



## Dwelling in Discomfort

*On the conditions of listening in settler colonial Australia*

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### *Abstract*

While critical scholarship on listening as a political practice has flourished in recent years, there remains much work to do on theorising listening as a situated practice in specific contexts, including as a practice that might unsettle settler-colonial relations. In this paper, we extend Bickford's (1996) work on political listening and our own theorisation of situated listening to offer provisional thoughts on the generative potential of refusal, discomfort, attunement and yielding – prompted by the 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and the broader conditions of listening and being heard in settler colonial Australia. We locate listening within a decolonial framework to extend and unsettle conventional liberal democratic and deliberative modes of listening. First, we argue it is vital to listen to First Nations histories and practices of refusal. Next, we offer attunement to register our differently situated listening positions within colonial networks of privilege and power. Third, we explore the transformative potential of yielding to First Nations' authority to set the terms, frames and limits of being heard – within, against, and beyond liberal democratic frameworks. Finally, we offer dwelling in discomfort as a location from which to build more just futures, with the sovereignty of First Nations people placed at its heart.

**Keywords:** political listening, decolonisation, Uluru Statement from the Heart, First Nations refusal, attunement, yielding, dwelling in discomfort.

### *Introduction*

While critical scholarship on listening as a political practice has flourished in recent years (Bassel, 2017; Beausoleil, 2017; Dreher, 2009; Thill, 2009, 2018; Scudder, 2016), there remains much work to do on theorising political listening as a situated practice in specific contexts, including listening as a practice that might unsettle settler colonial relations. This article takes as its starting point the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart (henceforth, the Uluru Statement)—and the political climate of state refusal in which it emerged—as a prompt and challenge for thinking about broader conditions of listening and being heard in settler colonial Australia, within and beyond the frame of the state. In her pathbreaking work, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, Susan Bickford (1996) identifies a range of practices necessary for ‘political listening’, including openness, receptivity, attention, engagement, duration, continuation and recognition. Extending Bickford’s conception of political listening to the settler colonial context, and building on our own theorisation of situated or located listening (Dreher and de Souza, 2018), this article theorises the generative possibilities of refusal, attunement, yielding, and dwelling in discomfort as listening-oriented concepts that might prompt a transformation in unjust social and political relations.

As we have argued elsewhere (Dreher and de Souza, 2018), listening is not only a technical process, but a politics that is located in time and space and specific contexts shaped by colonial histories – contexts in which we are differently and very unevenly located. We take Susan Bickford’s work as a starting point, recognizing the important engagements with feminist and feminist of colour work that underpin her theory of political listening. We also note that while Bickford

writes from a settler colonial context, the U.S., she does not directly address this within the work, nor does the work directly engage with decolonial and Indigenous struggles or how we might develop protocols for listening in these contexts. Thus, our paper extends Bickford's vital work by prioritizing decolonial and First Nations scholarship and knowledges, and by thinking from the settler colonial context of Australia in which the primacy of First Nations' sovereignty over, and authority for those lands, must be the foundation for transforming colonial relations towards more just futures.

In this article, our interest lies in the vital resources the Uluru Statement provides for thinking more broadly through a decolonising and situated politics of listening that centres First Nations sovereignty, justice and truth-telling to extend and unsettle liberal democratic frames. We are therefore less interested in equality of voice and public deliberation as a route to justice than in unsettling and dissolving entrenched hierarchies of speaking and listening – transforming colonial relations by developing a 'dispositional ethics of encounter' that is both responsive and responsible (Beausoleil, 2017). We gesture towards a politics of listening that decentres and unsettles in a transformative politics which moves beyond careful deliberative listening, to also consider processes of redistributing attention and value – prioritising or privileging First Nations voices and unsettling settler colonial authority. We pay attention to how a commitment to political listening might register uncomfortable truths about historic, structural and ongoing settler colonial violence – engaging with the broader histories of First Nations struggles for treaty, land rights, self-governance and truth-telling beyond the horizon of liberal-democratic and rights-based claims to voice, including those that unsettle 'the nation'.

We begin with a brief overview of the *Uluru Statement* and its central invitation to listen to First Nations seeking to be heard. Its single constitutional reform—a constitutionally protected First Nations Voice to Parliament—has been theorised as a mechanism that enshrines a 'norm of listening' within an amended Australian Constitution (Davis, 2018b) and a potential path to institutionalise political listening (Appleby and Synot, 2020). In this context, the Uluru Statement is at once constitutionally conservative and, potentially, transformative, refusing minimal or symbolic recognition in favour of meaningful structural reform.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, it also extends the horizon of attention beyond the state to the broader conditions of

Indigenous-settler relations, whose voices are heard, and who sets the terms.

We then explore multiple strategies of refusal, including generative strategies of Indigenous refusal of statist recognition. Where at its upper limit, Indigenous refusal denies the authority of the settler colonial state and sees political recognition as a technique of settler colonial governance (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014), we explore the nuanced strategies of partial and strategic refusal outlined in the Uluru Statement that does important work to alter the ‘terms of recognition’ (Appadurai, 2004) without refusing the state entirely. The next sections build on our interest in attunement as a mode of relational adjustment and the related notion of yielding as relinquishing power and authority—practices which together open up ethical possibilities for settling in to discomfort and difference. Such orientations might begin to embrace the deeply intertwined and enmeshed ways we are responsive to, and responsible for, other human and more-than-human beings, including land. We argue attunement and yielding hold the potential to re-orient attention beyond a liberal frame of individual guilt to gesture towards a relational notion of reciprocity and responsibility based in coexistence and shared history, fostering conditions for situated listening where truth-telling in relation to specific First Nations geographies might take place. Finally, we develop the notion of dwelling in discomfort to offer a way of sitting with unsettling truths and histories that does not seek an exit from them, contributing to a politics of ‘hearing well’ (Stauffer, 2015) that attends to both unsettling truths and truths that unsettle. The sustained engagement of dwelling in discomfort describes the necessary, difficult and durational work of sticking with what is uncomfortable and unsettling as Indigenous-settler relations are renegotiated—with justice as the shared goal, even when the form and shape of justice is not yet known.

### *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.

—*The Uluru Statement from the Heart*<sup>2</sup>

In May 2017 at Mutitjulu, at the foot of Uluru in the red desert of Central Australia, on the ancestral lands of the Anangu people, the Uluru Statement from the Heart (the Uluru Statement) was directly addressed and delivered to ‘the Australian people’.<sup>3</sup> The Uluru Statement foregrounds an alternative vision of political and

settler-colonial relations, given in a spirit of generosity and place of wisdom and locatedness (from the Heart). It seems significant, then, that while certainly connecting to the momentum and legacy of petitioning governments and colonial rulers,<sup>4</sup> it departs from them in its chosen mode of address: it is *not* a petition to government; rather it is offered as an invitation to ‘the Australian people’ to participate in building a different future. The invitation is a gesture of collective leadership within a climate of state retreat over recognition precisely because it calls on non-Indigenous settlers to *yield* to the sovereign authority, knowledge and wisdom of First Nations peoples in setting the terms and frames of future relations.

Where sovereignty was never ceded and treaties were never negotiated, a persistent refusal to listen to First Nations forms the foundation of the settler colonial Australian state and haunts contemporary political relations. The Uluru Statement centres a political aspiration to be heard, set against this long history of settler colonial refusals to listen. As Wamba Wamba lawyer and legal researcher Eddie Synot (2018, n.p.) argues:

[...] our ability to speak, and of non-Indigenous people to hear us – *to actually hear us* – has long been at the centre of problems in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. (our italics)

The Uluru Statement, a culmination of the First Nations National Constitutional Convention 23-26 May 2017, followed an extensive six-month deliberative democratic process which saw twelve First Nations Regional Dialogues (the Dialogues henceforth). The nation-wide Dialogues that led up to Uluru were a structured deliberative decision-making process designed with and for First Peoples and led by local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander groups in each region. This was the ‘first time a constitutional convention has been convened with and for First Peoples’ (Referendum Council, 2017b, p.iv). Simultaneously addressing the historical exclusion of First Peoples’ voices in the drafting of Australia’s constitution in 1901, and the continued problems of minimal or non-existent ‘consultation’ with First Peoples by successive governments, the Dialogues have been described as an innovation in deliberative decision-making and direct democracy (Davis, 2017, p.127). The Uluru Statement summarised the consensus position arrived at by the over 600,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates across the continent who participated in the Dialogues and was endorsed by the overwhelming majority at the Uluru gathering.

Central to the Uluru Statement is a single constitutional reform—a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament (Voice). Davis (2018, p. 41) argues the Voice provides a way to ‘imbue the decision-making of the government and bureaucracy with the *cultural authority* and *cultural legitimacy* of the foundations of Indigenous culture’ (our italics). Indigenous culture and knowledge would provide the moral *and* political foundation on which future decision-making and power-sharing arrangements are negotiated with regards to First Peoples. For Davis (2018, p. 43), the Voice ‘is a structural reform that *compels the state to listen* to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in policy- and decision-making’ (our italics). The Uluru Statement also calls for the establishment of a ‘Makarrata Commission’ to supervise plural processes of agreement-making (Treaty) and truth-telling (Truth), which we discuss further on. The call for truth-telling is a refusal to smooth over historic and ongoing oppression, powerlessness and cultural dislocation; to confront the over-incarceration of First Nations people (including youth) and disproportionately high rate of Indigenous child removals. In spotlighting these ongoing harms—what the Uluru Statement describes as ‘the structural nature of our problem’—responsibility for change to the settler colonial status quo is redistributed.

At the same time, the process of deliberation was a carefully circumscribed one that prioritised Indigenous agency and a locally-driven process; it addressed the consultation fatigue experienced by many First Nations communities and the history of minimal listening despite continuous ‘consultation’ by governments and bureaucrats (see Thill, 2009). Crucially, non-Indigenous Australians were *not* invited to be part of the deliberative process leading up to Uluru. Whether and how First Peoples are recognised in the Australian constitution is not for non-Indigenous people, or the settler-colonial state, to determine. Therefore, only *after* consensus had been reached through the Dialogues and subsequently endorsed at Uluru were we invited to listen in. We see this as significant precisely because non-Indigenous Australians were not being asked to ‘deliberate’ in the sense of carefully weighing up alternatives. Indeed, different modes of listening are called for, beyond those of democratic deliberation. While listening is crucial to deliberative decision-making processes where differing parties come to a place of consensus or accord, in the case of the Uluru Statement, it becomes necessary to pose the question: what kinds of non-Indigenous listening come *after* First Nations

deliberation to ensure more just possibilities for future shared action? If deliberation is a 'paying-attention-to' (Bickford, 1996, p. 30), then how do non-Indigenous people listen *after* First Nations' deliberation?

We propose the norms of non-Indigenous listening suggested by the Uluru Statement are best understood, not so much through the norms of liberal democratic dialogue and deliberation, but rather in shifting the terms and grounds of speaking and listening. This broader impact—beyond constitutional reform—also offers a listening route to attend to the nuance and diversity of standpoints that First Nations across the continent have expressed, post-Uluru. Responding to these voices, within and beyond the Uluru Statement, we offer refusal, attunement, yielding and dwelling in discomfort as concepts and practices that complicate, but also deepen, possibilities for living together in ways that transform colonial relations. We argue these practices have much to contribute to theories and practices of political listening within and beyond current democratic political arrangements, particularly in settler-colonial states.

### *Listening and the politics of refusal*

While all twelve Regional Dialogues asserted the fact that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples never ceded their sovereignty (Referendum Council, 2017), there remain contested positions among First Nations to both the process behind, and the proposals within, the Uluru Statement (Behrendt, 2019; Blanco, 2017; Davis, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; Synot, 2018; Murphy, Graham, and Brigg, 2017; Wahlquist, 2017; Watson, 2019). Indigenous Australians have long campaigned for constitutional recognition in close connection with other political aspirations, including assertions of sovereignty and claims for treaties and land rights (Davis, 2016, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; Synot, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). In the three years since the Uluru Statement was released, First Nations discussions on the promise and limits of 'voice' have extended to the limits of democracy itself, and the homogenising (and colonial) imperative of a single Aboriginal voice (ABC Radio National, 2019a). Yet these tensions remind us what is at stake in ongoing struggles for justice, sovereignty and land. Exercising political voice and influence *within* the state-centric political systems can be understood as 'part of a broader strategy for advancing [I]ndigenous self-determination by targeting a variety of parallel and complementary access points to political power' (Murphy, 2008, p.

186). Attending to these multiple, sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting, histories and practices of First Nations sovereignty and refusal within and beyond state recognition is crucial to foster conditions of listening that can hold diversity, discomfort and ambivalence.

*Indigenous refusal as generative practice*

The Uluru Statement provides a framework that refuses minimal or symbolic constitutional recognition while also refusing the logic of mastery that underpins colonial power. We understand this as a selective and partial 'turning away' (Coulthard, 2014, p. 45): the Uluru Statement does not reject the state entirely but instead, as Turner (2006) has argued for, engages with the state's legal and political discourses in order to advance Indigenous claims to be heard. We hear in the refusal of *the terms* of recognition and the *self-determining* imperative behind the Uluru Statement some resonance with anticolonial and Indigenous resurgence strategies of refusal as *generative* practices aimed at transforming the settler-colonial status quo (Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2007, 2014, 2017). For instance, in addressing the people rather than the state, the Uluru Statement reorients attention to First Nations-settler interdependence in building a shared and more just future.

Writer and scholar Tony Birch (2001) has written that the legitimacy of First Nations sovereignty lies neither within the legal system nor within state recognition. He has drawn attention to 'overtly self-determining strategies', such as younger Indigenous people prioritising climate justice and 'genuine recognition of Indigenous sovereignty in the form of Land Rights' (Birch, 2018, p. 6), or Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) pursuing direct action and refusing recognition as 'the true principle of self-determination' (p. 8). Birch also insists moral authority and First Nations sovereignty can be asserted in other ways, for instance by 'speaking out for, and protecting the rights of others, who live in, or visit our land', including non-citizens such as asylum seekers (pp. 20-21).<sup>5</sup> Birch reminds us practices of sovereignty that circumvent or refuse the state *are not diminished* by other forms of engagement with the state. In other words, it is not a zero-sum game.

Birch (2018) has also explored the value and limits of Indigenous practices of refusal in the context of climate justice, ecological interdependence, and caring for



Country. He cites the work of Indigenous Canadian scholar Dwayne Donald who argues that refusal itself is embedded within the history and logic of colonialism and that 'decolonisation can only occur when we face each other across these historic divides' (2011, cited in Birch 2018). In working towards climate justice, where transnational cooperation must be brokered, Birch (2018, p.2) poses the vital question: 'can we [First Nations and Indigenous people across the globe] afford to refuse acts of engagement with 'outsiders' that may benefit country?' In other words, turning away from the state can be—at different times—both necessary and insufficient in struggles for justice.

### *State refusal as deliberate not-listening*

Five months after the Uluru Statement was issued, the federal coalition government announced it would not support a key recommendation of the national Referendum Council enshrined in the Uluru Statement, namely the establishment of a First Nations Voice to parliament. For many supporters of the Uluru Statement, the government's dismissal of the Voice also made evident the importance of the claim (Mayor, 2018). For Cobble Cobble woman and Constitutional Law professor Megan Davis (2017, p. 120), rejection of the Uluru Statement by the Commonwealth continues this 'ingrained failure to hear' and 'the failure to listen and hear what Aboriginal people desire as the first peoples'. It is deeply ironic that the proposals were rejected on the anniversary of the handback of Uluru to the Anangu people in a move which refused a process that the government had itself initiated (Griffiths, 2017). We hear in the government's dismissal a deployment of state refusal that works to consolidate, rather than renegotiate power-sharing arrangements with regard to decisions affecting First Nations lives and lands (Daley, 2017; Griffiths, 2017; Hobbs, 2017; Synot, 2018). The mischaracterization of the Voice as a 'third chamber of parliament' by coalition politicians cast it as a threat to democratic values and ignored the 'constitutional vulnerability' (Morris, 2017) of First Nations people under current constitutional and legislative arrangements. It signalled a retreat from the spirit of good will, generosity and reciprocity with which the Uluru Statement was offered. It also weaponised the power of 'deliberate not-listening' (Bickford, 1996, p. 155), a reminder that one of the most 'effective and insidious ways to silence others in politics is a refusal to listen' (Dryzeck, 2000, p. 149) – one of the central problems the Uluru Statement sought to correct.

We are attentive to the continuing debate on Constitutional reform among First Nations scholars and activists, and in the broader scholarship on sovereignty. Authors and advocates of the Uluru Statement themselves stress that the proposal was modest and reasonable (Davis, 2018; Birch, 2018; Anderson in Blanco, 2017; Hobbs, 2017; Pearson, 2017). That such a modest and reasonable proposal was dismissed out of hand underlines ‘an enduring inability of Australian governments to engage with Indigenous people beyond the symbolic’ (Birch, 2018, p.2) and reveals that the colonial state ‘doesn’t have a lexicon for how to share power, law-making and sovereignty’ (Giannacopoulos, 2019, n.p.). The state refusal of even a deliberately limited and modest proposal for constitutional reform also highlights concerns raised that ‘white law cannot deliver justice, since it is itself an important arm of the colonial infrastructure’ (Giannacopoulos, 2019, n.p.).<sup>6</sup>

With these concerns in mind, we emphasise the vital significance of the Uluru Statement as a roadmap to new norms of listening both within—but also well beyond— institutions of settler colonial Australia, including beyond the Constitution and settler law. The deliberate move to address the *people*, not the state, bears repeating. Thus, the conditions of listening required for First Nations voices to be heard must also register a broader *shift in the terms and frames of encounter and exchange*, a shift which works to dissolve harmful hierarchies of value and attention that consolidate the settler-colonial status quo.

### *Attunement as relational adjustment*

Questions of justice are intimately connected to conditions of listening, hearing, attention and attunement, within and beyond the law or the constitution, and in everyday life (Stauffer, 2015). We are interested in what attunement might contribute to a situated listening that is attentive and responsible, offering alternative routes to justice and living together. Richard Dawson (2013) takes up the notion of attunement in the context of justice as a way of ‘orientating oneself to meaning’, so that doing justice to ourselves and others involves paying close attention to both variations of meaning (p. xvii) and to different voices (p. 10). For Dawson, justice as attunement is concerned with ‘constituting appropriate selves and relations’ (p. i). What those appropriate relations are or might be cannot be pre-determined, but rather must emerge from the specific histories, contexts and

grounds through which those selves and relations have been formed.

Practices of attunement are also found in ecological, spiritual, eco-political thought as well as in collective decision-making in democratic politics (Dreher and de Souza, 2018). In the political realm, the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW), for instance, observe moments of pause and silent attunement in preparation for future decision-making and collective action, one that might prepare for better political listening. For party members, the ritual of attunement before the conduct of meetings 'helps adhere to a schedule, calms heated spirits in cases of disagreement and focuses minds on the objective of consensus' (Faucher-King, 2005, p. 53). Inspired by the Quaker decision-making practice of attunement as 'listening together' (Molina-Markham, 2011, p. vi), this situated and contextual listening is sensitised and sensitive to others. The notion of 'listening together' to facilitate collective decision-making provides an alternative approach to Hannah Arendt's (1958) conception of politics as 'acting and speaking together' (cited in Bickford, 1996, p. 56). Crucially, such practices of attunement provide space for a listening-oriented relation, rather than a logocentric, or adversarial one.

Of course, attunement here is a practice that comes *before* decision-making, setting the conditions for listening together that are simultaneously responsive and responsible. While non-Indigenous / settler Australians were not part of the process of deliberation that led to the consensus position delivered at Uluru, we find other spaces where attunement might assist in coming to encounter First Nations on their own terms. If attunement involves a space of pause and attention to others and our environment, as well as our locatedness, then it also provides conditions of possibility to *listen differently* in order to move to a process beyond deliberative decision-making to agreement-making and truth-telling that holds in tension our differently located positions.

For instance, the Uluru Statement and its aspirations opens a listening route to hold what are normatively framed as competing notions of sovereignty as incommensurable yet co-extensive. The opening passages of the Uluru Statement choreograph and anchor non-Indigenous Australians in relation to the sovereign First Nations:

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown. How could it be otherwise?

The Uluru Statement weaves together multiple knowledge systems (Indigenous epistemologies, common law and western science) and distinguishes between two ontologies of sovereignty – Indigenous sovereignty and that of the nation-state or Crown. The rhetorical question *how can it be otherwise?* challenges non-Indigenous listeners to reflect on the simultaneous ontological incommensurability and co-existence of these sovereignties. This counters the narrative put forward by former Prime Minister John Howard, and others since, that rejects the possibility for treaty on the basis that 'a nation does not make a treaty with itself'. Yet close attunement to the statement undoes the logic of Howard's refusal. From Professor Mark McMillan's standpoint as a member of the Wiradjuri nation, for First Nations people, 'treaty as a set of relations, as conduct of sovereignty itself, allows us to cohere in ways that best reflects not just the now, but the possibilities going forward'. It also models a reciprocal obligation for non-Indigenous people, reminding them/us that 'sovereignty-never-ceded impacts their ability to construct a way that they operate their own citizenry and citizenship' (ABC Radio National, 2019b).

Attunement as responsive relation also suggests a particular ethical disposition that characterises political listening and the vulnerability that comes with holding ourselves open to others, otherness and difference (Ahmed, 2013; Coles, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2005). Attunement foregrounds dynamic relation; it asks us to come in to relation with others in ways that are context specific and sensitive to power dynamics. Attunement to our differently located listening positions is crucial in not collapsing difference (as in a politics of empathy), but rather holding it and collectively moving to transform the uneven relationships that structure difference. Sara Ahmed (2013) discusses attunement in relation to its affective dimensions, and the difficulties in being open to what is around us when we encounter otherness and difference. For Ahmed, attunement requires 'emotional labour' but also political work that (re)orientates attention to the ways that 'non-attunement' might continue structures of harm and violence when we are not in a 'responsive

relation' (p.17). There is a subtle but important distinction to be made between attention, a concept that Bickford (1996) identifies as key to political listening, and attunement—which can *orient* attention in particular ways. Attunement in the settler-colonial context can foreground a process-oriented and context-specific practice, grounded in the present context—such as the Country and lands we are inhabiting and living on.

As a political practice, attunement might prepare us for listening differently or doing politics otherwise – a path to reckoning with how we are implicated or complicit in existing political arrangements that harm Indigenous lives and mark Indigenous lands as a white possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Beyond the interpersonal and considering wider structures of encounter, we are interested in broader possibilities for political attunement, where the aim is not necessarily agreement, but rather a dynamic and ongoing process of *relational adjustment*. While power is rarely ceded willingly, 'power itself must be transformed in its encounter with powerlessness' (Dreher and Mondal, 2018, p. 11). In settler colonial Australia, more just power-sharing arrangements cannot be fully attained through a liberal politics of inclusion and diversity, or even democratic notions of political equality. A politics of listening that places at its heart the ontological primacy and sovereignty of First Nations people – one that both precedes and exceeds the white sovereignty of the '(never quite) post-colonial nation-state' (Haggis, 2016, p. 16; see also Moreton-Robinson, 2004) – might prepare for more just future relations. Cultivating practices that are attuned to 'sovereignty-never-ceded' (following Mark McMillan) foregrounds protocols for the non-hierarchical sharing of power, co-presence and the co-building of future worlds.

### *Yielding as giving over authority and ceding control*

The challenge of ceding control – or, what we are conceiving as yielding – is for Bickford (1996, p. 5) 'one of the central challenges for politics: addressing a conflict through political interaction demands that we resist the desire for complete control'. We see parallels between yielding and practices that characterise political listening. As a verb, yield can mean both to give up *and* to produce; in this twin sense, to give up settler authority and control might produce more just relations of co-existence. The political importance of yielding is particularly salient in settler colonial states like Australia where issues of treaty and truth-telling remain

unresolved. Extending Bickford's work, we theorise from the settler colonial context in which the primacy of First Nations' relationship with this land is continually usurped and the colonial project depends on denying First Nations' authority. We suggest coming to a place of listening to First Nations claims must involve a yielding of settler authority in order to privilege First Nations voices; crucially, this calls for a preparedness for non-Indigenous Australians to listen and learn about the truths of settler colonial history.

While receptivity and openness, as theorised by Bickford, signal the potential for vulnerability (for instance, yielding foregrounds the presence of power; specifically, uneven power dynamics), we suggest yielding signals a protocol for re-routing the flow of power in more just terms – a giving way as/from a position of power. To cede authority as a non-dominating move recognises the responsibility which comes from being in a position of power/privilege. Yielding connects to the humility and vulnerability of Bickford's vocabulary of openness and receptivity but moves them in a particular direction or puts them into action. Yielding involves a particular movement to cede ground – a stepping aside or giving way, not to abrogate or turn away from responsibility, but to take direction from listening to First Nations sovereignties and political aspirations and move accordingly. And perhaps this is a more difficult proposition.

Relatedly, the Uluru Statement does not articulate First Nations desires to be heard as a right to be claimed. As a register of aspiration rather than rights, the Uluru Statement offers a framework for a transformative or 'justice-oriented' listening (Thill, 2018) based on interdependence and an entangled history, rather than a rights-based claim to be heard. Indeed, Beausoleil (2016, p. 20) cautions of the risks of declarative language which can 'lead to objectification, conflation and appropriation by dominant listeners of what is represented'. So while 'the Right to be Heard'<sup>7</sup> invokes broader discourses of international law and human rights, we note that the Uluru Statement itself does *not* take up this rights-based language, perhaps because of the danger it poses in spiralling into a series of counter-claims, as well as the riskiness of 'rights talk' itself (Noddings, 2002).

As is evident in the Uluru Statement, calls for listening are often closely linked to claims to justice. Davis (2017) draws upon Jill Stauffer's (2015) concept of 'ethical loneliness' to articulate the deep moral injury caused by *not being heard* to locate the Uluru Statement within a 'continuum of experiences of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander peoples since invasion' (Davis, 2017, p. 141). For Stauffer (2015, p. 1), ethical loneliness describes a double abandonment where those who have been unjustly treated by society or experienced structural injustice and harm emerge from that injustice 'only to find that the surrounding world will not listen or cannot properly hear their testimony'. In this context, adopting the declarative language of rights in the Uluru Statement – *we have a right to be heard! Listen!* – seems insufficient to fully register the ethical dimension Stauffer and Davis are attending to.

Krista Ratcliffe (1999, p. 207) cautions if we meet a desire to be heard with 'counter-desires – pretending the desire to be heard does not exist, hoping it will disappear, or waiting for someone else to handle it – we stymie potential dialogue'. How then might we respond to this desire to be heard? Part of Ratcliffe's move in developing the notion of rhetorical listening which, we suggest is also a register of political listening, is that 'we may transpose a desire for mastery into a self-conscious desire for receptivity'. Julietta Singh (2018, p. 6), drawing inspiration from queer and feminist theory, echoes Ratcliffe's ambivalence with mastery: 'continuing to abide by the formulation of "mastering mastery", we remain bound to relations founded on and through domination'. By operating instead in a register of humility, vulnerability, hope and desire—we seek to be heard—the Uluru Statement models a justice-oriented, rather than rights-based, register of politics and relations that asks non-Indigenous Australians to yield power and listen.

While courage might be necessary to take political action and expose ourselves to the attention of others (Bickford, 1996, p. 69; Thill, 2009), we are more interested in the generative potential of humility, vulnerability and listening as discussed by Ratcliffe (2005), Dreher (2009), and Vice (2010) for the unsettling/discomforting possibilities we are exploring here. Courage, along with refusal and mastery, itself comes with a legacy of colonial (and gendered) dominance. In contrast, the vulnerability and listening-with-humility (Scudder 2016) involved in yielding to the other might instead suggest giving up of (colonial) mastery and harmful forms of domination (Singh, 2018, p. 21).

For settlers living on stolen Indigenous land, where the colonisers have not gone away, the question becomes: how do we stay in the right way? In this settler-colonial context, yielding is a particularly useful concept because it specifically

foregrounds giving way as/from a position of power or privilege. This puts Bickford's listening-oriented concepts of receptivity and openness *into motion*; it makes this move explicit. We suggest yielding demands more of us when we listen in the settler colonial context and is therefore a more difficult proposition. Here, yielding signals accommodating others, but doing so in ways not determined by those in power. Yielding foregrounds a specific dynamic of relation and intentionality required in order to cede ground; to give over authority. It might be one way to begin to divest from harmful forms of domination—such as yielding power as a way of wielding power—and instead come into right relation from a position of responsibility and accountability. In other words, yielding can signal a move to re-route the unjust flow and accumulation of power—not to simply reverse the hierarchy, but with the aim of co-making non-hierarchical relations in order to live more justly together.

*Makarrata, located listening and truth-telling*

How do we reconcile? What do we need to give, and what must be given to us for our loss, for our grievance? How do we balance the wrongs that have been done with a need to work together in the future? (Gamatj elder Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 2016)

The Uluru Statement's call for truth-telling, supervised by a Makarrata Commission, provides a way to address disadvantage and power imbalance on First Nations' own terms (Appleby and Davis, 2018). Makarrata is a Yolŋu concept from the people of Arnhem Land in the northeast tip of the continent. It is 'more than a synonym for treaty', describing a 'process of conflict resolution, peacemaking and justice' (Pearson, 2017, n.p.). Introducing the concept of Makarrata into the national frame holds the potential to recast Indigenous-settler relations and truth-telling practices in a context-specific way (Little, 2019). While details on the structure and responsibilities of a Makarrata Commission are yet to clarify how truth-telling and agreement-making will happen in practice, there is strong support by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for 'place-based or nation-based agreements' (Kyam Maher, JSC, 2018, n.p.) and local-level and context-specific processes of truth-telling:

[...] clearly people wanted that truth telling to be done on a local level – not to have some South African style truth commission but to allow First Nations to map out that truth with local Australian historical societies and local councils. (Megan Davis, in



JSC, 2018, n.p.)

Developing localised practices of truth-telling prompts us to think about justice-oriented (Thill, 2018) listening practices beyond Truth and Reconciliation models that take place at the level of the nation-state, or government-led commissions of inquiry (or even national apologies) which leave the foundational violence of 'the nation' largely intact. The identified need for Indigenous-led truth-telling situated within local community contexts learns from the limits and failures of state-based or top-down approaches to reconciliation which can be 'repressive and reinforce colonial hegemonies' (Edmonds, 2016, p. 8, cited in Appleby and Davis, 2018). Potentially, truth-telling and agreement-making, embedded within specific First Nations contexts and geographies, might develop practices of 'located listening' (Dreher and de Souza, 2018) that yield to First Nations histories and experiences. Potentially, they would also contribute to and engage with Indigenous nation building rather than nation-state building (see L. Simpson, 2016).

The Regional Dialogues touched on the complexity and *shared nature* of truth telling about history: it is not for First Nations people 'as victims, or as survivors, or as resistance fighters, but for all Australians, now and, through ongoing educational programs' in the future (Appleby and Davis 2018, p. 504). *The Guardian Australia* has begun a report called *The Killing Times* that documents and maps the organised and state-sanctioned massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia's Frontier Wars.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the report maps 'not just the grim tally of more than a century of frontier bloodshed, but its human cost – as told by descendants on all sides. This is the history we *have all inherited*' (Allam and Evershed, 2019, n.p., our italics). Confronting this history at the local level and listening to accounts from descendants of survivors of massacres, potentially transforms the relations of power between First Nations and non-Indigenous communities in setting the terms and frames of truth-telling. Yielding to localised, community-level approaches, rather than state-based or government-led ones, might prepare for more just arrangements of listening and being heard between non-Indigenous and First Nations peoples—shifting the grounds of encounter across the continent in the wake of colonisation.

*Dwelling in discomfort*

[Can] we move from places where whitefellas feel truly uncomfortable into what I call 'a meditation on discomfort' – to places where the settler society is made to answer these questions: what brings them to a place of lawfulness? Or how lawful is their sovereign status? (Watson, 2007, 30).

Much like our interest in the generative potential of refusal, attunement and yielding outlined above, we suggest dwelling in discomfort similarly calls up a responsibility to listen and a *sustained* engagement across difference. This moves beyond a comfortable politics of empathy which has its limits when attached to liberal modes of recognition and inclusion (see, for example, Povinelli, 2002; Scudder, 2016). For Bickford (1996, p. 149), the 'riskiness of listening comes partly from the possibility that what we hear will require change from us'. In the context of truth-telling about colonial history, of settler anxieties of belonging (Slater, 2018) and certainty (Mackey, 2014), what resources are available? As the above quote from Tanganekald, Meintangk Boandik woman Irene Watson illuminates, discomfort has particular resonance in settler colonial contexts because it foregrounds uncertainty and unsettlement as the grounds for political transformation and right relations. In seeking to reconfigure the relationship (and relations of power) between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians, dwelling in discomfort might be a prompt to accommodate difficult truths of the colonial past-present that First Nations have been calling for, and instead orient for contingency and uncertainty as conditions for justice.

Megan Boler's (1999) notion of 'pedagogy of discomfort' provides an educational framework which provokes critical reflection, social transformation, and action – making visible our differently located positions, both materially and historically. Discomfort as pedagogy, as something that situates knowledge production within a complex meshwork of power and privilege, is an ethical imperative that presses us to listen differently. For Julietta Singh (2018), cultivating discomfort is a vital decolonial and feminist practice. Taking inspiration from the work of Jamaica Kincaid, Sara Ahmed and others, Singh explores the generative and transformative potential of discomfort in creating ways of living together differently, including in the wake of colonisation. Extending this further, we argue

## Dwelling in Discomfort

*inhabiting* discomfort – dwelling rather than simply cultivating – better articulates the necessary, difficult and durational work of sticking with what is uncomfortable and unsettling as settler-colonial relations are renegotiated.

The temporality of dwelling or inhabitation, particularly in relation to the practices and politics of listening we are exploring in this paper, press us to resist both the impulse to quickly move through or retreat from discomfort.<sup>9</sup> Lipari (2010, p. 350) conceives listening itself as ‘a *dwelling place* from where we offer our ethical response’. Dwelling then doubly gestures towards a more sustained temporality that does not seek to occupy, but rather holds open an ethical space of inhabitation grounded in an ‘unsettled relationality’ (Boudreau Morris, 2017, p. 458), rather than one of settled residence. Katie Boudreau Morris (2017, p. 467), writing in the settler-colonial context of Turtle Island / Canada, conceptualises discomfort as a ‘time-mediated relationship that has its foundations in questioning and listening’. She suggests listening to, sitting with and wading through our discomforts are important practices that can be deployed towards decolonisation (p. 457). Watson’s (2007) ‘meditation on discomfort’ does similar *durational* work. By engaging with the temporality of dwelling in discomfort, we are challenged to listen to our own attachments and investments in current political arrangements and relations, with attunement to our ‘settler locations’ (Boudreau Morris, 2017, p. 467) as beneficiaries of First Nations dispossession, land occupation and the uneven distribution of power in the settler colonial state.

Given the importance of duration and temporality, we suggest that a concept of dwelling in discomfort can also give texture and situated specificity to Susan Bickford’s argument (1996, p. 170), raised in her book but not extensively developed, that the normative or evaluative standard for political listening is ‘neither consensus nor control, but something like continuation’. For Bickford, the underlying guide is ‘keeping the field of action open, to act in a way that future action is possible, so the field of freedom is maintained or expanded’. Writing in the Canadian context, Leah Bassel (2017) highlights the need to ‘take direction and stick around’ (Amadahy, 2008, cited in Bassel, 2017), similarly drawing attention to the durational work of ‘listening as solidarity’ between non-Indigenous migrant justice activists and First Nations peoples. In the context of settler colonial Australia, non-Indigenous capacities to dwell in discomfort might contribute to a

future-oriented field of action in which *sustained unsettling* provides the conditions for transformative change aimed at justice.

Sara Ahmed (2013, p. 420) also reminds us that ‘to feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives. Discomfort is hence not about assimilation or resistance, but about inhabiting norms differently’. If dwelling in discomfort eschews both assimilationist and resistant impulses, as Ahmed suggests, then it might prepare for a more contingent and interdependent relationality; one that listens from a place of ‘vital ambivalence’ (Singh, 2018, p. 158) that simultaneously attends to our entangled past-present and the uneven distribution of violence against First Nations people across settler colonial states. Like the notions of unsettled relationality and vital ambivalence, dwelling in discomfort holds in dynamic tension that which remains productively unresolved, providing a potential resource for transformation, rather than resolution or ‘settlement’. Such a disposition might allow us to stay with our complicities and contradictions, turning them over and working them through, without seeking an escape.

Wiradjuri scholar Robynne Quiggin (ABC Radio National, 2019b, n.p.) suggests non-Indigenous people in Australia wanting to support First Nations sovereignties need to ‘accept discomfort as a norm’ and take responsibility for the privilege that comes from their/our place in the colonial project:

So to take responsibility for that and to acknowledge that there is privilege that goes along with the way that power was divided up and continues to play out. [...] I think non-Indigenous people need to *accept discomfort as a norm*, and welcome it. And be open to complexity and uncertainty, so that what somebody might feel they know about their place in the country – in this place – can be thrown open and questioned so that people can actually have that vulnerability to ask themselves about the kind of benefit that they receive from the history and the present day. I think if we are talking about re-setting relationships we really need to think about that.

Discomfort can arise from being located as a listener in response to First Nations sovereignties, exposing us to uncomfortable truths, ‘regardless of, (and potentially against), a willingness or readiness to listen’ (de Souza and Dreher, 2018, p. 29). But as we’ve laid out here, a non-Indigenous commitment to dwell in discomfort might also arise from a shared desire for justice—even when it is not immediately clear what the shape of that justice, or a just politics, might be in the future. The

uncertainty and contingency that this brings attention to, we argue, is a necessary discomfort. Dwelling in the discomfort that arises from yielding to First Nations authority and primacy—orienting around a sovereignty lens—might be a first step towards a shared future on fundamentally transformed, and decolonising, terms. In other words, it is not a question of political equality, but of First Nations sovereign authority.

### *Conclusion*

In the settler colony of Australia, protocols for and practices of listening must attend to decolonial struggles and Indigenous sovereignties grounded *in this place* (following Quiggin). In this article we have sought to attend closely to the conditions of listening and being heard in settler colonial Australia, prompted by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, to think through the politics and practices of listening required of non-Indigenous / settler Australians to register First Nations voices. In the ways we have outlined, the Uluru Statement, offered as it is in a spirit of reciprocity, models how we might prepare for 'deep listening' (Atkinson, 2002; Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002) as part of a reparative process that involves a relinquishing of control and a giving over of authority to First Nations people in transforming future political action and social relations. We have shown how this actually unsettles conventional liberal democratic modes of deliberative listening which are insufficient to shift the settled (and settler-colonial) terms of speaking and listening.

By reflecting on refusal, yielding, attunement and dwelling in discomfort, we have extended Bickford's (1996) conception of political listening to foreground the settler colonial context to find that the Uluru Statement asks us to respond through a situated listening—a positional *and* redistributive politics that is specific and grounded, rather than an abstract or general principle. This redistributes attention and value to prioritise First Nations voices and authority, and de-centres settler colonial comfort. We have offered these concepts and practices that can help us understand and perform what's necessary for a more just politics.

There is much to be learned from listening to the ambivalent and contested relationships between First Nations and the state which resist the terms of liberal recognition, expose the provisional and exclusionary conditions of democratic citizenship, and undo the logic of settler-colonialism itself. Possibilities for living

together in the wake of colonisation are found when political listening takes account of our position as beneficiaries of Indigenous dispossession, land theft and colonial violence. If 'hearing well', as Stauffer argues (2015, p. 80), brings with it the potential to 'break the known order of the world for those who listen', then it also demands a break with the hierarchies of value and attention that condition whose voices and lives are made to matter or be heard, within and beyond the frame of the settler state. Therefore, we suggest listening must be firmly located within a decolonising, not simply a democratic, framework.

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### *Acknowledgements*

A version of this paper was presented at the 2019 Western Political Studies Association (WPSA) conference in the panel 'Conditions and Practices of Democratic Listening'. Generous engagement from Susan Bickford on earlier drafts contributed much to our thinking and continues to inspire our work. We are also grateful to feedback from our co-panelists, conference delegates and two anonymous reviewers. Work towards this paper was supported by the Australian Research Council (FT140100515) and the University of New South Wales Scientia Scheme.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Despite increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives within the parliament, at both state/territory and federal levels, representative democracy arrangements remain insufficient to fully account for First Peoples' voices. Hobbs (2017b) has argued that the Voice to Parliament would actually rectify a persistent democratic fault in Australian society: 'Although Indigenous people enjoy 'full equality' in the electoral arena, their position as an extreme numerical minority makes it difficult for them to be heard by government'. Indeed, the phrase 'In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard' underscores precisely the limitations of 'equal citizenship' as begun with the constitutional reforms of 1967 to ensure First Nations self-determination. Davis (2017, 127) has also noted the 'typically utilitarian philosophy of majority rules' frequently stifles proposals for reform on Indigenous issues.

<sup>2</sup> The Uluru Statement makes reference to the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum which is often erroneously assumed to have granted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the right to vote and citizenship status in Australia. Despite this optimistic reading of history, the achievements of the 1967 referendum were more modest – First Nations people were to be counted in the census and the federal government was given the power to make laws for Indigenous people (Behrendt, 2014; Davis, 2014b).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, by addressing the 'Australian people', the Uluru Statement leaves unproblematised the multiple inclusions and exclusions through which 'the people' are constituted in relation to the settler Australian nation. However, the key political move this makes—addressing the people rather than politicians or governments—compels serious consideration of Indigenous–non-Indigenous relationships more broadly, not only, or even primarily, through the State.

<sup>4</sup> A very brief history would include the many petitions from the Coranderrk Mission in the 1850s and 60s (Griffiths, 2017); the 1937 petition from Yorta Yorta man William Cooper to King George calling for Indigenous representation in the federal parliament; the 1963 Yirrkala bark petitions; the 1971 Larrakia petition; the 1979 National Aboriginal Conference resolution calling for a Makarrata; and the 1988 Barunga Statement.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the issuing of Original Nations Passports simultaneously enacts sovereignty-as-refusal (refusing the authority of the Australian state) and sovereignty-as-hospitality (welcoming refugees and asylum seekers excluded from recognition as citizens by the Australian state) (see also Giannacopoulos, 2014; Pugliese, 2015). In another form of sovereignty-as-refusal, the Aboriginal Provisional Government, established by Aboriginal activist and Lawyer Michael Mansell, have issued Aboriginal Passports to First Nations people which have been used to enter countries including Libya (1988), Switzerland (1990), Norway (1990), the Mohawk Nation (2014), and the Solomon Islands (2015).

<sup>6</sup> For Giannacopoulos (2019), the news that Australia's two largest mining companies have signed on to support the Uluru Statement indicates that constitutional change is very minimal change, as profit can still be generated and wealth extracted while Indigenous people are still deprived and dispossessed of their resources and land.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Right to be Heard' is a well-established principle in relation to agency and participation within International Relations, specifically in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and within Oxfam's Democracy and Human Rights Programme as a corrective to conditions of 'voice poverty'. Megan Davis (2017) has evoked the 'Right to be Heard' in some of her writing on Uluru, but the substance of her analysis is concerned with the ethical dimension of not being heard rather than its framing as a rights-based claim within international development discourse.

<sup>8</sup> The interactive map is available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars>.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, discomfort can also be mobilised as a form of performative victimhood to re-assert and wield power over others (see, for example, Hamad (2020) on 'white tears').

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