse as a means of legitimising colonial violence, dispossession, and establishing Indigenous reserves in British Columbia. Racial hierarchies positioned Indigenous land use in the realm of 'savagery', identifying European uses with civilisation and modernity, making a normative case for dispossession, by casting it as progress. Later racist tropes which positioned Indigenous society and land governance as antithetical to the urban (Dorries et al., 2019; McKinnon, 2020; Milner, 2020) have adopted a parallel approach to these earlier narratives. For example, government policy and cultural discourse that promote gentrification and neoliberal land governance, are among these "newer" initiatives which attempt to hoist assimilation and segregation on Indigenous communities (Shaw, 2007; Tomiak, 2017).

Increasingly, settler states have adopted more *pacificatory* approaches to maintaining territorial authority (Coulthard, 2014). The politics of recognition has been at the forefront in such contexts, where governments have sought to placate Indigenous political demands by recognising some rights to land and cultural difference, but without substantive recognition of Indigenous sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014). Problematically, the offers of material reparations, greater procedural rights, or accommodation of cultural difference, are fundamentally shaped by the norms, assumptions, and culture of the dominant party i.e. the settler state (Coulthard, 2014). The "conceit" limits the potential for more radical possibilities of being "on/with land", by accommodating Indigenous claims, only, within the bounds of colonial sovereignty and a capitalist mode of production (Blatman-Thomas and Porter, 2019; Coulthard, 2014; Porter, 2014). In calling out the restrictive character of recognition, Coulthard (2014), (also see Porter (2014) and Porter and Barry (2016)), draws attention to the lack of effective political and ethical reckoning with colonisation, implying that this evasion is a form of *deceit*. A similar implication is seen in Dorries et al.'s (2019: 27–28) claim that "the language of reconciliation and respect for Indigenous rights . . . masks foundational colonial commitments to the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples and land". Narrow recognition may promise respect for, and inclusion of, difference, but it does not recognise "political difference" and the base colonial context in which it operates

(Dorries et al., 2019). Such colonial masking or obfuscation can particularly gain traction in cities, where a long history of materially and conceptually positioning Indigeneity as anomalous with urbanity, lends itself to an undermining of Indigenous land claims.

In differentiating forms of power such as pacificatory (and deceitful) recognition, exercised more contemporarily, from domination through unconcealed violence, typically associated with, but not limited to historic dispossession, Coulthard's work is among those that show colonisation to be ongoing, but never static (Tomiak, 2019). Recent writing at the intersection of urban studies, Indigenous theory, and settler colonial studies has been especially insightful in revealing this *persistent but dynamic* character of colonisation, by turning to colonial histories to understand how they shape present-day city making (Mays, 2022; Milner, 2020; Porter et al., 2019; Tomiak, 2017).

In this vein, Mays (2022), Milner (2020) and Tomiak (2017) analyse the reworking of former discourses of colonial erasure in more recent urban settings, showing how they have slightly different approaches and effects to the past. Tomiak (2017) critiques the settler state's governance of urban Indigenous reserves across Saskatchewan and Manitoba, claiming that "older discursive frames" which justified past removals of urban-based First Nations on grounds of being incompatible with city life, were reworked into newer neoliberal economic agendas (Tomiak, 2017: 940). These "new" agendas sought Indigenous participation in urban reserves, but at the expense of residential use, and only to the extent participation conformed to ambitions of entrepreneurialism and land privatisation.

Writing about Detroit and Tel Aviv respectively, Mays (2022) and Milner (2020) discuss contemporary narratives from elite business figures and settler communities, resonant of historic frontier language, of "empty" land waiting for settler labour to discover and improve it. In Detroit, these "new" discourses, in contrast to historic narratives of bringing civilisation to frontier emptiness, celebrated improvement brought by white re-"settlement" and the reversal of urban decline, while discursively erasing Indigeneity from the city. The case of Tel Aviv demonstrates a different kind of shift in colonial discourse, with *racially marginalised* Mizrahi Jewish residents drawing on historic improvement narratives to claim land in the face of neoliberal urbanisation; narratives typically associated with the nation's founding white settler communities to which they do not belong. Their action, parallel to Detroit's elite, re-enacted, on a discursive register, the past removal and replacement of Palestinian connections with the city.

The analysis below draws on the above theoretical framings to make connections "between past processes" of colonisation and the "persistence of the logics of dispossession" (Mays, 2023: 158), in urban redevelopment in Sydney. Specifically, it examines how distinct modes of power have been mobilised across time in different colonial agendas. Each of its three empirical sections begins with an historic account of a state development programme, tactic, or policy, which has exercised domination, legitimisation, or pacification and deceit, in expanding or entrenching settler control of Indigenous land. First, the article examines how colonial nationalism motivated a concentration of government territorial power in two federal and state-level development schemes, one from a period of post-Second World War nation-building, and the other from the late 1980s, among the efforts to bolster Australia's bicentenary celebrations. The second historic account discusses the use of racialised legitimisations in attempts to remove or exclude urban-based Indigenous communities from Sydney in the 19th and 20th centuries. The third focuses on pacification and deceit inherent in the narrow multiculturalism of the 1970s, formulated as part of a nation-building process, looking to move away from the past of "White Australia", but without engaging with the country's foundational dispossession. Each of the historic discussions is followed with an analysis of a redevelopment practice, that is directly inherited from, or which has reframed

and reproduced one of these former methods of creating space in contemporary urbanisation. Among the more recent practices, the article first analyses authoritarian state development directed at Aboriginal housing in Redfern, inner Sydney, in 2004. Second, it examines racist tropes used to legitimise this domineering government action. Third, it discusses how a depoliticised form of multiculturalism pervaded community consultation, organised for the redevelopment of public housing, in neighbouring Waterloo, between 2015 and 2019, in a way that obfuscated “properly political” questions of land dispossession (Porter, 2014: 390).

Redfern and Waterloo, the sites of these more present-day dispossessions, are places important to urban Aboriginal communities and the Aboriginal movement for self-determination. A brief historic background, set out below, offers political context to help convey their significance, and situate their redevelopment in a wider story of urban colonisation.

Redfern and Waterloo’s (anti) colonial context

Redfern and Waterloo are within a few kilometres of Sydney’s central business district, on Gadigal country. The area is among the earliest sites of British colonisation, which commenced in the late 18th century. Aboriginal resistance met the occupation, but the spread of disease severely impacted people in the Sydney area (Gapps, 2018), as it did elsewhere in the east of the country, dampening *armed* resistance (Clayton-Dixon, 2020). Gadigal who survived, continued/continue to maintain connections with traditional country (Irish, 2017), but as is the case with many Australian cities, Indigenous residents of Redfern and Waterloo hold connections with different parts of Australia, reflecting a history of violence and displacement, but also of resurgence and the (re)establishment of communities in urban centres.

Aboriginal relations with the area now known as Redfern pre-dates invasion. But even in the aftermath, for most of the 20th century, and to date, Redfern has remained an important Aboriginal centre. Employment opportunities in the suburb’s Eveleigh railway yards made it among those inner-city areas which attracted Aboriginal workers in the early 20th century (Eveleigh Stories, n.d.). The community base strengthened in the mid-1960s, with greater relocation to urban centres like Redfern, which accelerated following the official end of the segregationist/assimilationist era of the Aboriginal Welfare Boards, the decline of the rural economy and increasing social liberalisation (Morgan, 2006). Urban areas became popular with young people because of the low rents and the already existing Aboriginal community. Redfern, alongside places like Fitzroy in Melbourne and South Brisbane, emerged as a hub of Aboriginal politics inspired by the ethics of “community control” of the USA-based Black Power movement, whose ethos aligned with long-standing Aboriginal demands for land rights (Foley, 2001). Redfern’s activists established Aboriginal controlled organisations to offer vital community services, and importantly their organising re-energised the movement for self-determination (Foley, 2001).

The housing cooperative, colloquially known as The Block, was set up through a hard-fought struggle to gain title to land opposite Redfern train station in 1973, making it one of the first urban “land rights” claims in Australia, with The Aboriginal Housing Company, owning land under freehold title (Anderson, 1993). Founding member Bob Bellea’s driving principle was that the Aboriginal community should own “land in the middle of the biggest city in the country”, countering efforts which repeatedly sought to remove them from urban areas (Bellea, 2007). This reclamation came before the passing of formal land rights and Native title legislation in the 1980s and 1990s. The ownership of inner-city land was

especially significant, given that such ownership is nearly entirely precluded under the restrictive conditions of these more contemporary laws. While The Block has been dogged by calls for its dismantling, since its formation, it also succeeded in cementing Aboriginal life in Redfern for decades (Shaw, 2007).

Redfern's neighbouring suburb of Waterloo, also a site of post-1960s urban-based Aboriginal resurgence, is home to one of the largest public housing estates in Australia, the Waterloo Estate. Comprising over 2000 dwellings, the development is home to Aboriginal tenants, tenants from culturally diverse backgrounds, including prominent Chinese and Russian communities, and residents of white British and European descent. The housing is a short walk from The Block, with some of Waterloo's tenants being former occupants, relocated following the Aboriginal Housing Company's demolition of their residences. Varying Government figures indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenants make up between 8% and 13% of Waterloo's residents. While the numbers appear small, the estate provides important access to inner-city housing and is within walking distance of Aboriginal community-controlled services. Social housing, as a whole, is an important tenure form for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with 34% of adults renting this way in 2018–19 (AIHW & NIAA, 2021). For stolen generation survivors, that is survivors of Australia's Indigenous child removal policies, the tenure offers limited priority provision, where the private rental market has proven exclusionary.

The estate's Turanga building, on the Waterloo Green, is where the site where Kamilaroy man TJ Hickey was fatally injured in 2004, in the course of a police pursuit; a tragic and pivotal occurrence for the area. The location is the starting point of an annual march which demands justice for his family. Hickey's death inspired community uprising that directed anger at the NSW police, led by young people with connections to The Block and the Waterloo Estate, dubbed the Redfern "riots". Following the mobilisation, NSW's legislators began advocating hostile proposals to redevelop the suburbs and demolish The Block. The agenda at the time was left incomplete, partly because of public backlash. But efforts to transform the locality were resurrected in 2015, with the NSW state government announcing plans to redevelop the Waterloo Estate into a mixed tenure project of 70% private and 30% social housing. State redevelopments of Redfern and Waterloo, and the longer history of land dispossession from which they draw precedent, offer important lessons on the workings and persistence of colonisation, to which I will now turn.

Domination

Histories: State capacities of domination and colonial nationalism

The entrenchment of colonisation has seen state domination in settler societies become increasingly expressed through administrative means, e.g. via state policy and bureaucracy. On this front, high profile government planning, land development and infrastructure building, led by authoritarian state bodies are important mechanisms of maintaining control over Indigenous land. Such endeavours may not explicitly call for the dispossession of Indigenous communities, or see their action in such light. But their ambitions often show disregard for Aboriginal land relations, work to expand "settlement", and materially and culturally bolster colonial nationhood.

The Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme is an important Australian example of colonial domination organised for post-war nation building, to realise long-standing aspirations of re-routing river systems in the south-east of the country for electricity generation and irrigation. The scheme, managed by The Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority

(SMHA), a Federal Government body, established in 1948, became one of Australia's iconic infrastructure programmes (McHugh, 2019). Through the SMHA, the Federal Government monopolised control over the project, which spanned 5124 km². It held no consultation with the Ngarigo, whose traditional territory the project engulfed and flooded, or with other Aboriginal people – Walgalu, Ngunnawal and Bidhawal – who held connections to the area (Schamberger, n.d.). Centralised control through a single commissioner, assisted by two associates, facilitated tight oversight of the works. Rights to occupy and enter private and state-owned property, funding to buy land, and eventually powers of compulsory acquisition, enabling the purchase of 42,000 acres by 1958, strengthened the SMHA's powers.

Colonial nationalism and acute racial anxiety, alongside the scale of the project, motivated this state consolidation of territorial power. In a context of post-war nation-building, defence was a powerful driver, used as pretence for the Federal Government to override states' water-management rights. The desire to expand white land occupation, offered a second important motivator, with the project envisaged to divert water for increasing agricultural production needed to sustain a settler community. Historian Graeme Byrne (2000) notes the backdrop to the project, where war with the Japanese had reinforced Australia's sense of being an "isolated" nation in the Pacific, and the barring of non-white immigration, through the "White Australia" policy, had strong public support. Against this backdrop context, the project aimed to secure a racialised national space, by consolidating "a White, Anglo-Celtic cultural outpost, to populate Australia with British or European migrants, the alternative to which was "race suicide" (Byrne, 2000: 35).

The Snowy was federally controlled, but, typically, major land development functions in Australia fall in the remit of *state* level governments. On this front, the NSW Government has significant track record of using authoritarian planning to facilitate urbanisation and infrastructure programmes (Searle, 2006). The Darling Harbour Authority (DHA), a NSW Government corporation, established in 1984, was a state body that adopted such an authoritarian style. Set up to redevelop 50 hectares of land in Darling Harbour, Warrane, on Gadigal country, a former port to the west of Sydney cove, among the earliest sites of British occupation, the DHA's work contributed to a construction surge that sought to capitalise on Australia's bicentennial celebrations in 1988. A single minister directed the body, making it accountable to him and his direct superior, the NSW Premier. The Authority was exempt from eight planning statutes, including the Environment and Planning Assessment Act 1977, freeing it from the scrutiny of The Department of Environment and Planning, and the Land and Environment Court, which adjudicated on appeals against planning determinations (Public Accounts Committee, 1989). Only the DHA's own Minister could hear challenges to its decisions, effectively bringing The Authority under "total ministerial control" (Kirkby, 1984: 1491).

Like the Snowy scheme, colonial nationalism motivated the absolutist development style, deemed necessary to "fast track" the harbour's transformation (Unsworth, 1984) and fulfil ambitions for it to be the centrepiece of the bicentennial anniversary (Public Accounts Committee, 1989). Former NSW Transport Minister BJ Unsworth saw Darling Harbour as the appropriate "focal point" for the "celebrations" marking the arrival of the first British colonists on 26 January 1788, given the area's history as the "first centre of maritime commerce" (Unsworth, 1984: 1485). Reading the DHA bill in Parliament, Unsworth claimed "This historic part of Sydney with its links going back to the very foundation of modern Australia will be . . . developed for the . . . people of this great state". The nationalism which gave the harbour pride of place, also expressed itself in the events planned for the site. The "First state '88" exhibition commemorated 200 years of colonial history through displays of Australian lifestyle, culture and industry (Kaya, 2018). The British monarch, the

late Queen Elizabeth's opening of the redevelopment, attended by other Royals, formed the pinnacle of the celebrations.

The national festivities provoked anger and cross-state coordination among Aboriginal institutions, who mobilised 40,000 people on the day, to build Sydney's largest rally (Deadly Story, n.d.). The march continued the spirit of previous political organising which refused to celebrate colonisation, as seen in the "Day of Mourning", where on the 150th anniversary of British occupation, Aboriginal activist, William Cooper, called on white Australia to acknowledge that "Australia Day" was nothing to celebrate (Cook and Goodall, 2013).

The Snowy and Darling Harbour projects reflect settler colonialism's creative agenda of building and bolstering a new, and so-called modern polity. But the *explicitly* destructive underside of colonisation, that of Indigenous dispossession, taken as a given in the aspirations to expand and celebrate white national space, can also be a direct motivator of state domination. The Redfern Waterloo Authority (RWA), established in 2004, adopted this more purposeful targeting of Indigenous communities, with calls to demolish Aboriginal housing in Redfern being a key objective.

Reproducing domination: The RWA

The authoritarian approach of the Darling Harbour and Snowy schemes, found its way to the urban scale, through later NSW government bodies tasked with large city redevelopment programmes. The DHA provided a blueprint for the RWA, a development corporation established in 2004 to transform Redfern and Waterloo following the Redfern "riots". The Snowy Authority, likewise, set precedent for the RWA. Its planning model inspired the National Capital Development Commission responsible for Canberra's development in 1957 (Cannon, 1999), a model passed down to two Sydney-based authorities, responsible for coastal land management and development – The Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (Toon, 1986). NSW Minister Frank Sartor, when introducing legislation to establish the RWA, noted that this past "experience and thinking", drawn from the two Sydney-based authorities and the DHA, explicitly influenced the Authority's structure (Sartor, 2004).

Following its predecessors, the RWA adopted a model of centralised control, reporting to a single Minister, responsible for developing and executing a strategic vision for the area in their remit (RWA Act, 2004). Former NSW MP Clover Moore, a long-term Redfern resident and now Mayor of Sydney, criticised the RWA bill, for the "unprecedented power" it handed the Minister, who could "override normal planning controls" (Moore, 2004). This over-riding worked through the declaration of a site within the RWA's territorial remit as "state significant", which enabled a re-scaling of development consent and planning power from local authority to state government (Searle, 2006). The move enabled the RWA to become both proponent and approver of "state significant developments".

The accumulation of planning capacity reflects a colonial appetite for territorial control. In *contrast* to the creative impetus of expanding/celebrating settlement, that motivated the Snowy and Darling Harbour Schemes, the RWA came into being following explicit calls for Aboriginal dispossession, through the demolition of The Block. The aftermath of the Redfern "riots" saw senior political figures like the NSW Liberal Opposition leader, John Brogden, demand that bulldozers "flatten" Aboriginal housing (Birch, 2004: 20); expressing long term government ambitions to dismantle the site. The NSW Labor Government showed tacit agreement, by establishing the RWA under the guise of addressing "social challenges", but retaining its principle function as the "economic development and use of its land" (Sartor, 2004: 12740).

In late 2004, *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a series of articles, discussing alleged government proposals to “tear down” the Waterloo public housing towers and “take control” of Aboriginal housing in Redfern for at least 20 years, in a redevelopment bid to “fix” “social ills” and raise property prices (Jopson and Ryle, 2004; Jopson et al., 2004). The Government dismissed the news articles. But Minister Sartor made clear that he opposed “concentrated” Aboriginal accommodation, publicly refuting the prospect of even a modest residential component of 62 homes, proposed under the Housing Company’s separate Pemulwuy development (Standing Committee on Issues Relating to Redfern and Waterloo, 2004). The Redfern Organisation for Aboriginal Unity, comprising nine Aboriginal organisations, release a statement in December 2004, in response to this situation: “Aboriginal people would regard any forced acquisition as once again the dispossession of our people and occupation of our land. We would fiercely resist this in a unified, determined but peaceful manner” (ABC News Radio, 2004). Sartor, nonetheless, re-asserted his agenda, publicly claiming “We won’t be compulsorily acquiring their [The Aboriginal Housing Company’s] land, no... but there are other ways of controlling development” (Dick, 2005). The “other ways” likely referred to the RWA’s ability to be developer and consent body for certain sites. In 2005, as expected, the NSW Government declared The Block, alongside other land parcels, state significant, facilitating the direct control of the RWA, and threatening the future of Aboriginal housing.

In reproducing colonial domination, the RWA explicitly channelled colonisation’s openly destructive aims of land dispossession, differing from the SMHA and the DHA’s primary focus of expanding and celebrating “settlement”, where dispossession was an unspoken underside. But this dismantling of people’s lived spaces through oppressive land development, required legitimising. To this end, in settler colonies entrenched racism has been repeatedly mobilised, to do the work of making a normative case for dispossession.

Legitimisation

Histories: The racist case for urban exclusion

Racialised tropes of Indigeneity as antithetical to the modernity of urban space have proven themselves to be enduring tools in efforts to exclude and displace Indigenous communities from cities (Edmonds, 2010; Jacobs, 2002). A significant period in Australia’s history, from the mid-19th century to the 1960s, saw states adopt policies of segregation and containment in relation to Aboriginal people via government managed reserves, located away from towns and urban settlements, and later practices of assimilation, to disperse Aboriginal communities into the mainstream white populace (Jackson, 2017). Racial imaginaries of Aboriginal life as “nomadic”, belonging in a “wild landscape”, and non-conforming with civilisation, of which the colonial city is emblematic, justified the racialised segregation of reserves (Pettit in Jackson, 2017). Subsequent state ambitions to assimilate reserves’ residents, particularly those with white heritage, repurposed this same logic in a bid to erase Indigeneity through absorption into urban settler society, as opposed to through segregation (Morgan, 2006).

Non-assimilated urban Aboriginal spaces, which transgressed the racial-spatial binaries of the civilised white centre and the Aboriginal reserve, faced denigration as places that had lost connection with a “pure” and “tribal” way of life (Jackson, 2017). This provided grounds for the dismantling of informal “fringe camps”, built on the edges of towns and cities like Sydney. In the late 19th century, George Thornton, Protector of the “Aborigines” in NSW (a role later incorporated into overseeing Aboriginal reserves), drew on racist narratives in efforts to remove Sydney’s fringe camps. In a report for the NSW

Legislative Assembly in 1883, Thornton cited police testimonies which criticised a camp in Circular Quay, in Sydney's harbour, accusing residents of being "drunk, fighting and swearing" (The Protector of the Aborigines, 1883: 5); a state of affairs put down to the way they generated their income (p. 4). Thornton proposed "... to get all the "aborigines" away from Sydney and suburbs and back into their own districts" (p.3), reflecting discomfort with the presence of urban-based Aboriginal people (Nugent, 2003).

Allegations of moral disorder, as expressed in Thornton's report have been wielded well into the 20th and 21st centuries. The establishment of The Block in Redfern, in 1973, as an Aboriginal governed space, was contested by The South Sydney Residents Protection Movement (SSRPM), a group led by white community members. Residents petitioning local and federal politicians condemned "the establishment of the ghetto", on moral and sanitary grounds, citing concerns for "life, property and land values" (Anderson, 1993: 19). The SSRPM, in a letter to the local *South Sydney Advertiser*, redeployed previous assimilationist logics, stating "[It] does not want anyone race or creed confined to one small area ... So long as persons of different races are distributed evenly – with no large bodies of any one race – they will assimilate with the majority" (Anderson, 1993: 19). The message reached senior federal ministers through the area's local member who claimed Aboriginal housing spelled, "defeat [for] the ultimate goal of true assimilation between "Aboriginals" and White people" (Anderson, 1993: 19).

On the face of it, Thornton's calls for Indigenous removal, and the SSRPM's demands for even distribution, appear to be different positions, expressing shifts in national policy from segregation to assimilation. But both are premised on a problematising of Aboriginality. The unifying racial hierarchy at the centre of such discourse, only serves to legitimise Indigenous dispossession through exclusion or absorption into colonial society, whilst maintaining the settler city's white spatial order.

Redeploying racist tropes

Racist tropes of Aboriginal dysfunction, such as those advocated in enforced segregation and assimilation, remain common in settler colonial urbanisation. In 2004, NSW political leaders drew on such rationales in their calls to demolish The Block. Liberal opposition leader, John Brogden, held the housing responsible for the Redfern "riots", claiming its social environment was detrimental to Aboriginal young people (ABC News, 2004):

I'd bring the bulldozers in because I think that allowing this to happen every couple of years which is what's going to happen, will never fix the problem ... What sort of life are we offering a young Aboriginal kid who at the age of 12 or 14 knows nothing other than grog and violence and unemployment.

Minister Sartor expressed parallel concerns regarding "concentrated" housing on The Block (Dick, 2005):

Everything's negotiable except for concentration of high-dependency housing there. ... It seems to me that the focus of the Block ought to be other than residential ... the focus ought to be on other things that bring people there, not necessarily highly-dependent people ...

This push for de-concentration relied on rationales similar to older discourses which advocated assimilation or segregation (Tomiak, 2017). The negative characterisation of urban Aboriginal housing positioned such space as inherently generative of social harms, and its

residents in need of dispersal, in order to attain “a presence for Aboriginal people in a sustainable way in the broader community of Redfern. When you can integrate them better . . .” Sartor asserted (Salusinszky, 2006).

Unlike previous racist discourse attached to assimilation and segregation agendas, in 21st-century Redfern, such tropes needed explaining away. Rejecting allegations of discrimination, Sartor claimed

I don't care if it's white or black, it's not a racial issue . . . When you've got people of that [socioeconomic] profile, no matter what their ethnic background, you can't afford to create another mire. You've got to give it reasonable probability of success. (Dick, 2005)

This defence attempts to reframe racist rhetoric through a socio-economic lens, claiming that any impoverished community is unviable. The reasoning, however, does not consider that such a stance disproportionately impacts Aboriginal people, whose incomes are lower than those of non-Aboriginal households, leading to more adults drawing on government pensions and allowances to support themselves (AIHW, 2019). It takes no account of the multiple phases of land dispossession, coupled with physical and economic violence which have targeted Indigenous communities (Goodall, 2008), instead labelling them “high dependency”, and “problems” in need of fixing with “de-concentration”.

Local resistance and criticism eventually led to the RWA's dissolution in 2011. While The Housing Company's redevelopment of The Block was permitted, later iterations of the project developed between 2014 and 2019, have been subject to fierce criticism from local Aboriginal activists, such as Wiradjuri organiser Jenny Munro, a founding member of The Aboriginal Housing Company, on the basis that they make insufficient provision for affordable housing for Aboriginal people.

Despite the RWA's dismantling, state efforts to transform Redfern and Waterloo have found a new lease of life in proposals to redevelop the Waterloo Estate, announced in late 2015. The project has seen the NSW Government adopt a more conciliatory approach to residents, through the offer of participatory rights in a culturally inclusive consultation. But the gesture, nonetheless, masked “foundational colonial commitments” (Dorries et al., 2019: 27–28) to maintaining Aboriginal dispossession. The promises of including and recognising the needs of diverse stakeholders have failed to address fundamental questions of colonisation, and have their roots in a narrow multiculturalism adopted in Australia in the 1970s, which I discuss below.

Pacification and deceit

Histories: Evading the political in Australian multiculturalism

Pacification and deceit frequently work together in colonial contexts through placatory offerings like material reparations, participatory rights or the recognition of cultural differences, which are celebrated or deemed admirable, but which do not speak to, and even obfuscate “properly political” questions of colonisation and land rights (Coulthard, 2014; Porter, 2014). Depoliticised multiculturalism offers an avenue for such forms of power.

The development of multicultural policy in Australia dates back to 1973, with the decade marking the end of the “White Australia” policy, and Australian multiculturalism presenting itself as a nation-building process to counter a racist past of bans on non-white immigration, and policies of assimilation and segregation directed at Aboriginal communities (Ang and Stratton, 2001; Moran, 2011). Multicultural policy aimed to manage diversity and

secure social cohesion through “the recognition of culture, equal opportunity and adequate access to services” (Schultz, 2015: 61).

Envisioned as a project where “all ethnic groups interact freely and share a common commitment to social and national ideals” (Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, 1982: 2), multiculturalism did not contemplate the ethics and politics of including people in a nation founded on colonisation. An influential paper of the time, *Multiculturalism for all Australians: Our Developing Nationhood*, claimed, “All persons living in Australia are “ethnic” whether they are “Aboriginals”, or trace their roots to the British Isles, continental Europe, Asia, Africa, the Pacific nations or the Americas” (Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, 1982: 1). Government efforts to be inclusive of citizens across their cultural differences, by allocating them the same political status, effectively sustained a colonial state of affairs; one that attempts to eliminate “Indigenous sovereignties” by assimilating Aboriginal people into “a common fabric of diversity” (Schultz, 2015: 62).

A lack of engagement with the contradiction of accommodating cultural diversity that is silent on colonisation, on the one hand, and Aboriginal calls for land rights and autonomy, on the other, is surprising, given multiculturalism’s introduction at a time when federal policy towards Aboriginal people shifted from one of assimilation to one of self-determination, in response to the ascendancy of the land rights movement (Schultz, 2015). Aboriginal social movements had even refused the position of another “ethnic” minority to be included in the nation state. In 1972, only a year before the Federal Government began describing Australia as “multicultural”, Aboriginal activists established the Tent Embassy occupation outside Federal parliament, opposing a similar politics of “inclusion”, promoted by the then Liberal-Country Government who had rejected calls for land rights, promising, instead, assistance to maintain “culture and traditions” “within the diverse culture of Australian society” (Robinson, 2014: 4). In defiance of the “diluted assimilationism” which sought to quash the “separateness” of Aboriginal people and make them part of mainstream Australian society” (Robinson, 2014: 25), the Tent Embassy demanded land rights and self-determination (Foley, 2014).

Inheriting colonial evasion: Community engagement on the Waterloo Estate

Federal multiculturalism’s lack of engagement with colonisation has filtered down to the state-level. Reflecting federal policy, since 1983, NSW Government agencies have developed plans showing how they will apply multicultural principles to meet the needs of a diverse society, with a basis in NSW’s *Multicultural Act 2000*. The principles include that all people should be able to participate in all aspects of public life, and use services and programmes delivered by government. Consistent with a stance that affords a limited inclusion of difference that does not challenge foundational dispossession, The Act calls on “all individuals in NSW, irrespective of their linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds” to “demonstrate a unified commitment to Australia, its interests and future”.

Family and Community Services (FACS), the former NSW Government department, responsible for managing public housing until 2019, and its then sub-agency Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC), NSW’s public housing landholders, were guided by a framework of cultural diversity in implementing their programmes and policies, aligned with NSW’s *Multicultural Act*. On all its major redevelopments, such as that of the Waterloo public housing estate, LAHC aimed to engage with “culturally diverse residents” to ensure they were “well supported and respected” (FACS, 2018: 86).

Waterloo's tenants received a letter from former Minister for FACS, Brad Hazzard, in December 2015, informing them of Government plans to transform their estate into a mixed tenured development of 70% private and 30% social housing, through land privatisation, potential relocation, demolition, and increases in density. In response to residents' outrage and anxiety, Minister Hazzard organised a community meeting in early 2016, to reassure Waterloo's tenants that they would be "treated sensitively and consulted at every step" (Clearing House, 2016).

Over seven years of community engagement has since transpired, and is still ongoing in different forms. Despite the government's public engagement consultant, Kathy Jones Associates (KJA), advocating "active and meaningful" participation (KJA, 2018: 24), the consultation functioned as a limited pacificatory gesture. Critical decisions, such as the decision to alienate public land, and establish a mix of tenures, had already been made by government, and were ring fenced as "non-negotiable" to tenants.

The engagement positioned Aboriginal people, Waterloo's culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and other resident groups, as stakeholders to be consulted during redevelopment. As a government consultant explained at a public meeting about the project, "[we] want to hear a clear voice from each cohort – the social housing residents, the private residents, the broader community, elderly, Chinese, the Russians, 'the Aboriginal', the youth" (Field Notes, 6 September 2018). In line with state multiculturalism, LAHC worked to broaden participation of tenants from culturally diverse backgrounds, by resourcing community-based support roles. It funded two bilingual educators to work with Russian and Chinese tenants (KJA, 2018). Aboriginal engagement, while not directly falling under the rubric of multiculturalism, was directed by a similar approach of expanding and facilitating participation, with LAHC making funds available for an Aboriginal engagement stream and an Aboriginal Liaison Officer post, in response to Indigenous advocacy.

The separate, but consistent, engagement sessions for each resident group covered a range of themes about Waterloo's future (e.g. culture and community life and housing and neighbourhood design), and tested redevelopment options with different communities, to make space for diverse needs (Elton, 2019; KJA, 2018). Facilitators noted the value Russian speaking tenants placed on on-site aged care, and the need for "easy access to multicultural support services" expressed amongst Chinese residents (Elton, 2019: 30). The Aboriginal engagement stream, implemented by Balarinji, a leading Aboriginal owned strategy and design agency, created space for Aboriginal views (Balarinji, 2017). The programme identified concerns especially important to Aboriginal tenants, such as the need for dedicated housing, flexible living arrangements and keeping Waterloo affordable for Aboriginal communities. Government reports (KJA, 2018), which formed the supporting material to inform master-planning and statutory decision-making, documented these demands.

The efforts to "make space for the needs of each stakeholder group" and ensure "that engagements are culturally appropriate" (KJA, 2018: 24), were important and perhaps well-intended. But the positive narrative about the extensiveness of consultation, detracted from the fact that the process relinquished no decision-making rights to tenants and engendered no legal obligation, on the part of the state, to meet the demands expressed in consultation.

The accommodation of cultural difference in a way that lacked substantive engagement with the "properly political" question of colonisation (Porter, 2014), served to obfuscate deeper state commitments to maintaining land dispossession (Dorries et al., 2019). Recognition of difference, offered Aboriginal people a limited form of inclusion, parallel to that of other "minority" stakeholders (Byrd, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Aboriginal residents' needs alongside those of other communities, were positioned in a wide array of

Waterloo's diversity; a framing that implied a political homogeneity across these multiple differences, masking "the foundational question of land theft" (Khan, 2019: 369), that has been central to Indigenous experiences and demands for justice in settler colonies. *Let's Talk Waterloo*, the public report documenting findings from the Visioning phase of consultation, made no mention of the *political* significance of Waterloo, and neighbouring Redfern, as places critical to the Aboriginal movement for self-determination. While the report noted the cultural importance of the area, the demands made for dedicated Aboriginal housing, and tenant concerns about the loss of community through gentrification (KJA, 2018), no record exists of government efforts to situate this inner-city housing need, and fears of displacement, against a backdrop of centuries of land dispossession, and assimilation and segregationist policies directed at erasing Aboriginality from cities. The lack of reflection, meant that the consultation held no space for state ethical and political reckoning with questions that might challenge its process of redevelopment, such as how decision-making *should* proceed in urban contexts where colonisation is ongoing, or what materially just outcomes, in relation to housing and land ownership, look like in such places.

Action initiated and supported by Aboriginal people with connections to Redfern and Waterloo stand in contrast to this silence, offering the political contextualisation missing from state processes. In 2016, the Waterloo Tent Embassy established a months' long occupation of the Waterloo Green to protest the redevelopment. While not solely an Aboriginal-led protest, The Waterloo Embassy was set up with leadership and support from Aboriginal activists and residents with long-term connections to the area, such as Jenny Munro, involved in political organising since the 1970s. As with other Tent Embassy protests, the occupation embodied an anti-colonial stance, taking inspiration from the first Aboriginal Embassy established outside Federal Parliament in Canberra, in 1972, to demand land rights. The name "Aboriginal Embassy" captures a collective sentiment that Aboriginal people have been "treated like aliens in their own land" (Foley, 1991, in Robinson, 2014). This situating of the redevelopment in a wider project of colonisation was also expressed in *Survival Guide*, a podcast run by Joel Spring and Lorna Munro, young Wiradjuri and Wiradjuri/Gomerioi people, who grew up in Redfern and Waterloo, working across education, architecture, poetry, art, and organising. The podcast combined historic and political commentary with personal narrative to analyse gentrification in Redfern and Waterloo as a continuation of a longer history of land dispossession. In the programme Spring re-politicised housing redevelopments in this area, stressing that "to the Indigenous community the redevelopment of Redfern and Waterloo represents much more than the loss of physical housing stock", given that these sites are "the crucible of Indigenous self-determination in Sydney" (Survival Guide, 2018).

Campaigning from *outside* of state channels, led by groups such as the Redfern Waterloo Aboriginal Affordable Housing Campaign, comprising Aboriginal community controlled organisations and allies, have also emphasised the importance of affordable Aboriginal housing in places of resurgence, like Redfern and Waterloo (Redfern Waterloo Affordable Aboriginal Housing Campaign, 2020). The Housing Campaign's organising has seen some success with the new Labor Government, elected in NSW in 2023, promising increased levels of social and affordable housing for Aboriginal tenants on the south of the estate. The state, however, still maintains a commitment to redeveloping Waterloo, despite ongoing opposition from a cross-section of Sydney-based residents, calling for an end to the project and the wider demolition of public housing in the state (Action for Public Housing, n.d.).

These efforts to re-politicise urban housing redevelopment, highlight the need for decision-making that is informed by colonial realities, where participation engages with

Indigenous “political difference” (Dorries et al., 2019), and the history and present of dispossession that underpins settler cities.

Conclusion

Redevelopments in Redfern and Waterloo offer important lessons on how colonial control of Indigenous land persists, through a tendency to self-perpetuate. These areas have witnessed a contemporary reworking of historic forms of state domination, racist legitimisations used to marginalise urban Indigenous communities, and pacification and deceit that promise multicultural inclusion, whilst evading political questions of land dispossession. The article’s attention to the “continual”, but shifting, practices of colonisation (Estes, 2019), through different modes of power, reveals the extent of work needed to (re)produce dispossession, contributing to scholarship that questions the taken-for-grantedness of colonisation as a completed project; a hegemony especially pervasive in “settler cities”.

But seeing colonisation as not a done deal, but as constantly being done, raises questions of what spaces can be created to unsettle colonial power, and what action is useful to stem the constant remaking of dispossession precedent.

Indigenous efforts of making city space, offer multiple examples where the (re)asserting of Indigenous principles, governance and authority in relation to land and place has undermined the status quo (see special issue Blatman and Mays, 2023; Coulthard, 2014; Dorries, 2022; Mays, 2022; Mckinnon, 2020; Porter and Barry, 2016; Rey and Harrison, 2018). Kiddle et al.’s (2023) analysis of their own project, *Imagining Decolonised Cities (IDC)*, in Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand, discusses Indigenous planning that aimed to produce a place which was equitable and just for all families, whilst reflecting Maori values and identity. The work led by Maori educators, invited both Maori and settlers to propose ideas of a decolonised city. Participants were informed about colonial histories and community needs, and asked to respond to specific Maori principles about the kinds of relationships that constitute a place, in their proposals. This opening up of space for multiple ideas is counter to the colonial domination, discussed in this article that works through a concentration of state power in delivering large land development. In contrast to the evasion of questions of colonisation/decolonisation, frequently seen in city-based participatory processes, the IDC project centred those very subjects in its community outreach.

Another important example, from the Australian context, of Indigenous refusal of colonial decision-making, is the establishment of Redfern’s Aboriginal community controlled organisations, which offer legal and medical services, and affordable housing for Aboriginal people, as mentioned in this article. Gumbainggir Historian, Gary Foley (2001) stressed that these services were shaped by an understanding of colonisation, the problems it created, and governed by an ethic of self-determination, where Indigenous people collectively controlled decision-making, refusing the domination they had previously faced in the name of protection and welfare. The services’ urban location, was especially significant, challenging the racist separation of Indigenous space from city space.

These efforts to undermine settler colonialism undoubtedly face their own internal challenges, but they also face the difficulty of operating in a colonial order which is continually remaking itself. In such a context, it is necessary to consider action that seeks to undermine colonisation across a wider time horizon. In relation to cities, culturally diverse geographies with long histories of Indigenous exclusion, it is worth asking what work is needed to halt the persistent racist tropes directed at urban Indigeneity, and rework the narrow participatory processes that call for greater Indigenous inclusion in the “settler city’s” multiple

diversities, as opposed to seeing the “settler city” itself, as the problem (Dorries et al., 2019; Porter and Barry, 2016).

An important role for non-Indigenous people in this regard, alongside dedicating resources to Indigenous organising, is to help change the terms of debate around colonisation and Indigenous political demands, by building a wider understanding of the basic principles at stake (Behrendt, 2003). Colonisation persists, partly because of settler society’s refusal to morally and politically reckon with its past and present (Birch, 2020). Any shift in public education/reflection on the ramifications of colonisation needs to include discussion of how colonial histories continue to shape, and are institutionalised into city-building processes (Behrendt, 2003; Mays, 2022). It follows that there is a need to engage with different urban Indigenous material and political aspirations (Behrendt, 2003), and to create an understanding of how multicultural inclusion is distinct from, and might co-exist with Indigenous demands that reject the dispossession on which settler cities are founded. Such re-orientation is important groundwork for expanded conversation and action on alternative ways of decision-making, for developing different meanings of justice and different social relationships, and relationships with land, in currently colonised places.

Building this public understanding is not only about empirical facts. There is the practical question of how to actually prompt ethical and political reflection, and how to even bring people to such discussions (Kiddle, 2023). I do not have prescriptive solutions here. Change of this kind is difficult and bespoke. While it is not a substitute for legal and institutional restructuring, it is necessary to create a viable break from the status quo, and to enable a substantive acknowledgment of Indigenous political demands.

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Note

1. “Suburb in Australia is a geographic reference, defining an area in a city or town with a specific postcode. It does not necessarily refer to places on the periphery of urban areas. Both Redfern and Waterloo are located in inner-city Sydney.

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