

# Findings from the Literature Review

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## Method

We identified relevant literature about barriers to and enablers of truth-telling, with a particular focus on community-based truth-telling, and also reviewed sources on historical acceptance / denial of First Nations histories in settler colonial states. See the bibliography at the end of this document for a full list of all sources reviewed.

Findings were grouped thematically, as detailed in the Table of Contents.

Several case studies of community-based reconciliation / truth-telling were developed and are included in the Appendices.

## What is truth-telling?

Truth-telling emerges from restorative justice processes designed to bring victims and perpetrators together and is widely used in various forms in post-conflict contexts around the world as a reconciliation and peace-building mechanism. In contrast to traditional retributive justice which is strongly focused on perpetrators, truth-telling is both perpetrator and victim-centred. Truth-telling can provide an opportunity for the victims of human rights abuses to have their experiences “acknowledged”, to establish “the facts” in the public domain, and to set the historical record “straight” (Cohen, 2001). Like all political processes, however, truth-telling initiatives reflect the realities of power and vested interest – in how the issues get defined, whose voices are heard, which facts are acknowledged, and so on.

There are significant debates in the transitional justice field about ‘truth vs justice’. Stan Cohen emphasises that “‘doing something’ about the past means more than getting the accounts right. The dominant meaning of accountability is justice” (Cohen 2001, p. 125). In formal human rights terms, the driving rationale to investigate and generate knowledge is “to identify those responsible and bring them to account...[however] investigations into the past are seldom empowered to go anywhere beyond recording knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is not the first phase in coming to terms with the past but the only phase. This is where the matter ends” (Cohen 2001, p. 20). As Cohen argues, “What is the point of knowledge without justice? Should justice or truth be the guiding aim of accountability?” (Cohen 2001, p. 43). These are important considerations for truth-telling processes to engage with.

Truth is always multidirectional and contested; there are key questions about “who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power?” (Foucault 2001, p. 170). Truth-telling processes can define and construct issues in ways which exclude or minimize some “truths”; for example, the experiences of Indigenous parents were largely absent from the report of the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry (Payne 2021). The *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry in Australia also provides a salutary lesson about how perceptions of the legitimacy of the truths unearthed through such processes can be undermined when significant stakeholder groups (in this case, the white Australians who were involved in child removals) argue that their “truth” has not been heard.

Truth-telling needs to avoid being positioned as a “one-off” event or activity but rather should be seen as an ongoing process of dialogue and engagement, an intergenerational project of change (Wilkins 2019, p. 148).

## The UN Framework and ‘the right to truth’

There is growing recognition within the international human rights framework of “the right to truth” (sometimes also described as “the right to know”). The UN Human Rights Committee passed a Resolution on the Right to the Truth in 2009 (UN Human Rights Council 2013), an International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations was established by the UN General Assembly in 2010, a Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence was appointed in 2012, and a UN Resolution on the Right to Truth was passed by the General Assembly in 2013. There is also a rapidly growing body of national and international jurisprudence articulating this emerging human right (Walker 2010, p. 526).

Importantly, within the UN framework the right to truth encompasses not only the victims’ (and their families’) right to know, but also the right of a people “to know the history of oppression that is part of its heritage” (Walker 2010, p. 526). Truth is seen as an important mechanism to restore dignity to victims of human rights violations and their families, and is also seen as playing a vital role in preventing denial and safeguarding against the reoccurrence of violations (Walker 2010, p. 527). Effective truth-telling can also restore trust and repair relationships between victims of human rights violations and their communities (Walker 2010, p. 540).

The UN Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005, affirm the primacy of *restitution* as the key remedy, to ‘restore the victim to the original situation before the gross violation ... occurred’ (United Nations General Assembly 2005, p. 2). In cases of historic injustices, however, restitution is usually seen as a utopian goal. In cases where restitution is not possible, the UN Principles provide for *compensation* for ‘economically assessable damage’; *rehabilitation*, provided to victims in the form of medical and psychological care and legal and social services; and *satisfaction*, which is defined to include remedies such as public apology, commemorative initiatives, and educational programs. Truth-telling primarily sits within this latter principle of ‘satisfaction’.

Walker argues that politically implemented modes of truth-telling for and by victims of gross violation and injustice and their descendants may legitimately be seen as a kind of reparations (Walker 2010). To count as reparations, however, Walker argues that truth-telling must be interactive, useful, fitting, and effective. Walker also emphasises that truth-telling in and of itself is unlikely to be sufficient reparation for serious wrongs; in the Australian context, truth-telling must therefore be accompanied by other measures that address the ongoing impacts of dispossession and colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### *Truth-telling and cases of historical injustice*

As we have outlined above, truth-telling primarily emerged in the context of post-conflict settings, as a mechanism to establish the truth about state violations or to counter the previous suppression of information about the treatment of oppressed groups. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it developed into a major mechanism of transitional justice. The potential of transitional justice measures to contribute to the resolution of cases of historical injustices remains uncertain, as the opportunities to “transition” to new models and approaches are much more limited in such contexts. Damian Short comments that “the illegitimacy to be addressed in Australian reconciliation was not a lack of liberal democracy but rather the foundation of it: the act of ‘settlement’ and colonial dispossession” (Short 2005, p. 269).

Appleby & Davis have argued that First Nations people involved in the Regional Dialogues and developing the Uluru Statement from the Heart exhibited a “sophisticated, nuanced and meaningful” understanding of the possibilities of truth-telling as an essential aspect of the redefinition of the political

relationship between First Nations peoples and the state (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 503). As envisaged by Appleby & Davis, truth-telling in the Australian context has multiple dimensions, including the need to examine the role of the media and the education system; the need to recognise resistance as well as victimhood; the need for truth-telling to be local, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but inclusive so that “all Australians could understand the truth, shame and complexity of their own stories and thus move towards a stronger, freer and richer future” (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 504). Transitional justice processes such as truth-telling can retain their radical transformative potential even in established liberal democracies; Barolsky highlights that “The goal here is not inclusion in the existing settler-colonial order but a reconfiguration of that order” (Barolsky 2022, p. 5).

There is a large body of literature exploring the relationship between truth-telling and historic injustice. Historic injustices are defined as those wrongs done in the past for which a plausible contemporary case can be made that the act/s constituted a gross violation of human rights. Within this framework there must be a valid state or community against which the claim or claims are being made; some theorists also stipulate that there must be ongoing impact/s of the historic wrong/s into the present (Torpey 2006, p. 45). It is important to recognise that the process of identifying what constitutes an historic injustice involves elements of power and choice:

in recognizing the most egregious historical injustices, only one layer of injustice is amended. In most cases the history of the protagonists is more complex, but other injustices, which are also part of its history, are ignored. (Barkan 2000, p. xx)

Theorists emphasise a link between concern for historic injustices and the need for new forms of political legitimacy to underpin liberal democratic states. For example, Bain Attwood describes the “acute ethical problem” facing settler societies such as Australia, where the “troubling presence” of the past is increasingly seen to cast a shadow over Australia’s future (Attwood 1996, p. xxix). Modern efforts to address historical injustices in colonial contexts are alluring to some in seeming to offer a redemptive narrative (Moses 2004, p. 35), but typically fall short in acknowledging the ongoing impacts of past injustices, accepting legal responsibility or providing material redress (Lykes & van der Merwe 2023, p. 465). Truth-telling projects dealing with historic injustices also need to contend with the desire to create a ‘fixed’ version of the past and avoid the teleological impulses and redemptive narratives often embedded within political appeals to the judgement of history (Scott 2020). James describes “the historical justice dilemma”, arguing that “historical justice seems trapped in the regimes of injustice that it claims to want to transcend (James 2021, p. 375).

Colonial injustices have been described as having largely “remained beyond the purview of transitional justice” due to transitional justice’s lack of focus on structural issues (Balint, Evans & McMillan 2014; see also Nagy 2013, who notes the failure of transitional justice to sufficiently “engage social inequality and structural violence”). The failure of such processes to address the ongoing impacts of injustices such as land dispossession or to recognise the sovereignty (Gunstone 2016, p. 199; Maddison & Shepherd 2014, p. 268) and self-determination (Corntassel & Holder 2008, p. 466) of First Nations peoples has also been noted. Despite these limitations, Nicola Henry argues that transitional justice provides a “unifying framework” that brings together disparate discourses on colonial-era injustices (Henry 2016, p. 206) and that the transitional justice framework remains relevant in Australia because of its focus on “the transition of state power and the mechanisms of justice that are required to achieve political transformation” Henry 2016, p. 201).

The United Nation’s Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Fabián Salvioli, released a report in July 2021 on the role of transitional justice measures in addressing the legacy of gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed in colonial contexts (United Nations General Assembly 202) (United Nations General

Assembly 2021). This report noted that restitution is difficult to achieve in settler colonial contexts given the gravity of the rights violations committed, and also the impossibility of fully restoring the pre-colonial situation. The Special Rapporteur argued however that some forms of restitution, such as the return of expropriated land and cultural heritage, are possible. Noting the challenges posed by the passage of time since the original violations had occurred and the difficulty of determining which individual victims should be the beneficiaries of reparations when the violations have been suffered on a massive scale and have affected not only the direct victims but also intergenerationally, the report nonetheless found that historical truth-telling processes are an important part of restorative justice in settler colonial contexts, alongside land restitution, memorialisation and non-recurrence measures (United Nations General Assembly 2021).

## Truth-telling in Australia

Truth-telling in various forms has been a prominent feature in the relationship between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australia. Appleby & Davis point to colonial murder trials such as the Myall Creek massacre case; parliamentary inquiries into killings and massacres; more recent commissions of inquiry such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the Bringing Them Home Inquiry; public acknowledgements of past wrongs by our political leaders including Prime Minister Paul Keating's Redfern Speech and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations; Native Title processes requiring historical proof of Aboriginal peoples' "continuous association" with their country; academic historical accounts; "reconciliation literature", films, television series, songs, dance, theatre; the recording of oral histories; and the Massacre Map project, to name a few (Appleby & Davis 2018, pp. 501-2).

Truth-telling is seen as an important way to acknowledge the ongoing impact of past injustices in the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Oscar 2020). Truth-telling was a key demand expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the outcome of an extensive deliberative democratic dialogue undertaken with Indigenous communities across the nation (Commonwealth of Australia 2017). The call for truth-telling outlined in the Uluru Statement is not separable from First Nations demands for voice and treaty and while the exact nature these truth-telling processes will take is yet to be determined, it is likely to take place through local truth-telling initiatives at a community level, in a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' expression of truth (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 504).

Characterising previous truth-telling initiatives in Australia as "ad hoc and piecemeal", Appleby & Davis argue that First Nations people involved in the Regional Dialogues and developing the Uluru Statement from the Heart exhibited a "sophisticated, nuanced and meaningful" understanding of the possibilities of truth-telling as an essential aspect of the redefinition of the political relationship between First Nations peoples and the state (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 501). Truth-telling in this context has multiple dimensions, including the need to examine the role of the media and the education system; the need to recognise resistance as well as victimhood; the need for truth-telling to be local, led by First Nations people, but inclusive so that "all Australians could understand the truth, shame and complexity of their own stories and thus move towards a stronger, freer and richer future" (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 504).

During the Regional Dialogues that led to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the demand for truth-telling from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives was "unanimous at every dialogue"; a key guiding principle that emerged was that constitutional reform should only proceed if it "Tells the truth of history" (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, 22). The call for truth-telling outlined in the Uluru Statement is interconnected with Aboriginal demands for Voice and treaty. Megan Davis has

described the deliberate sequencing of ‘Voice-Treaty-Truth’ by the drafters of the Uluru Statement, noting that “the order is important” (Davis 2018); effective truth-telling can only take place once political reforms are in place (Fullagar 2021). The Uluru Statement called for a Makarrata Commission to be established to oversee ‘agreement-making’ and ‘truth-telling’ processes between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; as part of its commitment to the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the current federal government committed \$5.8 million in funding in 2022 to commence the work of establishing the Commission (Australian Government 2022).

Why does truth-telling remain a central demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Heidi Norman emphasises the cultural and political aspects of truth-telling for First Nations people, arguing that “the impulse to tell ‘our story’ and develop ‘a shared sense of history’ functions as something of ‘a plea’ from Aboriginal people to have their historical experiences acknowledged and understood by the broader community with the hope that this will then result in political change” (quoted in Lindsey et al. 2022). The range of outcomes sought from truth-telling are diverse - the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Final Report (2018) described truth-telling encompassing multiple dimensions, including a foundational requirement for healing and reconciliation, a form of restorative justice, a process for First Nations people to share their culture and history with the broader community, to build wider understanding of the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to strengthen awareness of the relationship between past injustices and contemporary issues (JSC 2018). The report noted that contested history should not be a barrier; rather, truth-telling should seek to provide an honest account of history from all perspectives. There is a duality in the notion of truth-telling in this report, which is seen to encompass the historically negative impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but also as a celebration of “the wonderful and amazing culture that Aboriginal peoples have” (JSC 2018). As First Nations Canadian authors Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwadzi emphasise, “Indigenous stories of resilience are critical to the resurgence of our communities” (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwadzi 2009, p. 139).

## *State-level truth-telling processes*

A number of state-level truth-telling processes are currently in train or under consideration in Australia.

The first formal truth-telling process into historic injustices experienced by First Peoples in the state of Victoria was launched in early 2022 and the work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission formally commenced in June 2022, with a final report due to be completed in June 2024. The Yoorrook Justice Commission is described as a “commission of truth” (McLeod 2022), a truth and justice process that it is argued will “help shape and create a more equitable society that brings pride to all Victorians” (Geraldine Atkinson, Co-Chair of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, quoted in McAvoy 2022). In describing the significance of the Commission, Senior Counsel Fiona McLeod said that it

provides an unprecedented opportunity to shine a light on our history; to formally recognise and record the truth, to acknowledge – what was done by those with power to those who were deprived of power; to build a permanent and public record; to reflect upon what has been lost, of the thousands of First People’s lives and the richness of culture destroyed by colonisation; to reflect upon who we are who remain (McLeod 2022, p. 3).

Commissioners invested with the powers of a Royal Commission have been gathering information from a wide range of sources and hear from many witnesses. Tony McAvoy, Australian First Peoples Senior Counsel assisting the Commission, described this truth-telling process as “not one of listening and



hearing alone”, but “participatory”, leading to the creation of an “indelible”, “unfiltered and unsanitised” record by First Nations people (McAvoy 2022). For McAvoy, the ability of the Australian nation to accept the truths generated by the Commission and provide rectification and restitution for the dispossession of First peoples will be a mark of national maturity.

Other states are currently considering or are in the process of establishing state-level truth-telling bodies. The Northern Territory Treaty Commission published its *Towards Truth-Telling* report in February 2021, recommending the establishment of a three-year independent truth commission. The Pathway to Truth-Telling and Treaty Report published in late 2021 explored the possible format, content and purpose of truth-telling in Tasmania, among a range of other issues. The Queensland government’s Path to Treaty legislation was passed in May 2023 and includes the establishment of a Truth-Telling and Healing Inquiry, although it is currently unclear if this process will proceed since the Liberal National Party indicated that they would be withdrawing their support in the aftermath of the Voice Referendum (Pengilly 2023).

### *Community-level truth-telling*

State-based truth-telling processes have been increasingly subject to criticism in the transitional justice literature. Anyeko identifies the growing consensus in transitional justice that “bottom-up strategies, starting within communities, are preferable” to “top-down” processes (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 108). First Nations legal scholar Megan Davis has recently described state-centred processes as a model that has become “a manifesto for maintaining the status quo: a means to make unspeakable wrongdoing and gross human rights violations comprehensible, yet in effect fit them into the status quo ... these processes do not disrupt or change state structures” (Davis 2022). State-based truth-telling commissions have also been described as inherently problematic for First Nations communities and “fundamentally flawed mechanisms for transforming inter-group relations” (Corntassel & Holder 2008, p. 466).

Community-level truth-telling is increasingly seen as an alternative or complementary to the work of institutionalised truth commissions or inquiries. Sullivan (2016) underscores the importance of grassroots truth-telling practices in New Zealand in promoting healing, empowering communities, and challenging dominant historical narratives. Writing in the African context, Clark argues that “the face-to-face engagement between community participants that these processes encourage has yielded important social benefits” (Clark 2012, p. 77). In post-conflict settings in Africa, community-based approaches to transitional justice have led to recognition “that everyday citizens committed horrendous crimes and must – in some form – be called to account for those actions” (Clark 2012, p.57). This has some resonance in the Australian context, where perpetrators of colonial era violence were never called to account for their crimes, which were contemporaneously repressed and have subsequently been “forgotten” by the broader community despite their ongoing impacts on Aboriginal lives (Attwood 2017). Community-level truth-telling also aligns with the importance of community in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Some theorists have argued that local or community truth-telling processes have the potential to avoid some of the limitations of state-centred transitional justice by ‘decentring’ the settler colonial state (Barolsky 2022, p. 10) and recognising “multiple, potentially irreconcilable ‘truths’” (Barolsky 2022, p. 11). However, Kochanski urges a cautionary note, commenting that “Transitional justice at a local level is riddled with dilemmas and contradictions as well,” and arguing that local justice has been overly romanticised and idealised (Kochanski 2021). He warns that common problems with local transitional justice measures include failure to observe legal standards of due process; the reinforcement of existing local hierarchies and forms of discrimination; susceptibility to political and elite interference, intimidation and surveillance; and the need to be aware of the role “local gatekeepers” might play “in

perpetuating distortions and reinforcing a preferred version of the conflict” (Kochanski 2021). These are important cautions to keep in mind.

Participants in a joint truth-telling symposium undertaken by Reconciliation Australia and The Healing Foundation in 2018 (Reconciliation Australia and The Healing Foundation 2018) identified what they saw as important truth telling activities. Interestingly, participants did not suggest a formal national commission process (outside of formal hearings) during this exercise, but rather focused on:

- education, including the reform of school curriculum;
- the revitalisation and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ practices, cultures, languages, and knowledge;
- acts of recognition, including memorialisation, plaques, and renaming places;
- sharing and re-storying, including through arts, performance and yarning circles;
- the establishment of museums, local community memorials and monuments;
- formal hearings to capture stories and bear witness ;
- a national healing centre;
- discovery, through exploring archives and other records to map massacre sites, Stolen Generations institutions and understand the magnitude of the many past wrongs
- collaborating to re-story, reconcile, and heal including through local reconciliation committees, advocacy, and partnerships across the Australian community. (Reconciliation Australia and The Healing Foundation 2018)

Ten principles were identified that could frame and guide future truth telling processes:

1. The right to know our many truths: truth telling must encompass both past and contemporary injustices, empower multiple narratives, and embrace complexity.
2. Safety is paramount: time and effort must be put into creating safe spaces for truth telling. This includes ensuring truth telling is conducted in a culturally safe manner.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition and control: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities must lead the design of truth telling processes and the narrative that they create, including how engagement in truth telling occurs, the stories that are told, and the records that are kept.
4. Listen, bear witness and record: audiences to formal truth telling processes must be receptive, that is, able to listen and accept the truths that are shared. Accurate records must be kept and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must retain ownership of records relating to their personal stories.
5. Build off key documents of truth: truth telling must be informed by the work that has already been done, in particular, the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.
6. Inclusivity and reciprocity: non-Indigenous Australians, including recent migrants, have an important role to play in truth telling.
7. Time sensitivity: balancing the sense of urgency to tell the truth with allowing time for participation of many in what can be difficult processes.
8. Responsibility, action, and accountability: truth telling must involve responsibility and action for ensuring that past injustices are not repeated. Resources are required and there must be accountability for outcomes.
9. Healing, justice, and nation building: acknowledging that truth telling is an uncomfortable process, that the process is not about shame or guilt, but about driving positive change and acceptance.

10. Truth telling is a gift: truth telling benefits the whole nation, and communities must be supported to tell the stories they want to tell in the ways they want to tell them. (Reconciliation Australia and The Healing Foundation 2018)

Reconciliation Australia also undertook workshops with local councils in 2019 to identify considerations and challenges to truth-telling at a local level (Reconciliation Australia undated). The report of discussions at these workshops identifies a range of important considerations and challenges for local truth-telling to address:

- Truth-telling is a process that takes time;
- Relationships built on trust are critical;
- There is no 'one size fits all' approach;
- Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is required;
- Awareness of Council timeframes and processes;
- Dealing with sensitive material and hard conversations;
- Truth-telling requires adequate resourcing;
- There is a need to avoid lack of ownership or 'buy-in' across the organisation (i.e. the council).

Staff from the Alfred Deakin Institute of Citizenship and Globalisation recently undertook some research commissioned by Reconciliation Australia (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, shared with the authors of this literature review in draft format only). This study explored 22 community truth-telling initiatives, which are described as a "small, non-representative sample" of the extensive array of grassroots truth-telling initiatives currently taking place in diverse forms across the Australian community (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, p. 5). The authors identified four broad types or categories of truth-telling in the activities they documented:

- Recognition of colonial violence
- Recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination and agency
- Recognition of Indigenous cultures, contributions and resilience
- Redress, healing and reconciliation (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, pp. 19-20).

This report also identified selection criteria which informed the truth-telling sites they examined, which could usefully function as key principles informing community-based truth-telling practice more generally:

- Led by or developed in partnership with Indigenous communities;
- Recognising the diversity, strength, self-determination and resilience of Indigenous peoples;
- Featuring ongoing and sustained community engagement;
- Enhancing First Nations sovereignty, healing, and/or education;
- Embedding community and cultural wellbeing safety;
- Building relationships, cross-community collaboration and partnership (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, pp. 20-21).

This report emphasised that the weight of community truth-telling is currently being unequally borne by First Nations people without appropriate resourcing and support (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, p. 6); this is clearly both unfair and unsustainable.

# Historical acceptance in settler colonial contexts

Reconciliation Australia uses the term “historical acceptance” to measure the extent to which Australians recognise, understand, and accept the wrongs of the past and the impact of these wrongs on First Peoples. The term “historical acceptance” also encompasses employing the truth to generate justice and healing, and to ensure that the wrongs of the past are never repeated. Through promoting historical acceptance, Reconciliation Australia aims to ensure that

- There is an understanding and acceptance in Australia of past laws, practices and policies that have deeply affected the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- There is understanding of the immediate and devastating impact of these actions and the intergenerational trauma they caused, including their effect on the lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians today
- Fundamentally, historical acceptance is about telling the truth to achieve justice and healing. (Reconciliation Australia undated).

The relationship between truth, history and reconciliation has been questioned and critiqued by a number of scholars. This critique has multiple dimensions: the attempted use of reconciliation to redeem the settler colonial state (Short 2008); the attempt to locate the harms of colonisation firmly in the past and to ‘draw a line’ between the past and present practice (Maddison 2019, p. 184); or a focus on national unity to elide questions about First Nations sovereignty and the legitimacy of the Australian state (Maddison 2017, p. 5). Others are more optimistic about the relationship, with Muldoon arguing that reconciliation’s intrinsic focus on justice inevitably escapes the state’s attempt to deploy it for pragmatic purposes (Muldoon 2003, p. 188). Maddison argues that it is only through integrating “proper recognition of historical injustices” as well as “tales of national building triumph” that history can take its proper role in contemporary understandings of the nation (Maddison 2012, p. 706). For Adrian Little, rather than drawing a line under the past, “the point of pursuing truth is to circulate narratives of future and present injustice (which have often been excluded from public discourse in conditions of conflict) rather than drawing a line under the past” (Little 2020, p. 39). Barolsky argues that the purpose of truth-telling in settler-colonial contexts is “to narrow the contested ground of debate in the political community by recognizing that injustice did indeed occur ... It is only on these grounds of mutual recognition of the ‘truth’ of injustice that new conditions of equality can be established and pragmatic actions for redress agreed to” (Barolsky 2022, p. 4).

## *Historical Amnesia*

Drawing on the work of Lenape-Potawatami educator Susan Dion, Absolon argues that historical amnesia is “a powerful tool breeding ignorance and inaction”. She argues that “People don’t know what they don’t know... Many people unknowingly participate in colonial mechanisms because they just don’t know or understand how to step into becoming a part of positive change so they either defer to Indigenous peoples (pass the buck) or freeze (and do nothing)” (Absolon 2016, p. 47). For Absolon, “Cultural and colonial amnesia is endemic and a lack of accurate knowledge in education creates a society that forgets, avoids, denies and negates the connections between personal and political, present, past and future” (Absolon 2016, p. 46).

Paul Connerton (2008) identifies seven types of ‘forgetting’: repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence. Drawing on Connerton’s work, historian Anna Haebich argues that forgetting is not passive but is rather “adaptive

and functional” (Haebich 2011, p. 1034). Many of Connerton’s concepts have application to historical understanding, as they “share the common denominator of ‘shaping and maintaining a group’s identity (past, present, future) by adapting history, selecting what is stored from the present, and choosing what direction to take to preserve the (new) identity’” (Haebich 2011, p. 1034). Haebich argues that First Nations groups in settler societies including Australia face “continuing purposeful national agendas of collective forgetting that deny them historical justice” (Haebich 2011, p. 1035).

Cook highlights that beliefs about what constitutes “legitimate historical knowledge” contribute to the maintenance of historical amnesia and settler denial (Cook 2016, pp. 74-5). Kidman also discusses the role of “historical forgetting” in “post-settler imaginaries of the nation”, describing the inverse relationship between the commemoration of wars and military commitments abroad with the forgetting of “devastating military incursions and assaults on indigenous communities that have taken place within national borders and which provide the foundation upon which many modern post-settler states are built” (Kidman 2017, pp. 96-7). Writing in the context of Northern Ireland, Lawther highlights how forgetting and silence are frequent reactions to past trauma, and can be used strategically in some cases to protect and defend the value and self-image of specific social groups (Lawther 2013, p. 173).

### *Historical denial*

Settler denial has been described as “a distinct form of an epistemology of ignorance” (Cook 2017, p. 76). In an article exploring the nature of historical memory in settler colonial contexts, Attwood (2017) explores the relationship between contemporary and historical denial in Australia, drawing on Freud’s concept of denial or disavowal to argue that denial is “always partial in that a human being both knows and does not know or rather knows but is unwilling or unable to acknowledge what they know” (Attwood 2017, p. 24).

Exploring the history of settler claims to Australia in the 19th century through the lens of “contemporary denial”, Attwood highlights that settlers were uncomfortably conscious of the tenuous nature of the basis on which they held land: “Without a consent that purchase or a treaty implied, the settlers were left without a truly satisfactory way of legitimizing their claim of possession” (Attwood 2017, p. 25). The key arguments used to justify Aboriginal dispossession during the early decades of colonisation were that Aboriginal people were not actually in possession of their lands as they did not “till the soil”; that their dispossession was “the design of providence”; or that settlers had been granted the land by the government (Attwood 2017, p. 25). From 1837, the increasingly bloody frontier conflicts fought in Australia to dispossess Aboriginal people had to be disavowed, as Aboriginal people were technically British subjects and so entitled to legal protection; this had the effect of driving the frontier wars that were being waged underground. Attwood highlights the widespread use of euphemisms to disguise the killing of Aboriginal people, of which the term “dispersal” and its variants were most common. Settlers also displaced their own savagery on to Aboriginal people and used the term “civilising” as a euphemism for settler violence (Attwood 2017, p. 27).

Other concepts that contributed to the phenomenon of “contemporary denial” were the notion that Aboriginal people were “a doomed or dying race”, which aligned with Darwinian ideas about the “survival of the fittest” and emerging theories of ‘racial science’ in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The massive decline in the Aboriginal population was also rationalised by arguments that Aboriginal people were “destroying themselves by means of their own savage customs (such as warfare and infanticide),” effectively denying settler responsibility for the extermination of the Aboriginal people (Attwood 2017, p. 29).

Attwood argues that contemporary denial created by the unique circumstances of Australia's colonisation was followed by a century of historical denial, one which "displaced any settler agency for the dispossession, destruction and displacement of Aboriginal people and denied the Aboriginal presence by casting the Aboriginal race out of place by claiming that they were out of time" (Attwood 2017, p. 39). From the mid-19th to mid-20th century, historical denial "gradually and incrementally" became prevalent in histories of the colonisation of Australia (Attwood 2017, p. 30). The emergence and professionalisation of history as a discipline during this time, with its focus on objectivity, written rather than oral sources and with a particular construction of the relationship of the past to the present, enabled the Australian nation to morally, politically and cognitively distance itself from its "troubling past" (Attwood 2017, pp. 32-33). The anger and denial of some settlers in response to the rise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to revised understandings of Australia's past (which could also be characterised as the "return of the repressed") highlights the work remaining to be done to fully "come to terms" with Australia's troubling history (Attwood 2017, p. 40).

Another factor identified in the academic literature that contributes to historical denial among non-Indigenous people is the "very different version of history" that exists between colonial nation-states and those of First Nations communities (Cornthassel, Chaw-win-is & T'lakwadzi 2009, p. 138).

### *Cultural difference in understandings of truth and history*

Rachel Busbridge highlights the differences between First Nations ontologies and Western liberalism, arguing that cultural difference becomes problematic when First Nations peoples are expected to conform to the dominant group's expectations in order to be 'recognised' (Busbridge 2017, p 138). Drawing on Jean Francois Lyotard's concept of a "differend", Tarc highlights the symbolic and political impasse that can occur between two communities who operate "with radically and aesthetically different epistemological worldviews and/or lived experiences" (Tarc 2020, p. 58). Tarc notes that "in a differend the non-hearing yet adjudicating body is prone to dismiss the claim of the aggrieved without a just basis" (Tarc 2020, p. 59).

Damien Riggs highlights that while white histories represent truths that come from a particular invested perspective, "white historians do not often position their work as historically and contextually contingent; rather, they rely upon claims of universality to justify their work... What is required, then, is a form of critical reflexivity where white historians acknowledge the locality of their work, but at the same time focus on the ways in which that work is made possible by the privileged location of whiteness" (Riggs 2004, p. 47). Riggs argues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories could be described as "'histories of' (of place, relationships, stories and belonging)", whereas non-Indigenous histories are "'histories for'—histories used to legitimate, to justify or to claim"; there is a need to recognise "the rhetorical effects of non-Indigenous histories and their involvement in accounting for dispossession and genocide" (Riggs 2007, p. 446).

Worimi historian John Maynard describes Aboriginal history research as generative: the work reinforces and sustains Aboriginal worlds and reflects a yearning for truth by Aboriginal people that was denied. The impact of colonisation not only targeted the fracturing of Aboriginal people, but as Maynard says, "a state of forgetting and detachment from our past" (Maynard 2007). A similar theme is developed by Wiradjuri historian Lawrence Bamblett, who provides an account of Aboriginal approaches to history, saying "our stories are our survival" (Bamblett 2013). Consider the dedicated labour to return Ancestral Remains to their country, the work of Aboriginal people to restore the graves of their family and community on the old missions and work to document sites, such as Tulladunna Aboriginal cotton chipping Aboriginal camp on the plains country of north west NSW. Here Aboriginal communities are documenting their history in order to communicate across

generations, create belonging, sustain community futures and know themselves. Heidi Norman describes the history work being undertaken by Aboriginal communities to tell their stories about the places and people that are significant to them – a local, bottom-up “living social and cultural history” that is not constrained by the debates and counter-debates of historians or “the moral weight of the national story,” and one which looks forward to future generations and not just back to the past (Norman 2021). These processes of documenting and remembering Aboriginal stories of the past are less concerned with the state and settler hostility and unburdened by categorising time; ‘1788’ appears irrelevant in the enthusiasm for living social and cultural history; not confined to the ‘fixed in time’ histories called upon in Native Title litigation or the debates among historians and their detractors over method and evidence or the moral weight in the national story of such accounts (Norman and Payne 2023).

### *Creating shared histories*

An often-desired outcome of truth-telling processes is the creation of a “shared history” between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians. Shared history was a key issue identified by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in the 1990s (Gunstone 2016, p. 196). For example, in discussing local truth-telling activities arising from the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, Appleby & Davis argue that “these local truth-telling activities to be collated, properly archived, and where appropriate and with the proper permissions, made public. This would create a record of history: a unified understanding of the contested nature and experience of Australia’s history” (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 509). Highlighting examples such as the contested response to truth-telling processes such as the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, other theorists have questioned the underlying belief that “shared truths” will necessarily arise out of interaction “between those who disagree or understand situations differently” (de Costa 2017, p. 192).

Maddison & Shepherd advise that First Nations people may seek more than the development of “shared” histories:

What indigenous peoples seek in these contexts is most often not a transition towards a shared, integrated society, but a transformation of that society such that their sovereignty as distinct and self-governing peoples is recognised. The desire for truth-telling in such situations is about the indigenous desire to ‘inscribe their own historical experience in the history of the nation’; a desire that does not erode or diminish demands for the recognition of sovereignty and separate identity.

(Maddison & Shepherd 2014, p. 268)

Arguing that perhaps the aim should not be consensus, Maddison calls for “a more agonistic engagement...one that favours dissent and contestation over consensus and closure” (Maddison 2017, p. 4). While not foreclosing the possibility that First Nations peoples and settlers can share historical understanding, Maddison argues that this process will involve ongoing dialogue rather than closure and acceptance of the realities of historical violence, marginalisation and oppression of First Nations peoples (Maddison 2019, p. 191).

### *The relationship between history and truth-telling*

Educators Alison Bedford & Vince Wall (2020) explore the role of history in truth-telling. They emphasise that “truth-telling cannot be just a massacre narrative in which First Nations peoples are yet again dispossessed of agency and identity”; there is an ongoing need for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ agency, the long struggle for First Nations rights (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 48) and to de-mythologise Australia’s national foundational myths (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 49).



This strongly aligns with the views expressed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which called for recognition of First Nations Law, resistance, the work of First Nations rights campaigners, and recognition of both “the tenacity, courage and perseverance” of First Nations peoples in addition to their experiences of invasion, dispossession, and frontier violence (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, pp. 16-21). Working in the Canadian context, Fast & Drouin-Gagné highlight the need for approaches to teaching colonial history that “also incorporate hope by presenting Indigenous responses to colonial violence and oppression” (Fast & Drouin-Gagné 2019, p. 103).

Despite the academic histories written over many decades detailing First Nations history, there appears to be limited interest in engaging with this history. Mary O’Dowd describes the “slow penetration of this history in the formal and informal education systems of Australia” (O’Dowd 2012, p. 104), and uses the term ‘un-history’ to describe how Australian history does not simply marginalise or silence First Nations history but creates a history that is not reconcilable with the historical foundation myths of Australia’s national identity (O’Dowd 2012, p. 105). Johnston & Forrest argue that “This was not a story that white Australia wanted to hear... There is undoubtedly some community sentiment that wishes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘to just move on’ or ‘get over it’. Why is history so important?” (Johnston & Forrest 2020 p. 76). Responding to their own rhetorical question, Johnston & Forrest argue that history matters “because it tells us who we are and where we have come from. It is about our identity as Australians and some versions of that history paint an ugly picture. It matters to everyone—to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to non-Indigenous Australians” (Johnston & Forrest 2020, p. 79). Mati Keynes highlights however that “History curriculum is a domain that continues to privilege narratives of settler legitimacy while marginalising Indigenous and non-Western knowledges” (Keynes 2021, p. 414).

## Barriers to truth-telling

There is an extensive body of literature which identifies a wide range of barriers to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, truth-telling and reconciliation. This section provides an overview of the main barriers identified from the literature reviewed.

### *Reluctance to engage in truth-telling*

Writing in the Canadian context, Anishinaabekwe scholar Kathleen Absolon (2016) highlights some of the factors underpinning First Nations scepticism about reconciliation, particularly in a broader context of social exclusion. She argues that the inclusion of First Nations peoples is often “superficial and token” and identifies specific barriers including “social ignorance, lack of political will, institutional racism, colonized structures and internalized colonialism and oppression” (Absolon 2016, p. 46). Key variables and obstacles identified by Absolon include ignorance; cultural and colonial amnesia; power; privilege; and greed (Absolon 2016, p. 46).

Other First Nations researchers are optimistic about the potential for truth-telling processes, arguing that they “offer dramatic images of honouring Indigenous experiences, overturning colonial structures, and challenging their legitimacy... Truth telling is the first essential step of breaking down the walls of silence about life inside the cage” (McCaslin & Breton 2008, p. 521). However, not everyone is comfortable in telling their truth, particularly if there is uncertainty about its reception; it has been noted that “Silence may operate as an effective shield in a sociopolitical environment unwilling to listen to the voices of the victims” (Vatan & Silberman 2013, p. 3). Although there was overwhelming support for truth-telling at the First Nations Regional Dialogues, previous research has suggested that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not be ready to share their stories or “truths” with the wider community (Goodall 2002, p. 5); and special measures may be required to minimise the trauma



caused to First Nations peoples by asking them to remember painful past histories (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, p. 147).

## *Refusal*

Kahnawà:ke scholar Audra Simpson's work on ethnographic 'refusal' offers an interesting lens through which to reflect on the potential and limits of truth-telling. Highlighting the "techniques of knowing" that have frequently been employed by colonisers to govern and control the Indigenous 'other' (Simpson 2015, p. 95), Simpson discusses the dissonance between what First Nations peoples say about themselves and the representations that were (and are) produced about them (Simpson 2015, p. 97), arguing that First Nations voices "were imperceptible, or unknowable, or unimportant, or were sieved through analytics or narrative forms that interpreted their aspirations in ways that were not their own and/or were unrecognizable" (Simpson 2015, pp. 100-1). Noting that issues of 'authenticity' arise when Indigenous cultural forms do not align with non-Indigenous expectations, Simpson cites non-Indigenous beliefs about cultural purity, "culture as tradition," or "culture is what is prior to settlement," arguing that these simplified understandings are devoid of context and work to fetishize culture and contain Indigenous discourses (Simpson 2015, p. 99). These simplified understandings of what counts as 'authentic' Indigenous experience could pose a significant barrier to truth-telling.

Simpson's work has multiple applications to truth-telling processes. She reminds us that "No situation is 'innocent' of a violence of form, if not content, in narrating a history or a present for ourselves," (Simpson 2015, p. 99), and this caution applies to truth-telling, which - in common with other political processes - reflects the realities of power and vested interests in how the issues get defined, whose voices are heard, which facts are acknowledged, and so on. A key question Simpson poses for ethnography but which could also be asked of truth-telling is "Who benefits from this and why?" (Simpson 2015, p. 111). For Simpson, the right to speak or not to speak is an expression of Indigenous sovereignty (Simpson 2015, pp. 104-5). Could truth-telling provide First Nations peoples with the opportunity to "speak for themselves" in an expression of their sovereign 'voice' (Simpson 2015, p. 97)? Theoretically yes, however for Simpson, the ethics of sovereignty might require non-Indigenous participants in truth-telling to think about the limits of knowledge and to question their desire to 'know' (Simpson 2015, p. 105). Truth-telling may involve First Nations people refusing to participate in truth-telling as a political assertion (Simpson 2015, p. 107), a legitimate strategy of disengagement (Simpson 2015, p. 106) or from a reluctance to share certain 'truths' to protect the concerns of their community (Simpson 2015, p. 105). Simpson argues that a "deeply horizontal as well as vertical" historical sensibility will be required to understand many of the truths that are shared (Simpson 2015, p. 109), one that many non-Indigenous participants in truth-telling currently lack.

## *Ignorance*

The most recent Australian Reconciliation Barometer report indicates that only 45% of respondents identify that they possess a fairly high to very high knowledge of First Nations histories (Reconciliation Australia 2022, 17, p. 117). Despite decades of curriculum reform, non-Indigenous Australians still lament "why didn't we know?" when confronted with accounts of past violence and injustice against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; Clark, de Costa & Maddison argue that "Not-knowing is a leading trope of settler colonial self-awareness" (Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p. 390). Clark & de Costa observed numerous instances of what they dub the 'why weren't we told' syndrome in their research involving non-Indigenous focus group participants with the longest experience of living in Canada (i.e. those who were born in Canada and whose parents and grandparents were born in Canada) (Clark & de Costa 2011, p. 332).

Writing in the context of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CTRC), Seema Ahluwalia argues that ignorance is nurtured by non-Indigenous people as a coping mechanism to enable the nation to continue to assert a positive national identity (Ahluwalia 2012, p. 48). She criticises the Canadian government for its lack of leadership in moving Canadians beyond ignorance and denial in responding to the CTRC, asking “When will we begin the work of gathering and documenting the statements of Canadian settlers who will admit ‘I did this,’ ‘I was indifferent to the abuse and murder,’ ‘I stood idly by and waited for someone else to end the horror,’ or ‘my taxes and the taxes of my forefathers paid for these systems of torture and abuse?’” (Ahluwalia 2012, p. 50).

Several theorists discuss “an epistemology of ignorance”, highlighting that ignorance is “often constructed, maintained, and disseminated and is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty” (Tuana cited in Haebich 2011, p. 1035). In his exploration of white ignorance, Charles Mills defines ignorance as encompassing both false belief and the absence of true belief (Mills 2008, p. 232). He highlights white refusal to recognise the role of structural discrimination in creating the advantages white people enjoy (Mills 2008, pp. 239-40), describing an “intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia, especially about nonwhite victims” (Mills 2008, p. 241). White ignorance is not innocent; “vested white group interest in the racial status quo...needs to be recognized as a major factor in encouraging white cognitive distortions of various kinds” (Mills 2008, p. 246). For Mills, understanding the nature of white ignorance is essential to overcoming it:

White ignorance has been able to flourish all these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for ‘racial’ reasons have needed not to know. Only by starting to break these rules and meta-rules can we begin to understand the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white darkness and the achievement of an enlightenment that is genuinely multiracial.  
(Mills 2008, p. 247)

Another significant exploration of the conscious and structural nature of ignorance can be found in Proctor (2008). Proctor identifies three key aspects of ignorance - “ignorance as a native state (or resource); ignorance as a lost realm (or selective choice), and ignorance as a deliberately engineered and strategic ploy (or active construct)” (Proctor 2008, p. 3 Nb. italics in sentence not reflected here). While ‘innocent’ or ‘native’ ignorance may be able to be addressed by knowledge, some ignorance is actively constructed. Proctor highlights that “Ignorance has a history and is always unevenly distributed: the geography of ignorance has mountains and valleys. Who is ignorant and why, and to what extent?...What keeps ignorance in one place, while it evaporates in some other?” (Proctor 2008, p. 26). Ignorance might be the result of inattention, disinterest, calculation, resistance or tradition, amongst other factors (Proctor 2008, p. 24), and might even be created by knowledge; for example, Sullivan argues that “the provision of partial or selective information can be used to give the impression of knowledge, while in fact constructing ignorance that conveniently sustains perceptions of racial or cultural superiority” (Sullivan 2007, p. 205). While people may believe their ignorance is innocent - as posited in the question ‘why didn’t we know?’ - it is more likely that ignorance about First Nations History is a form of structural ignorance. Research undertaken by Taylor & Habibis usefully identifies four main areas of white ignorance obstructing their engagement in constructive relations with Aboriginal people: “ignorance of Australia’s race relations history; of Aboriginal law, cultures and languages; of the complexity of contemporary Aboriginal lives; and of the extent of their own ignorance” (Taylor & Habibis 2020, p. 359).

Other theorists warn of potential dangers in centring white ignorance in reconciliation initiatives such as truth-telling. De Costa argues that beliefs about the capacity of non-Indigenous Australians to accept First Nations claims have been a delimiting factor in previous reconciliation initiatives (de Costa 2002). Short's critique of the Decade of Reconciliation in the 1990s argues that "'education' for the non-Indigenous rather than 'justice' for the Indigenous emerged as the dominant focus of the process" (Short 2008, quoted in Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017). Proctor argues that combatting ignorance with knowledge alone is not enough; and Lawther highlights the difference between *knowledge* and *acknowledgement* (Lawther 2013, p. 176). Nonetheless, Taylor's research highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see the need to reduce white ignorance as a prerequisite to both constructive race-relations and Indigenous well-being (Taylor 2022, p. 207). However, she emphasises that First Nations people must play the lead role in determining what knowledge is relevant and why (Taylor 2022, p. 206).

For some theorists, however, settler ignorance about First Nations peoples has the potential to be productive. Drawing on the work of Lévinas, Bell argues that recognition of "unknowable difference" might unsettle and decentre the self and create an "ethical response of endless obligation and responsibility" (Bell 2008, p. 856). Discussing an experimental education project undertaken with university students in New Zealand, Jones argues that the desire to "know" can arise out of an epistemology of domination, "the (White) fantasy of absolute knowledge" (Jones 2001 cited in Bell 2008, p. 862). While we still need to maintain a commitment to cross cultural understanding, Bell argues that certainty of knowledge of 'the other' constitutes bigotry, and that we should instead have a self-reflexive appreciation that knowledge is always provisional. For Bell, this is "ignorance as an act of responsibility for the other, rather than ignorance (or knowledge) as domination" (Bell 2008, p. 864).

Gordon outlines two types of approaches to cultivating historical consciousness—the cognitive approach versus a critical approach; "The former assumes that a moral response necessitates knowledge and understanding of the past whereas the latter focuses on the ethical debt that the present owes to the past regardless of what we know or understand" (Gordon 2015, p. 491). This suggests that irrespective of the causes of ignorance, 'not knowing' is not a valid excuse for not engaging.

## *Disbelief and denial*

Aboriginal educator Wendy Brady attributes disbelief in Aboriginal truth-telling to an unwillingness by non-Indigenous Australians to relinquish control and authority over the truth; Brady states "we as Aboriginal people are much more suspect in our telling of history" (Brady 2014, p. 117). Focus groups undertaken in Australia by Clark, de Costa & Maddison identified that questioning the credibility and authenticity of Aboriginal people of combined Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry was "very widespread among those who feel sceptical about any measure of material support that specifically targets Aboriginal disadvantage" (Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p. 392). Charles Mills highlights the ramifications of racist belief in "nonwhite inferiority...undermining nonwhite claims to knowledge that are not backed up by European epistemic authority," resulting in the discrediting of non-white witnesses and the dismissal of their reports (Mills 2008 p. 243).

Havemann argues that denial has operated in Australia to mask the violence of the dispossession and exclusion of First Nations people (Havemann 2005 p. 57). Havemann applies Stan Cohen's typology of denial to describe the 'logic' of denial in the Australian context:

literal and conscious denial - 'no Indigenous massacres occurred';  
interpretive denial - 'these were not massacres: they were the dispersal or transfer of the Indigenous population for their protection'; or 'it was not official: it was private genocide, by settlers and rogue police';

implicatory denial - 'it's not genocide: the forcible removal of children was aimed to give them the benefits of white civilization'.  
(Havemann 2005, p. 58)

Quoting French anthropologist Didier Fassin, Benjamin Jones describes denialism as distinct from denial; while denial is a form of self-delusion, denialism is morally sanctioned and is “an ideological position whereby one systematically reacts by refusing reality and truth” (Fassin cited in Jones 2020, p. 104).

Sarah Maddison (2012) explores the phenomenon of denial drawing on social psychology theory about group identification. She argues that those who strongly identify with a dominant national ‘in-group’ are more likely to downplay the negative actions of their group, defend nationalist sentiment and feel the need to glorify their national group, creating “a serious obstacle to accepting negative information about their group or national history,” resulting in denial (Maddison 2012, p. 702). Denial is strongest amongst members of dominant social groups, “who are less likely to accept their collective guilt for racial injustice”; indeed, they are more likely to minimise the harms of the past or engage in victim-blaming (Maddison 2012, p. 703).

Sahdra & Ross also examine the role of group identity in remembering past events, including in cases where “ingroup members” were perpetrators or victims of violence (2007). In considering why groups “commemorate and preserve memories of tragedies”, Sahdra and Ross suggest that one answer is “that memories of ingroup suffering are also important to people’s social identity”. For those members of the group that perpetrated the harm, however, Sahdra & Ross found that “high identifiers recall their group’s history in a manner that limits the damage to their social identity. They are less likely than low identifiers to recall harms committed by members of their ingroup”, are also less likely to seek information about harms committed by members of their ingroup, and more likely to categorise negative episodes “in more positive terms” (Sahdra & Ross 2007, p. 393).

### *Trauma and the need for cultural safety in truth-telling*

Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights that truth-telling can be a painful process for First Nations participants. Commenting that “Sharing knowledge is a long-term commitment” (Smith 2012, p. 16), Smith argues that “This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized means for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation, after what is referred to as historical trauma, become crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they have decided consciously or unconsciously to forget” (Smith 2012, p. 147).

Juanita Sherwood highlights the profound impact of “situational, cumulative and intergenerational trauma felt through encounters of systemic and overt violence which are the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians”, which she argues is further compounded by its lack of recognition by mainstream Australia (Sherwood 2009, p. S25).

In a research project investigating young Aboriginal peoples’ experience of historical trauma, Smallwood argues that “Understanding historical trauma requires a multi-level approach that considers the individual, family, and community levels, which are foundational to understanding Aboriginal people's social and emotional wellbeing” (Smallwood 2023, p. 4). Smallwood highlights the impact of historical trauma on young people’s identity:

Young people’s stories brought forward the constant need to respond to questions about how they identify and the proof they need to identify. They expressed these experiences as an

everyday burden of being Aboriginal that at times is inarticulable and answerable to only feelings of the stress and pressure to affirm identity. (Smallwood 2023, p. 8)

The existence of widespread trauma in First Nations communities makes issues of cultural safety in truth-telling critical. Taylor & Habibis highlight however that “Ignorance of history makes many White Australians an unsafe audience with which to discuss their shared history. Where historical facts are met with disbelief, denial and refusal to engage, the interaction is profoundly uncomfortable” (Taylor & Habibis 2020 p. 365).

Bennett & Gates (2022) also highlight the importance of trauma-informed approaches to truth-telling. Drawing on the Department of Health & Human Services 2020 document *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety*, they define a culturally safe space for learning and sharing as “one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel safe and that there is no assault, challenge or denial of their experience” (Bennett & Gates 2022, p. 3).

### *Lack of Trust*

Discussing the use of community-based transitional justice mechanisms in Rwanda and Uganda, Clark highlights that bringing communities which have experienced conflict together can be a fraught process: “engagement is not an inherently positive dynamic; when not managed effectively, it is equally capable of fomenting discord. For engagement to produce positive results, it requires the immense dedication of the parties involved, a genuine sense of trust between them, and effective forms of mediation to ensure that this sense of trust is maintained” (Clark 2012, p. 60).

Carlson & Frazer (2019) describe the long history of First Nations peoples’ marginalisation and exclusion from the institutions of Australian society, many of which were actively involved in causing harms to First Nations communities, highlighting that there are “clear limits to trust in settler-colonial society” (Carlson & Frazer 2019, p. 103). Whilst truth-telling might seek to engage First Nations people and communities, this history means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people might lack trust in truth-telling processes, be sceptical about participating, uncertain about any benefit from their participation or have valid concerns about exposing themselves to ignorant or racist views held by some non-Indigenous people. Carlson & Frazer’s powerful account speaks to the potential role of truth-telling to deal with the history of a range of organisations, governmental and otherwise, who have contributed to the elimination and assimilation of First Nations peoples - the focus here is on health and education, but the findings have broader application to a range of institutional settings (see Carlson & Frazer 2019, pp. 91-94).

### *Lack of accountability*

De Costa & Clark (2016) make some interesting points about non-Indigenous perceptions and the responsibility to engage, categorising non-Indigenous responses into “delegated responsibility” (someone else has the responsibility to act) or “embodied responsibility” (the individual accepting their own responsibility to engage). The responsibility to act / engage is seen by those with delegated responsibility to be located with First Nations people, or the government, rather than non-Indigenous people (De Costa & Clark 2016, p. 200). In contrast, “Embodiment... emerges where, after discussion about the circumstances of Indigenous peoples and the underlying historical causes and social context of those circumstances, participants were able to describe who or what should be responsible in terms of their own identities” (De Costa & Clark 2016, p. 205). Clark, de Costa & Maddison highlight the need “to get beyond the us-and-them construction, which entails cultivating a wider sense of ownership of and responsibility both for unfinished business and for contemporary inequalities” (Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p. 394)

## *Tokenism / Meaningless acknowledgements*

First Nations academics Theresa Ambo & Theresa Beardall (2023) use the term “rhetorical removal” in their analysis of land acknowledgement practices (the Australian equivalent is Acknowledgements of Traditional Owners) by US universities. They argue that these practices result in the selective erasure of First Nations peoples when First Nations are acknowledged by institutions as traditional stewards of their homelands without an accompanying commitment by these institutions to addressing colonial legacies of violence and the redistribution of material support (Ambo & Beardall 2023, p. 105). To move beyond meaningless performative gestures that “rhetorically remove” First Nations peoples, Ambo & Beardall highlight the need for accountability about the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism and the establishment of “meaningful, resource-centred partnerships” with First Nations communities (Ambo & Beardall 2023, p. 131).

Burgess et al also highlight that the tokenistic inclusion of First Nations content or the use of simplistic or deficit discourses about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be obstacles to learning (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 926).

For Absolon, both truth-telling and truth listening are essential to create authentic relationships and dialogue: she argues that “people are tired of contrived attempts (rightly so) and are thirsty for real conversations about real life experiences, issues, challenges, journeys toward truth building and truthful problem solving” (Absolon 2016, p. 51). Truth-telling processes have the potential to create meaningful dialogue between First Nations and non-Indigenous people. Emphasising that this process is more fundamental than ‘repairing’ broken relationships, Barolsky, Berger & Close note that the relationships created through truth-telling will in many cases be new relationships (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, p. 6).

## *Emotional responses*

Protocols about dealing with the range of emotions that truth-telling may surface will be an important component of community truth-telling processes.

It has been noted that people who have experienced trauma frequently tell their stories “in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner,” which is seen by some to undermine the credibility of their experiences (Herman 1992, p. 1). This is an important consideration for truth-telling processes to recognise, particularly where the aim is for broader community acceptance of the veracity of the truths being shared by First Nations truth speakers.

Burgess et al note that non-Aboriginal responses to engaging with Aboriginal content can produce a variety of emotional responses, ranging from resistance to shock, guilt, confusion, hesitation, and racism (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 926). The ‘difficult’ knowledges which arise from the realisation of the harms of colonisation can lead to feelings of discomfort and distress by listeners, resulting in a perceived loss of agency as they grapple with how to best respond (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 935). However, Carlson & Frazer argue that discomfort might be an important part of the process; “It is through these unsettling encounters, difficult emotions, and disorientating dilemmas that we might ‘engage in a process of letting go of deeply held beliefs’” (Carlson & Frazer 2021, pp. 220-1).

Other scholars express concern about the potential appropriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ pain and suffering. For example, Kennedy highlights that compassion can lead to “a false feeling of shared suffering”; participants in truth-telling will need to be able to reflect on and

understand their differences and be able to “exercise empathy without appropriating the other’s pain as one’s own” (Kennedy 2011, p. 273).

Palmer & Pocock examine the differential burdens borne by First Nations and non-Indigenous people in reconciliation processes (2020). They highlight that “the pain of colonization” has not been forgotten by First Nations peoples (Palmer & Pocock 2020, p. 63), who live with its ongoing consequences daily. They suggest that acknowledgement and acceptance of settler discomfort in hearing stories about First Nations peoples’ pain and grievances might be essential, as “it is a reminder of their responsibility for continued suffering and the need for reparation” (Palmer & Pocock 2020, p. 63).

## ***Anger***

First Nations Canadian scholar Rachel Flowers addresses the role of righteous anger, arguing that too often First Nations anger is dismissed as destructive:

To disregard anger and resentment as destructive emotions is an uncritical move to absolve the unforgiven, whereby blame is placed on the injured party, who is seen as an irrational ‘blockade’ blinded by their rage compared to the ‘reasonable’ apologist (Flowers 2015, p. 42).

This poses questions about the legitimacy and place of “righteous anger” in truth-telling; national reconciliation initiatives often place an emphasis on values such as unity and forgiveness, as has been discussed earlier. Rather than reaching a simple unified ‘truth’, the outcomes of truth-telling might be more complex. Rachel Busbridge argues that rather than aiming to achieve consensus, reconciliation should rather enable “different parties to come together in an ‘overlapping dissensus’ that does not presume that political unity comes about by a shared commitment to agreed-upon principles of justice, but is rather a ‘contingent possibility of politics that comes through contesting the nature of the injustice that brought the parties to the conflict together in the first place’” (Busbridge 2017, p. 152).

## ***Shame***

In her analysis of settler shame stemming from truth-telling exercises in the Canadian context, Kizuk (2020) argues that settler shame produces a bad feeling needing resolution. More often than not, the preference is “to re-establish the self as good, or worthy of pride, rather than respond to other-oriented concerns of justice”. As such, for Kizuk, “settler shame maintains a settler colonial system of oppression” (Kizuk 2020, p. 162).

In contrast, Lambourne highlights the positive role that shame (rather than guilt) can play in re-integrating offenders into society - “This is reminiscent of many traditional, indigenous non-Western justice processes where the offender acknowledges what he or she has done and the harm that it has caused, and as a result may undergo some form of punishment determined by a community elder, and yet the final outcome of the process is seen as a restoration of the relationship between the offender and the community. In both cases, there is an experience of shame rather than guilt that enables the offender to voluntarily take on obligations to repair the harm, rather than being forced to do so by the state or a court of law” (2016, p. 59).

## ***Guilt***

Sarah Maddison (2012) discusses collective guilt as a barrier to historical understanding. While some take comfort in denial of historical injustice or through rationalising colonisation, many other Australians experience “collective guilt”, which leads people from the dominant group to focus on themselves rather than on the victims, or creates unpleasant feelings which people then commonly seek to avoid or deny (Maddison 2012, p. 699). Maddison argues that collective guilt is therefore “a



profound and complex barrier to a national examination of the systemic racism that continues to marginalise indigenous peoples in Australia” (Maddison 2012, p. 697).

For other theorists, guilt can be a productive emotion. Carlson & Frazer argue that because of the ongoing injustice of First Nations dispossession, settler guilt cannot be fully reconciled; feelings of discomfort and guilt by settler Australians should be understood as “necessary—offering possibilities for reevaluating one’s relation to the land on which one is situated and the people to whom it rightfully belongs” (Carlson & Frazer 2021, p. 222).

## *Indifference*

Research suggests that the barriers to learning historical ‘truths’ are attitudinal as well as structural (Clark 2008), and researchers have lamented the piecemeal nature of current educational approaches as well as the levels of “disaffection, disinterest and denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history” (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 502). Discussing their research involving focus groups undertaken with non-Indigenous Canadians, Tom Clark & Ravi de Costa identify non-engagement as “a crucial obstacle to a substantive shift in relations” between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples (Clark & de Costa 2011, p. 330).

## *Truth fatigue*

In her chapter exploring teaching and learning difficult histories, Anne Clark notes that “an uncoordinated overexposure” to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories seems to be causing a lack of interest and backlash from students (Clark 2017, p. 83); students experience a “fragmented, repetitive and incomplete” Australian history education (Clark 2017, p. 85). This can lead to truth fatigue, a feeling of “overexposure,” that they have “heard it all before” (Clark 2017, p. 83).

## *Racism / white privilege*

Taylor & Habibis highlight the unconscious racism of many non-Aboriginal Australians, commenting that “Just as oppression can be internalised by the oppressed, domination can be internalised by the dominant” (Taylor & Habibis 2020, p. 356). Charles Mills argues that deeply held beliefs about racialised differences prevent truthful perceptions of non-whites and “serve as a categorical barrier against their equitable moral treatment” (Mills 2008, p. 239).

Yin Paradies identifies some of the key socio-demographic factors underpinning Australian attitudes towards reconciliation, highlighting the importance of disaggregating survey data by age, gender, education, Indigeneity, race/ethnicity and nativity (Paradies 2016, p. 112). Paradies describes racism as a key barrier to reconciliation (Paradies 2016, p. 104). Drawing on existing data, Paradies’ finds that up to 15% of the Australian population are overtly racist (depending on which indicators are used), while 4-8% are anti-racist, although up to half of this latter group are unsure about “what action can be taken to advance reconciliation and reduce Indigenous disadvantage.” While 70-80% of non-Indigenous Australians acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as ‘first Australians’, around 25% fail to recognise First Nations disadvantage; concerningly, a higher proportion of young people than older people have this perception (Paradies 2016, pp. 109-110). Paradies also notes that problematic views are not limited to non-Indigenous people, with some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people expressing “feelings of inferiority and lack of pride in their culture” (Paradies 2016, p. 110). While providing information is not sufficient in itself to change attitudes or behaviours (Paradies 2016, pp. 112-113), awareness of white privilege “appears to be an important driver of a positive attitudes to Indigenous Australians and reconciliation, in particular” (Paradies 2016, p. 112). Burgess et al also emphasise that critical engagement with notions of Whiteness and challenging oppressive structures and



practices are essential to avoiding tokenism and inadvertently reproducing Aboriginal alienation (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 938).

### *Lack of agreement around truth-telling aims and processes*

Misconceptions around the aims of truth-telling (e.g. acknowledging First Nations perspectives vs “sharing” histories) or misunderstandings of the processes by which truth-telling takes place can significantly impact on non-Indigenous perceptions of the validity of truth-telling. For example, Payne (2021) argues that the failure of some non-Indigenous people to recognise that the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry was not operating in a traditional retributive justice mode undermined their acceptance of the validity of the Inquiry’s findings (Payne 2021, p. 26).

### *Lack of knowledge / opportunity to participate in truth-telling*

Researchers have identified a lack of awareness amongst non-Indigenous people about what they could do to act on their interest in deeper engagement with First Nations peoples (see, for example, Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p. 382). Paradies argues that given research findings about lack of clarity about how to engage / act operating as a barrier to participation in reconciliation by non-Indigenous Australians, there is a need for public education initiatives to “focus on strengthening knowledge and confidence of how best to further reconciliation in Australia among those most committed to doing so” (Paradies 2016, p. 114).

### *Failure to acknowledge diversity*

There is a need to acknowledge the diversity of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples in truth-telling processes. Diversity needs to be acknowledged in multiple ways.

The diversity within and between First Nations peoples needs to be recognised (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 52). In addition, lack of differentiation in the category “non-Indigenous” commonly fails to recognise diversity amongst non-Indigenous peoples (Clark & de Costa 2011, p. 330; Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017).

First Nations historian Shino Konishi has argued that “the simplification of the Indigenous/settler binary has limitations in understanding the complexity of subjectivities and interpersonal relationships in many settler colonial contexts” (cited in Rudolph 2021, p. 183). Rata & Al-Asaad’s 2019 article discussing the New Zealand context is one of very few identified in this literature review that looks beyond the ‘white settler / Indigenous’ binary to consider the implications and possibilities for solidarity between First Nations peoples and settlers of colour. Rata & Al-Asaad argue that “strengthening Māori–ToC [tauiwi (settler) of colour] solidarities requires us to subvert the settler colonial lens, deconstruct identity binaries, recognise our distinct yet interrelated experiences of settler colonial racialisation and oppression, accept the conditional nature of inter-group solidarity, and align compatible Indigenous sovereignty and anti-racism movements” (Rata & Al-Asaad 2019, p. 229). Clark, de Costa & Maddison also note the impact of differences in cultural background on attitudes towards First Nations peoples, observing that “racialised people [i.e. those from non-white non-Indigenous ethnicities] often seem to speak and think differently about the realities of Indigenous life and marginalisation” (Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p. 386).

# Enablers of truth-telling

The literature highlights a range of factors that enable participation of both First Nations and non-Indigenous people in truth-telling and result in more effective truth-telling, summarised below.

## *The educative role of Elders*

Iseke highlights that “Indigenous Elders are the educators, storytellers, historians, language keepers, and healers of our communities” (quoted in Sium & Ritskes 2013, p. 36). Burgess et al note the powerful and transformative impact of Elders and Aboriginal community educators when they have a prominent role in explaining relational connections with and responsibilities for Country (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 929).

## *Relationality*

The connection between truth-telling and belonging is highlighted in the work of Burgess et al (2022b), who argue that “Aboriginal-led truth telling is possible when values and ethics emanate from an Indigenous worldview, respect is embedded through deep listening, and connections develop into relationships” (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 935).

From a non-Indigenous perspective, internationally renowned peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach also identifies relationality at the centre of reconciliation, arguing that relational engagement enables people to see “spaces of intersection, both those that exist and those that can be created,” and to imagine new post-conflict relationships (quoted in Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2015, p. 5).

Research undertaken in the Canadian context has identified that interpersonal engagement between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples was aligned with non-Indigenous respondents accepting personal responsibility to engage with First Nations issues rather than seeing it as the responsibility of some “other” (whether government or another body) to act (Clark, de Costa & Maddison 2017, p 388).

## *Inclusivity*

Brounéus & Guthrey argue that truth-telling processes need to be inclusive and participatory and should seek to amplify the voices of marginalized groups. Their work in Solomon Islands highlights the importance of acknowledging the multiple perspectives and narratives of all parties affected by conflict (Brounéus & Guthrey 2018).

Elizabeth Stanley also links the success of truth processes to their ability to “represent all sides, and be commonly accepted and inclusionary in their approach. If viewed as biased or exclusionary, the symbols will bear less popular resonance” (Stanley 2002, p. 10).

## *Dialogue*

Hattam & Matthews argue that “‘reconciliation’ must involve dialogue” (Hattam & Matthews 2012, p. 17), commenting that “Dialogue demands that we listen to the other’s views in the ‘strongest possible light’ with a view to seeking common ground, but also an obligation to come to terms with and to make something new, being open to the possibility of being revitalized, of disturbing our habitual ways of ‘seeing’, thinking and being in the world” (Hattam & Matthews 2012, p. 18).

However, writing in the New Zealand context, Jones & Jenkins problematise the desire for dialogue, arguing that “The desire for shared talk is, at its core, a desire for the dominant/colonizer group to engage in some benevolent action - for them/us to *grant a hearing* to the usually suppressed voice and

'realms of meaning' of the indigene. After all, as already mentioned, *indigenous* access into the realms of meaning of the dominant Other is hardly required; members of marginalized/colonized groups are immersed in it daily. It is the colonizer, wishing to hear, who calls for dialogue" (Jones & Jenkins 2008, p 478). Reflecting on her experience teaching a group of Pakeha students Indigenous Studies, Jones argues that "the desire for Pakeha to understand Māori can be an 'imperializing desire for absolution on the part of dominant groups – an unproductive need for reassurance' which actually obscures the need for students to reflect critically on their own position of privilege or their complicity in on-going colonial relations of power" (cited in McGloin 2015, p. 274). These arguments however sit somewhat at odds with the strong call for truth-telling processes in the Australian context which has emerged from First Nations peoples themselves, rather than from a Western desire "to know the Other".

Sarah Maddison calls for a more "agonistic" or combative dialogue between First Nations and non-Indigenous people, to avoid truth-telling resulting in attempts to "draw a line" under the past or to close down options for ongoing political engagement (Maddison 2019, p. 189). Maddison argues that this agonistic approach to truth-telling requires "behaviours that avoid pitting 'good' against 'evil'; rely on testimony from those on all sides of a contested memory (i.e. 'victims, 'perpetrators', and 'bystanders'); recognise the importance of emotions in these spaces and reconstruct the contexts, struggles and multiple narratives that contributed to mass crimes and historic wrongs" (Maddison 2019, p. 189). Rather than seeing truth-telling as leading to the establishment of a single truth, an agonistic approach would instead "focus on engaging conflicting historical accounts through dialogue intended to 'make a conflict more liveable'" (Maddison 2019, p. 190). Maddison highlights that rigorous debate about the facts and implications of the past is a likely result of truth-telling, but that it is through this ongoing discourse that political reconciliation actually takes place (Maddison 2019, p. 190).

### *Acknowledging that truth-telling takes time*

Truth is not a quick fix but is rather "a long-term relationship that one nurtures over the course of many years" (Daly 2008, p. 39). Changing beliefs and perceptions is a long-term process, one which Margaret Urban Walker argues "we should expect to be intergenerational" (cited in Wilkins 2019, p. 148). It is not enough to undertake truth-telling processes as a "one-off" event; "The truths told must keep being retold and the wider injustices and flaws within society that they illuminate must be explored and addressed" (Wilkins 2019, p. 148).

There is also an ongoing challenge to sustain the gains made through truth-telling processes. Discussing their research undertaken in Solomon Islands, Brounéus & Guthrey note that lasting peace requires ongoing efforts to address the root causes of conflict and to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups continue to be heard (Brounéus & Guthrey 2018). However, as noted earlier, the brunt of community truth-telling is currently being borne primarily by First Nations Australians, without appropriate resourcing and support (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, p. 6).

### *Recognising the limits of truth*

Erin Daly's 2008 article "Truth Skepticism" spells out some of the challenges of the truth-seeking project. While Daly's focus is on truth commissions in transitional contexts, many of her findings have applicability to other forms of truth-telling.

Daly discusses the idea of a "truth cascade," her term for the multiple benefits seen to accrue from truth processes – these include "helping victims to heal, promote accountability, drawing a bright line between the past and the present, promoting reconciliation" (Daly 2008, p. 23). However, Daly cautions about expecting too much of truth-telling; "The problem is that the truth neither is nor does all

that we expect of it. It is not as monolithic, objective or verifiable as we would like it to be, and it cannot necessarily accomplish the ambitious goals we assign it” (Daly 2008, p. 23).

Some of the problems that Daly identifies with truth-telling processes are that truth is not monolithic, so producing “a single accounting of events” is not possible (Daly 2008, p. 25); the experience of those who have lived through atrocities becomes “lost in translation” (Daly 2008, p. 26); there is “not enough truth”, and important questions about why violations occur and the motivations of perpetrators remain unanswered (Daly 2008, p. 27); while participants seek an authoritative record, “The multiplicity, subjectivity and mutual incompatibility intrinsic in the concept of truth make the goal of establishing a single record elusive” (Daly 2008, p. 28); the truths produced are questioned as “There is no way to ensure that a report on the truth will be viewed as authoritative by all constituencies” (Daly 2008, p. 28); the benefits of truth-telling to victims may be intangible (Daly 2008, pp. 30-1); truth does not necessarily promote reconciliation and “may actually impede reconciliation” (Daly 2008, p. 36); “establishing the truth about an event is no guarantee that beliefs and attitudes change,” especially in deeply divided societies (Daly 2008, p. 37); and the truths produced are “taken as authoritative by those who are predisposed to accepting the truth it tells and by those whose minds are open to change based on new information, but not by those who are committed to a different understanding of past events” (Daly 2008, p. 38).

Daly provides some valuable advice to those embarking on truth-telling: “first, establish the goal(s) of developing a program that emphasizes the truth; second, determine whether the putative benefits are worth the costs and third, design a program so as to enhance the likelihood of success” (Daly 2008, p. 40). Truth-telling processes also need to align with the desired goals (Daly 2008, p. 40). Daly highlights that “the benefits associated with truth-telling are difficult to achieve and need support...be realistic in asserting what the truth can and cannot do” (Daly 2008, p. 41).

Arguing “In Defence of Reconciliation”, Victoria Freeman also acknowledges some of the hard truths that need to be faced in reconciliation processes by both First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples; “Indigenous peoples have to become reconciled to the fact that non-Indigenous people are here to stay...no matter how much restitution is offered, nothing settlers can ever do will fully make up or restore what was lost or damaged through colonialism...But non-Indigenous people also have to become reconciled to something very unpleasant, which is our history on this continent. Non-Indigenous people have to acknowledge that colonialism happened and continues, and we must acknowledge our own relationship to it. We have to acknowledge that, like it or not, all non-Indigenous peoples, even recent newcomers, benefit from the colonialism of the past and from ongoing colonizing actions in the present” (Freeman 2014, p. 218). Little & Maddison highlight that reconciliation is messy, complex and contested; they note that the literature tends “to oversimplify what is at stake, to establish and then contest a set of binaries: reconciliation requires truth or justice; vengeance or forgiveness, it is about unity or difference; race or class; and recognition or redistribution” (Little & Maddison 2017, p. 146).

Adrian Little reminds us that “Truth is not necessarily cathartic, and it cannot simply be generalized from individuals to broader groups or to society as a whole”. while we cannot expect truth to repair damaged relationships and trauma, “we probably should aspire to improving them” (Little 2020, p. 40).

### *Recognising structural disadvantage and the ongoing impacts of the past*

As William Faulkner famously commented, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Truth-telling needs to acknowledge the continuity between past events and ongoing colonial relationships (Fast &

Drouin-Gagné 2019 pp. 97-8), “the extent to which the injustice endemic to historical harm persists and permeates contemporary social structures, often with the tacit endorsement of current administrations” (Durbach 2019, p. 209).

Reconciliation initiatives are often critiqued for individualising collective harms and failing to acknowledge or address structural issues (see, for example, Balint, Evans & McMillan 2014; Nagy 2013), and for failing to address the ongoing impacts of injustices such as land dispossession or to recognise the self-determination of First Nations peoples (Corntassel & Holder 2008, p. 466). To be effective, truth-telling in the Australian context will need to recognise systemic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and centre First Nations self-determination and sovereignty as key principles.

### *Maintaining hope for a better future*

Little argues that truth-telling should have a future orientation, as “Truth is about the future as much as it is about the past” (Little 2020, p. 40). He suggests that the call for “Voice, Treaty, Truth” is as much about improving the articulation of socioeconomic concerns in the future as it is about addressing past wrongdoing (Little 2020, p. 51). Hattam & Matthews also propose using the ‘utopian imaginary’ to imagine a different future; “We want to argue that the ‘utopian imaginary’ and social idealism is an important and necessary aspect of social transformation and change since it facilitates envisaging alternatives, mobilization and planning towards the achievement of ethical objectives” (Hattam & Matthews 2012, p. 22).

### *The importance of education*

Arguing that truth-recovery projects are a form of public pedagogy (Walker 2012, p. 20), Margaret Urban Walker describes truth-telling as a form of human rights education, arguing that “the more frequently and widely truth-telling processes are implemented, the more effectively human rights standards are circulated” (Walker 2012, p. 21).

Reflecting on the successes and failures of the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) in Australia in the 1990s, Andrew Gunstone identifies two key successes: “the encouraging of local community involvement in reconciliation, and the developing of a range of reconciliation publications and resources” (Gunstone 2016, p. 199). However, Gunstone argues that these two programs ultimately contributed to the failure of CAR’s educational goals because of their failure to genuinely address First Nations rights, including “sovereignty, self-determination, native title, land rights and a treaty” (Gunstone 2016, p. 199). Gunstone and Walker’s research highlights the importance of a human rights-centred approach to truth-telling.

Maddison & Stastny (2016) investigate non-Indigenous people’s sites of learning about Australian history and First Nations peoples and cultures, exploring where, how and what non-Indigenous people learn and whether this learning leads to greater understanding and engagement between First Nations and non-Indigenous people. Their research identifies that non-Indigenous people learn about Australian history, First Nations people and cultures, and reconciliation from four main sources: school; media (including television, films, radio, books, and newspapers); work; and family and friends (Maddison & Stastny 2016, p. 235). They note however that “Unfortunately, the largely stereotypical understanding of Indigenous peoples and cultures that they draw from these four educational sites were also consistent, whether participants form their understanding from indirect or interactional forms of learning” (Maddison & Stastny 2016, p. 240). Maddison & Stastny find a lack of evidence to support that “education is a deeply transformative site with regard to non-Indigenous attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and/or reconciliation” (Maddison & Stastny 2016, p. 233), concluding

that “It seems that the logic of settler colonialism also fosters a kind of ‘deafness’ to learning about Australia’s history, Indigenous people and cultures, and an unwillingness to engage” (Maddison & Stastny 2016, p. 245).

Others are more hopeful about the impact of education on reconciliation. Marom & Rattray identify four themes that they see as central to education for reconciliation: “Land as educator, Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, reciprocity, and sovereignty” (Marom & Rattray 2019 p. 7). They identify some key components in the creation of ‘the cultural interface’, Martin Nakata’s term describing the complex contested space between First Nations and Western knowledge systems: “1. Indigenous participants must be in the majority in order to address the imbalances of Western culture and prevent academic-dominated discussions. In a set class composition, Indigenous knowledge could be brought in (with permission). 2. Developing relations with local Indigenous leaders and cultural teachers is necessary in order not to learn ‘about,’ but with. 3. Indigenous pedagogies, such as talking circles (that allow each individual to provide their thoughts), and learning circles (where a cultural teacher shares learning through explanations and demonstrations), should be used instead of a frontal classroom approach. 4. Getting outside of the class and being on the land is important, as it conveys the idea of the land as a classroom” (Marom & Rattray 2019, p. 14).

Sophie Rudolph reminds us that we need to be cognisant of First Nations peoples’ aspirations for education, arguing that “education has a range of roles in contributing to justice projects for First Nations” (Rudolph 2021, p. 191). This theme is echoed by Taylor & Habibis (2020), whose research centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and highlights First Nations peoples’ enduring belief in the importance of addressing White ignorance. Taylor & Habibis also highlight that we are yet to see a systemic, well-funded, community-wide effort in Australia to address White ignorance (Taylor & Habibis 2020, p. 368); we currently lack the data to accurately assess the potential impact of education in shifting attitudes.

Barolsky, Berger & Close describe community truth-telling currently taking place throughout Australia as largely focusing on experiential learning through “immersive experiences, rather than focusing on facts alone” (Barolsky, Berger & Close 2023, p. 7).

### ***Pedagogical approaches***

Bedford & Wall propose a ‘de-mythologising pedagogy’ to teaching Australian history, informed by eight guiding principles:

1. First, Do No Harm. There is a need to “both share truth and enhance a sense of shared humanity.” History education should take place in a spirit of Makarrata - “At no time should [teaching materials] cause further hurt or division” (Bedford & Wall 2020, pp. 49-50). This does not mean glossing over the harms of colonisation, but explicitly identifying white settler values of this time and the silencing of First Nations voices (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 50). The aim is not to create a sense of guilt but to empower non-Indigenous people to recognise and oppose oppressive systems (Bedford & Wall 2020, pp. 50-51).
2. The Past is Not Even Past. This principle addresses the need to emphasise the connection between past events and the lived experiences of First Nations peoples today. “The past is very much alive in our communities,” and this is true of settler descendants as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 51).
3. Songlines. This principle emphasises the need to teach about pre-contact First Nations culture and the resilience and survival of First Nations cultures and connection to Country (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 51).

4. Give Voice. This principle highlights the importance of recognising the diversity of First Nations peoples and centring their voices and perspectives, to avoid speaking ‘on behalf of’ First Nations peoples (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 52).
5. Life in All Its Complexity. “Truth-telling must explore the complexity of human experience” and avoid creating simplistic binaries of ‘good versus evil’ (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 52).
6. It Was a War. While there is a need to challenge the myth of peaceful settlement, this principle emphasises that there is also a need to avoid positioning First Nations peoples as “merely inevitable fatalities of a colonisation process” by recognising the agency and resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Celebrating First Nations survival is an important strategy (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 53).
7. Teach History Well. This principle highlights value of the skills of history as a discipline - a questioning, critical mindset; asking questions; evaluating evidence; making informed decisions; and making meaningful connections between the past, present and possible futures (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 54).
8. Empower Students to Build a Better World. The aim of teaching this history should be to empower learners to be active and responsible citizens (Bedford & Wall 2020, p. 54).

We have highlighted previously the need to avoid approaches to truth-telling that seek closure on the past or to that attempt to contain First Nations peoples within Western knowledge systems. Drawing on the work of Zembylas & Boler, Colleen McGloin argues the need for a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’, an approach that requires “learning to inhabit ambiguity, discomfort and indeterminism” (Zembylas & Boler quoted in McGloin 2015, p. 272). This is a challenging process; “[To] embrace discomfort and ambiguity, of course, requires courage — courage to tolerate emotional uncertainty and courage to open up intellectually” (Zembylas & Boler quoted in McGloin 2015, p. 272).

### *Engaging young people in truth-telling*

Heykoop (2014) usefully identifies some key enablers and disabling factors for young people’s participation in truth-telling; although her research is based on a specific context (North Uganda), the principles she identifies have wide applicability. Young people in Heykoop’s study wanted to have a clear understanding of what they could expect from truth-telling, and how it would lead to tangible change in their lives. Participants identified four key enabling factors that would support their engagement in post-conflict truth telling. These factors include: (a) assistance and follow-up support; (b) acceptance and feeling free from finger-pointing, stigmatization, and community mistrust; (c) the assurance of confidentiality; and (d) forgetting. Young people frequently cited assistance and follow-up in the form of counselling, advice, financial and educational support as an important factor or reason for young people to share about the past (Heykoop 2014, p. 84). Young people also identified three prominent disabling factors, which might negatively affect a young person’s personal well-being, their ability to live in community, and their decision to participate in post-conflict truth telling, including (a) revisiting painful memories, (b) fear of harm, and (c) no assistance or change as a result of participation (Heykoop 2014, pp. 89-90).



### **Heykoop's principles for engaging young people:**

- Young people's participation in truth telling is important/essential.
- There should be special measures of protection for all young people under the age of 25 to participate.
- Young people must be engaged in deciding how young people should be involved. This will help to ensure respect for young people's best interests.
- Sensitize young people about the importance of their participation and how they could be involved in post-conflict truth telling.
- Treat young people with respect and dignity.
- Confidentiality should be assured for all young people.
- Young people's participation should be voluntary—not forced.
- All young people should be treated equally- not as perpetrators.
- Use creative and flexible ways to involve young people.
- Non-discrimination- all young people should have the opportunity to participate.
- Offer several opportunities for young people to engage—not one-offs.
- Ensure real changes happen in young people's lives- just sharing is not enough. (Heykoop 2014, pp. 157-8)

Writing in the Australian context, Smallwood (2023) reports on the findings of her research involving interviews with 15 young Aboriginal people, utilising a Gamilaroi practice called “winanga-li” (to listen, to hear, to know and to remember). Smallwood notes that “Understanding historical trauma requires a multi-level approach that considers the individual, family, and community levels, which are foundational to understanding Aboriginal people's social and emotional wellbeing. At each of these levels, the presence of protective factors includes a person's connection to their identity, cultural expression, and engagement within their communities as they are defined and imagined” (Smallwood 2023, p. 4). Smallwood highlights the deep impact that the questioning of young people about how they identify and the proof they need to identify has, experienced as a “constant pressure to defend and explain their identity” (Smallwood 2023, p. 9).

## **Truth-listening**

Truth-telling requires listening (Davis 2016) and an empathetic audience. Burgess et al highlight that there is a need for “deep, purposeful listening...demanding cultural humility, open mindedness and critical personal positioning” (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 934). This type of listening requires “the development of reciprocal, honest and trusting relationships through ongoing reflexivity and commitment to the process” (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 934).

Simpkins reminds us that our style of listening is culturally informed, highlighting the challenges posed to intercultural listening and truthful dialogue by the “many truths and many differing realities” between First Nations and non-Indigenous people (Simpkins 2010, p. 326).

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who writes about the Aboriginal concept of *dadirri*, describes listening as a vital life-skill that Aboriginal people learn from an early age, but one that is not often reciprocated by white Australians:

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn - not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting... We have learned to speak the white man's language. We have listened to what he had to say. This learning and



listening should go both ways. We would like people in Australia to take time to listen to us. (Ungunmerr-Baumann 2002)

Atkinson describes *dadirri* as “a deep contemplative process of ‘listening to one another’ in reciprocal relationships” (Atkinson 2002, p. 15). Describing *dadirri* as “the search for understanding and meaning, a cyclical process of listening, observing the feelings and actions, and reflecting and learning as individuals, and with community” ((Morris et al 2022, pp. 140-1), Morris et al outline their use of the Aboriginal concept of *dadirri* in a research project, arguing that “*Dadirri* combats colonisation by creating a space for the things that need to be pushed aside to resurface; the importance of culture and traditional Lore, deep listening, allows us to reconnect – to nature, to ourselves, to each other” (Morris et al 2022, p. 153).

Colleen McGloin outlines the practice of what she describes as “listening to hear”. McGloin argues that for change in thought, perception and action to occur, listening must be a risk-taking venture; “If we are only to hear what is safe or familiar, there will be no conflict, no ‘poles of contradiction’, no impetus or motivation for transformation” (McGloin 2015, p. 277). Carlson & Frazer suggest that this type of courageous listening “necessitates understanding the settler project of Indigenous elimination, and its manifestation through policy, practice, desire and discourse. And it means understanding colonialism not as a historical event, but as a current, ongoing, lived reality” (Carlson & Frazer 2021, p. 220).

## Compassionate witnessing

Rosanne Kennedy emphasises the need for non-Indigenous Australians to learn to become compassionate witnesses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suffering; she argues that we must educate the community to receive painful testimonies (Kennedy 2011, p. 263). Exploring the Sorry Book campaign that developed in response to the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry and Report, Kennedy discusses the opportunity afforded by the Sorry Books to bear witness and respond to the testimonies presented at the Inquiry (Kennedy 2011, p. 259), highlighting that some signatories struggled to find appropriate ways to express their sorrow (p. 272). Kennedy’s findings also have implications for community responses to truth-telling.

## Truth-telling and healing

Truth-telling is usually based in the official acknowledgement of the truth of victim accounts which had previously been ignored or denied, and is therefore frequently associated with ‘healing’. For example, Appleby & Davis comment that “Healing can only begin when this true history is taught” (Appleby & Davis 2018, p. 507). Some have problematised the relationship between truth-telling and healing, emphasising that the context within truth-telling takes place is critical, particularly for more vulnerable members of a community (see for example Aoláin & Turner 2007; Brounéus 2008; Payne 2021); while others have questioned the appropriateness of individualised, therapeutic responses to collective and systemic harms. However, Rosemary Nagy has emphasised that there are significant differences between settler and First Nations approaches to and understanding of healing. In the context of her work on the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Nagy describes healing for First Nations peoples as ‘a process of connectedness’ between land, tradition and community; “for Indigenous peoples healing moves beyond individual or therapeutic approaches to encompass the need for structural change” (Nagy 2013, pp. 60-1).

Jo-Ann Episkenew highlights that the need for healing does not mean that First Nations peoples are sick; rather, “Colonialism is sick; under its auspices and supported by its mythology, the colonizers have inflicted heinous wounds on the Indigenous population that they set out to civilize. Although Indigenous

people understand their need to heal from colonial trauma, most settlers deny that their society is built on a sick foundation and, therefore, deny that it requires a cure” (Jo-Ann Episkenew quoted in Henderson & Wakeham 2009, p. 16).

## Acknowledgement

Cohen sees *acknowledgement* as the bridge between knowing the truth and doing something about it. Acknowledgement is the opposite of denial – that we see, react, emote, and *do something* – “intervene, help, become committed” (Cohen 2001, p. x). Acknowledgement is related to knowledge; Cohen states “Acknowledgement is what happens to knowledge when it becomes officially sanctioned and enters the public discourse” (Cohen 2001, p. 225). Marcia Langton has highlighted that “there’s very little or no acknowledgement of this is what happened in Australian, but more importantly, there is no remorse. No acknowledgement. When historians raise these incidents in Australian history, they’re accused of lying or they’ve got their facts wrong. Most Australians would prefer to believe that” (quoted in Neath & Brook 2018, p. 144). Perhaps this is the role that truth-telling processes most successfully fulfil, to operate as a form of public acknowledgement of atrocity and suffering, a particularly vital role when powerful vested interests attempt to suppress such knowledge. The strongest response to arguments about the futility of attempting to ‘know’ about historical injustice is the importance placed by survivors on establishing ‘the facts’, setting the historical record ‘straight’, and countering the lies and misinformation that facilitate atrocities taking place (Cohen 2001).

## Truth-telling methods

This section identifies methods drawn from the academic literature that might usefully be applied to community-based truth-telling.

Maddison & Nakata argue that “Work on Indigenous-settler relations must centre Indigenous knowledge and experience, intercepting settler ignorance and the reproduction of ‘stagnated’ Indigenous-settler relations to conceive of new futures shaped through more just and ethical relations” (Maddison & Nakata 2019, p. 9). For Sium & Ritskes, “Indigenous truth rests on the empowerment of Indigenous land and sovereignty, not needing any legitimisation from colonial states or modernity. These claims to Indigenous epistemologies and truths rest on Indigenous peoples and lands as carriers and sustainers of knowledge production” (Sium & Ritskes 2013, p. ii). Rosemary Nagy highlights the need to use First Nations methodologies, to undertake “truth telling and truth sharing in a culturally appropriate way” (Nagy 2012, p. 359). Fast & Drouin-Gagné also highlight the value of using First Nations approaches to education, including storytelling, storying and counter-stories; Indigenous community-based pedagogy; place-based and land-based pedagogy; and highlight “the use of story as a valuable medium; the importance of place and connection to local lands and land wisdom, learning about and respecting local protocols, the integral role of Elders as knowledge holders, valuing relationality, and the practice of teaching through Indigenous embodiment” (Fast & Drouin-Gagné 2019, p. 106).

Anishinaabekwe scholar Kathleen Absolon proposes the following key principles to building relationships based on truth and honesty, which could usefully inform community-based truth-telling in Australia:

- How will we create an inclusive and relationship building process?
- Who will coordinate a planning session to begin?
- Are Indigenous people who are relevant to the topic invited?

- Who will you invite? Inviting people who have interests indicates an investment in a meaningful and purposeful process.
- Is there a space that generates respect in the sharing of ideas? Creating spaces that allow people space to share, engage & be on land is helpful.
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure Indigenous people are listened to?
- How will respect be enacted?
- What truths need to be shared?
- What Indigenous process can be integrated to foster respectful sharing and listening: relationship building? Ask about the circle process.
- What activities and events can be planned that build respectful and inclusive relationships with Indigenous peoples? (Absolon 2016, p. 50).

## *Yarning*

One First Nations research method is yarning, “a conversational, deep listening approach located in a culturally safe place and based on respectful relationships to understand self and others” (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 927). Brigden et al argue that “Yarning circles support building respectful relationships through respectful, harmonious, creative, and collaborative ways of communicating. They foster accountability and provide a safe place to be heard and to respond, and promote learner interactions, as well as supporting community engagement” (Brigden et al 2020, p. 133).

## *Storytelling*

Burgess et al emphasise the importance of narrative approaches – the unfolding of stories, lived experiences, events and meanings that do not necessarily follow a linear chronology (Burgess et al 2022a, p. 158). Emberley describes First Nations storytelling “as a form of testimony” (Emberley 2014, p. 7), while Sium & Ritskes argue that “Contrary to liberal notions of stories as depoliticized acts of sharing, we must recognize stories as acts of creative rebellion” (Sium & Ritskes 2013, p. v).

Commenting that “A storyteller believes in the power of story to heal the world”, Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes argue that “We remember best if the story touches our emotions, because emotional memory runs deep” (Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes 2014, p. 220). They also caution against the trivialization of First Nations stories and knowledge, and the demand for documentary corroboration of First Nations oral knowledge (Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes 2014, pp. 220-1).

Storytelling involves responsibilities. Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes highlight the dual responsibilities of the listener – “to seek and find meaning in the story” – and of the storyteller – “to tell an appropriate story for the circumstances and the listeners” (Baldasaro, Maldonado & Baltes 2014, p. 226). Sium & Ritskes highlight accountability as a key feature of First Nations storytelling, identifying that “the storyteller must feel a sense of intellectual and often spiritual responsibility to the audience they speak to”; they also consider the responsibilities of the listeners who are “witnesses to these stories of pain, healing, and transformation” (Sium & Ritskes 2013, p. viii).

Writing in the Canadian context, Aparna Mishra Tarc calls for non-Indigenous people to hear, engage with and understand First Nations stories: “Reconciling relations between Indigenous and Canadian society requires a committed reconsideration of oral historical Indigenous consciousness that tells another, sustainable story of many nations on the land we live. Through a hearing of these oral histories and ‘sad songs’ as pedagogical and political forms of dialogue and committed action, we might begin to restore and renew our shaky and grief-stricken hold on the land and each other” (Tarc 2020, p. 67).

## *Customary or traditional justice approaches*

A number of sources highlighted the use of local or community-based approaches to transitional justice, employing “forms of local, customary, or traditional justice and dispute resolution” (Clark 2012, p. 50). The use of local, culturally-specific truth-telling and transitional justice mechanisms has been endorsed by the UN in the 2004 Special Representative Report on Rule of Law and Transitional Justice (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 110). Some examples of the use of traditional or customary practices in truth-telling and conflict resolution are discussed in the case studies in the Appendix. Of course, the term ‘Makarrata’ is drawn from the traditional Yolgnu practice of spearing a wrongdoer to temporarily disable them, “to settle them down, to calm them”; Little suggests that the connotation of the term ‘Makarrata’ is more radical than the benign idea of reconciliation, requiring “that the capacity of the settler colonial state to perpetrate and sustain injustices against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be removed or severely curtailed” (Little 2020, p. 42).

## *Acknowledging Country / place in truth-telling*

The inclusion of Country-based learning can be an effective tool to promote understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 926).

Learning from Country cultural immersion experiences led by Aboriginal community-based educators have been demonstrated to be an effective tool in deepening learning for preservice teachers (Burgess et al 2022b). Burgess et al argue that sovereignty is at the heart of Country-centred relationships, and that truth-telling also has a critical role to play (Burgess et al 2022a, p. 167). They have developed a Learning from Country Framework to empower educators to incorporate Learning from Country principles in their personal and professional identities (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 925). For Burgess et al, “Relationship-building through deep listening, respectful and reciprocal practices in a culturally safe place encourages understanding of self in relation to others and Country and contributes to emerging individual and collective narratives of place” (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 930); this approach has the potential to inform community-based truth-telling processes.

Yunkapoorta & Shillingsworth highlight the importance of Aboriginal pedagogical processes, and outline a process based on four key steps: Respect (the values and protocols of introduction), Connect (establishing relationships and routines of exchange grounded in equality), Reflect (collectively establishing a shared body of knowledge) and Direct (reaching agreement about how to act on the shared knowledge) (2020, pp. 11-12, cited in Burgess et al 2022b, p. 930). Burgess et al (2022b, p. 931) draw on these processes in their Learning from Country Framework, which is based on three key practices:

- i) connecting to and learning from Country,
- ii) engaging with diverse Aboriginal experiences and views emerging from local cultures, identities, histories and communities and
- iii) explicitly rejecting deficit discourses and challenging stereotypes, racism and the power structures that propagate these. (Burgess et al 2022b, p. 932).

# Appendix: Case Studies

## Canada

### ***The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)***

The Canadian TRC operated from 2008 until the completion of its mandate in 2015, and aimed to:

- document the history of the Indian Residential Schools system in Canada; and
- “use those findings to bring about ‘reconciliation’, that is, to improve relations between Aboriginal and other peoples in Canada” (de Costa 2017, p. 186).

Niezen (2016) noted that the TRC’s mandate was to educate the public and reform the “dominant narrative of the state”. Though it was not inevitable, the TRC did so by focusing almost exclusively on the experience of victims (Niezen 2016, p. 921); Niezen argues that there was a “clear tendency” to privilege and highlight the worst abuses and most horrific acts of violence towards children (Niezen 2016, p. 925). Niezen suggests that one of the results of the TRC’s victim-centrism was “the absence of dissident voices” and counter-narratives, so therefore, while the Commission heard “a great deal about the pain, struggle, and redemption that characterize a particular kind of survivor experience, while our knowledge of the ‘perpetrators’, their motives, and the institutions that harboured them are left obscured. Yet this is precisely the knowledge on which truth commissions should concentrate if the harms of state policies and of the institutions they create are to be properly understood – and avoided” (Niezen 2016, p. 935). Alhuwalia (2012) makes a similar point, arguing that “the government has done nothing to lead Canadian settlers in examining our responsibilities in the truth telling process. Our government has offered no strategies to help Canadians move past denial and our desire to not know.” Noting that most of the testimony gathered by the TRC has come from the survivors, she questions the absence of “government leadership, resources and encouragement for gathering Canadian settler testimonies of domination, violence, racism, and indifference to human suffering” (Alhuwalia 2012, p. 50).

Like Niezen, de Costa (2017) also highlights some negative consequences stemming from the TRC’s victim-centred approach, arguing that foregrounding individual testimony “diminished the TRC’s deliberative potential”. While there “was a sincere and well-founded concern not to expose survivors of IRS to harm through their testimony; it would have been deeply inappropriate to interrogate the witnesses or to adopt a skeptical attitude towards their testimonies” de Costa argues that “one could not come away with a sense of how new dialogues might be emerging through the process of learning about the past, if this was the purpose. These were not sessions in which someone might have offered an alternative, let alone a contrary view, if such views existed” (de Costa 2017, pp. 191, 194). de Costa suggests that the TRC assumed from the outset what the effect of its work would be: “healing to those who told it, moving and mobilizing to those who heard it”. Yet, de Costa concluded that the TRC was “likely to ineffective in engaging and mobilizing those who do not already see the issues as relevant to themselves (de Costa 2017, pp. 195-96)”.

In contrast, Nagy argues that to “meaningfully bear witness in the context of Indigenous genocide, we must open our hearts and minds to Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world”; she wonders about “the ways in which survivor testimony might spark or strengthen settler reckoning and decolonizing change through the dismantling of colonial attitudes, beliefs, institutions, and structures” (Nagy 2020, pp. 220, 221). Nagy acknowledges the risks involved in a victim-centred approach:

- The sidestepping of structural matters;
- The prioritisation of certain types of testimony and the silencing of others;
- The impossibility of bearing witness to one's own trauma because the pain can exceed the bounds of language and comprehension, potentially leading to "accusations of noncredibility";
- Even when witnesses respond to testimony with empathy it might be a passive empathy that fails to encourage self-reflection and might only leave a good feeling about feeling bad; and
- The susceptibility of testimony to co-opted "into colonial narratives of closure and fixing the Indian problem (Nagy 2020, pp. 224, 237)."

However, such testimony, including its anger, has a "transgressive potential" to upset colonial narratives and speaks to the survival of First Nations culture and spirituality (Nagy 2020, pp. 224, 227, 228, 233-35).

Reflecting on the implications of the TRC, Koggel argues that there are "fundamental differences in the collective interpretative resources of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians" and that to bridge that gap, "non-Indigenous Canadians need to be re-educated about Canada's history – to unlearn what is taught in the official accounts of its history and to learn about the histories of laws, practices, and traditions as told by Indigenous Canadians" (Koggel 2018, p. 242). This work, she suggests is hampered by the "settler within", or Canadian "myth of the benevolent peacemaker", which has "shaped Canada's history and its relationships with Indigenous peoples" (Koggel 2018, p. 242).

Neufeld et al (2022) conducted a psychological experiment and found that increased historical knowledge about Indian Residential Schools increased empathy for First Nations Canadians (Neufeld et al 2022, p. 623). However, they did also note some potentially negative effects of increased historical knowledge about how past actions continue to impact and harm First Nations people, including increased defensiveness and heightened prejudice; some secondary trauma; a perception that difficulties are beyond repair and therefore reduced empathy; and the perpetuation of the image of victimhood (Neufeld et al 2022, pp. 626-27).

### ***The Remembering the Children Society***

While much attention has been given to the TRC, Park (2016) argues that little scholarly attention has been paid to the justice-based responses to Canada's Indian residential school's system that "have emerged within and between communities". She aims to address this imbalance "by interpreting the work of the Remembering the Children Society", which has endeavoured "to commemorate children who passed away at the Red Deer Industrial School (Red Deer IS), one of the approximately 130 schools that made up Canada's residential schools system" (Park 2016, p. 425).

The Remembering the Children Society is a collaboration between representatives of First Nations impacted by the Red Deer IS, the Métis Nation of Alberta, and the United Church of Canada (UCC), its core objectives are to: "reclaim and preserve cemeteries associated with residential schools in Alberta, commemorate children who lost their lives while attending residential school, conduct research relating to deaths and burials, engage in public education about IRS history, facilitate reconciliation, and assist other groups that have similar goals" (Park 2016, p. 425).

Park argues that community-based restorative justice presents a locally meaningful alternative to official (state-sponsored) transitional justice responding to mass violence; that the work of the Remembering the Children Society exemplifies community-based restorative justice by remembering and honouring the child victims; and that First Nations cultural practice is at the centre of the Remembering the Children Society's work. Park notes that the RCS achieves this in four ways: through feasts and

ceremonies, by prioritising “freeing the spirits of children who died”, by placing Elders at the centre of the work, and lastly, emphasising “Aboriginal spirituality and world views as the basis for the group ‘working together’” (Park 2016, p. 425).



## *Timor-Leste*

### ***Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation or Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação (CAVR) and the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP)***

The Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação: CAVR) was established in 2001 and “was mandated to institute processes for truth-seeking, reconciliation, and healing for the human rights violations committed from 1974 until 1999” (Cross 2021, p. 148). (See also Simangan 2019, p. 124). Horne notes that to “build local support for the process of reconciliation and transitional justice, the CAVR engaged in community outreach” and encouraged “communities to participate in the design of the programme” (Horne 2014, p. 25).

A Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) was established within the Commission, “a voluntary process initiated by minor offenders who wished to be reconciled with their communities.” Village panels held hearings and proposed “acts of reconciliation” for the offenders to undertake so that they might reconcile with and be received back into their communities. (Cross 2021, p. 148). The CRP drew on the concept of *nahe biti*, meaning “stretching the mat”. As Simangan notes the “local concept encourages meetings and discussions between opposing parties to reach an agreement as a part of an evolving process of linking the past and the future for the purpose of achieving stability, peace, tranquillity, and honesty” (Simangan 2019, p. 124). Highlighting the participation of an estimated 30,000-40,000 people out of a population of less than one million, Daly argues that “This part of East Timor’s transitional program explicitly privileged victim healing and community reconciliation over authoritative truth and formal, internationally normed justice” (Daly 2008 p. 32).

Lambourne describes the process of *nahe biti*: “*Nahe biti* refers to the symbolic rolling out of a mat at a venue to discuss and settle an issue among interested parties through consensus. The process involved voluntary acceptance of culpability and agreement on reconciliation acts such as reparation, community service or public apology, and was usually finalised with a symbolic exchange of ‘betel nut’ ceremony to show sincerity and commitment. The significance of the mat is that it cannot be rolled up again until the conflict has been resolved. The sanctions or compensation requested by the victims more often than not involved a heartfelt confession and public apology, along with symbolic payments. Reconciliation in this manner is traditionally seen as a bridge to achieve a much greater aim of harmony and peace in the society. As a result, the CRP resonated with traditional values in its emphasis on the community rather than the individual, and the opportunity for the perpetrator to engage with the community in an exchange which was both ceremonial and practical, and to be reintegrated into the community” (Lambourne 2016, pp. 65-6).

However, in “Local Norms and Truth Telling,” Holly Guthrey suggests that the truth-commission process in Timor-Leste “may have missed the mark in terms of respecting sociocultural values as well as local norms and the expectations of those who participated in their national public hearings” (Guthrey 2016, p. 2). Drawing on the responses from nineteen semi-structured interviews she conducted in both Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands, Guthrey found that some of those who testified about “women’s issues”, or sexual violence in such public forums found the process “quite disconcerting, if not distressing” (Guthrey 2016, pp. 2-3). In this sense, the truth-telling process disregarded important local norms including “the common sociocultural taboo surrounding speaking about sexual violence and the use of silence or “forgetting” as a coping or survival mechanism” (Guthrey 2016, p. 5). She suggests that there may have been a “lack of adequate communication about what victims should expect from giving testimony” and argues that such “truth commissions must be specifically adapted to the context for which they are created (Guthrey 2016, p. 21).”



## ***Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF)***

As a way of addressing the violence committed in 1999, the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF) was established in 2005 by both the governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Its mandate was to uncover the “conclusive truth,” “to identify institutional responsibility for the violence committed in 1999, and to make recommendations for preventive and healing measures with the aim of consolidating a peaceful friendship between the two countries” (Cross 2021, p. 149). Cross suggests that “[o]ne of most apparent advantages of the CTF over the CAVR was that it was created and supported by the two governments” (Cross 2021, p. 150), yet this bilateral support was at the same time perceived as a weakness, for while “President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia endorsed the report’s findings and provided Indonesia’s first official recognition that its state institutions had systematically violated human rights in Timor-Leste,” he did not “apologize, nor did he specifically acknowledge Indonesia’s responsibility; he only expressed remorse” (Cross 2021, p. 150).

Although many Timorese wanted “more than remembering the past” and hoped to see those responsible for serious violations held accountable and brought to justice, as Simangan notes, “Timorese politicians calculated friendship over justice as a more reasonable option for Timor-Leste with respect to its diplomatic relations with Indonesia, a more powerful and influential player in the region.” In that sense, Simangan describes the CTF as “a façade of International justice” (Simangan 2019, p. 127).

Cynthia M. Horne makes the point that although East Timor has been described as a “representative example of bottom-up transitional justice and reconciliation”, “the role played by extra-regional actors in actually reconstructing and implementing... ‘traditional’ justice programmes” has been understated (Horne 2014, pp. 18, 20) . “Local groups were encouraged and later instructed by external actors in how to use traditional methods” (Horne 2014, p. 27). Yet, citizens worried “about the bias of the traditional justice system, in which the interests of certain village elites were disproportionately represented.” Horne suggests that the system “reified the traditional power structures, reinforcing the subjugation of minority groups and women within the post-conflict social hierarchy” (Horne 2014, p. 27).

## *Northern Ireland*

### ***The Ardoyne Commemoration Project***

Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern have written extensively on the community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to 'truth-telling' in Northern Ireland, using the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) as a case study (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 72). Lundy and McGovern were active participants in the project, writing the project book (Lundy & McGovern 2006a, p. 75). The four-year-long project was designed to record and publish the testimonies of the relatives and friends of 99 people from the Ardoyne area of North Belfast who died as a result of the conflict (Lundy & McGovern 2006a, p. 72).

Lundy & McGovern argue "that there are significant benefits for conflict resolution if truth-telling mechanisms pursue community participation and public ownership of the process as key goals" (Lundy & McGovern 2006a, p. 72). However, they stress "that the tensions and silences that exist within particular communities on the legacies of the past need to be addressed as part of post-conflict transition quite as much as the antagonisms that exist between communities" (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 75).

Against the backdrop of the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 and a feeling that there was a "hierarchy of victimhood", with many nationalists sitting at the bottom, "around 30 people including victims' relatives, concerned individuals and representatives from community groups called a meeting in Ardoyne to discuss the 'victims agenda' and to explore ways in which the community could commemorate their own victims of the conflict, in their own way" (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 75).

As Lundy and McGovern argue, "central to the work of the Ardoyne Commemoration Project was the adoption of action research strategies and methodologies. Indeed, the principles of community participation, local ownership, and control could be said to have been its greatest strengths. Local stakeholders (or the community) were fully involved in the initiation, design, decision-making, management, and delivery of the project. From the outset it was an egalitarian, consciousness-raising, and empowering initiative that was seeking to bring about change and social justice" (Lundy and McGovern 2006b, p. 52. See also Lundy and McGovern 2008).

During a four-year period, over 300 interviews were conducted (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 75). The desire to democratise the project meant that interview transcripts were returned to interviewees, "who could then alter their testimony in any way they saw fit. The transcript was then re-worked in line with these wishes. Family interviewees were also allowed pre-publication access to the complete case study including interviews with other family members, friends and eyewitnesses. While participants could only make changes to their own testimony they could raise any inaccuracies or issues of concern in other testimonies with the ACP" (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 76; Lundy and McGovern 2006b, p. 55). Lundy and McGovern consider the criticism that such insider "truth-telling" in a violently divided society raises the question of bias and the epithet "partisan research", all of which calls into question the testimonies' truth claims (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 81). As it was community-based project, there was much debate about these questions of truth, and whether to even use the word when describing the project. Yet, according to Lundy and McGovern, "there was a strong sense amongst the project members that they wanted to hold onto the word and concept of 'truth' rather than relinquish it for what was seen as the less evocative and powerful 'story'" (Lundy and McGovern 2006a, p. 83). Lundy & McGovern argue that recognising and documenting the voices of previously excluded or marginalised members of society, and doing so on their terms, was important and valuable work.

Further, they argue that “[w]hat mattered was not only what ‘truth’ was told, but the process of ‘telling the truth’ itself” (Lundy and McGovern 2006b, p. 61).

Writing in relation to established community-based restorative justice projects in both nationalist and loyalist areas of Northern Ireland, Ashe (2009) notes that while women have played a prominent role in their communities, they, and their accounts, are noticeably absent from analyses of those projects (Ashe 2009, p. 308).

## *Community-based truth-telling drawing on traditional African conflict resolution mechanisms: Northern Uganda, Rwanda, Sierra Leone*

A 2012 study by Anyeko et al explores the use of a traditional African conflict resolution mechanism and the role of truth-telling in community-based truth-telling in Northern Uganda. The authors describe the principles and practice of *mato oput*, a traditional method of dispute resolution employed between clans in Acholi after a murder or unintentional killing:

The ultimate goal of *mato oput* is to restore relations between the offended clans, and thus truth-telling remains an integral part of the practice. It is a voluntary process that consists of a cooling-off period, after which representatives of the clans engage in shuttle diplomacy in order to collect confessions and establish the truth. This is followed by material compensation given to the clan that has suffered the death. The practice, which can last from months to decades, concludes with a ceremony and feast during which clan representatives share a drink made of sheep's blood and roots from the bitter *oput* plant, symbolizing the washing away of bitterness between the clans.

(Anyeko et al 2012, p. 111)

*Mato oput* is "a process involving truth-telling through mediation, acknowledgement, compensation and symbolic reconciliation" (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 115). Reparations, both material and symbolic, are an important part of Acholi truth-telling practice: "In Acholi culture, truth means being open and talking freely, confessing for the wrong committed against others. It also means acceptance for what you have done and agreeing to correct that wrong that has occurred" (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 117).

Some scholars have been highly critical of the use of culturally specific local dispute resolution practices for a range of reasons, including that they de-historicize cultural practices; that justice should be universal rather than local; that such practices are politicized by NGOs, foreign donors and the government and represent "the romanticism of some imagined past" or an "invention of tradition"; and even on the basis that they are neo-colonial because they privilege particular structures of power and patronize locals. However, others argue that these critiques are based on a false distinction between "modern" and "traditional" forms of justice, and that the distinction between local and international justice is also a false one, as such processes are inevitably intertwined (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 111).

Anyeko et al identify that survivors of atrocities want to be involved themselves in establishing the truth about what happened and see the truth-telling process as essential in moving beyond conflict. More than 90% of the respondents surveyed in this study wanted some form of truth-telling; "in particular, people want to know why this war happened, who is to be held accountable and what has happened to their loved ones who are missing" (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 114).

Respondents in this study supported truth-telling for a number of reasons:

- it was necessary in order to understand the root causes of the conflict;
- acknowledging the harms done was essential to educate following generations about what had happened;
- it was essential to prevent future conflict;
- it was needed to establish what had happened to missing loved ones;
- it was seen as a way for victims to obtain symbolic and material reparations (Anyeko et al 2012, pp. 114-115).

Anyeko et al's research highlights that fear of retaliation by perpetrators in an environment where peace is uncertain is a major obstacle to truth-telling (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 118; and see also Brounéus 2008 who discusses this issue impacting on women's participation in post-genocide truth-telling in Rwanda). Respondents in Anyeko et al's study also felt strongly that people should not be compelled to participate in truth-telling; perpetrators instead must be "gently persuaded" that it was in their interests to participate (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 120).

While truth-telling is an important component of reconciliation, Anyeko et al remind us that it does not in itself constitute reconciliation. In the Ugandan context, truth-telling needed to be accompanied by material compensation and ceremonial practices, for example the ritual cleansing of massacre sites (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 122). An important finding of this study that has implications for truth-telling in the Australian context is that "victims are often in the best position to articulate the principles and practices along which a truth-telling process should be based, including some of the challenges and dangers associated with such a process. . . justice and reconciliation processes are always and at once historically situated and informed by those who have the most at stake in the process" (Anyeko et al 2012, p. 123).

Customary or traditional truth-telling processes have also been utilised in Sierra Leone (known as Fambul Tok, or 'family talk', promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding in local communities), which similar to the Rwandan gacaca and the Timorese *nahe bitu* processes, place a strong emphasis on truth-telling and restoring community (Lambourne 2016, pp. 68-9). For Lambourne, these examples illustrate how adapting an Indigenous traditional approach to justice can address the need for community reintegration; "the perpetrator or offender is encouraged to accept responsibility and to make amends in return for reintegration into the community, rather than being banished or incarcerated" (Lambourne 2016, p. 66).

## *The use of community-based truth-telling to address racism in the United States of America*

### ***The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission***

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was a community-based restorative justice intervention established in the early 2000s in response to a 1979 incident of racial violence and subsequent years of lingering trauma and resentment which had impacted on community relationships and decreased trust in civic institutions in the Greensboro community (Androff 2018, p. 274).

The GTRC was established in response to a racist attack which took place in Greensboro in 1979, in which five members of the Workers Viewpoint Organisation (WVO) were killed and 10 people were injured when their demonstration was attacked by the KKK. The victims were blamed for inciting the violence, the attack was never fully investigated, and further protest, including a funeral march for victims, was banned. All-white juries acquitted all perpetrators during two separate trials undertaken in the 1980s, so retributive justice mechanisms had failed (Androff 2018, p. 276). The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a community-based attempt to utilise restorative justice approaches to change community perceptions of the massacre and to “construct a new narrative of the community’s past in order to transcend racial and class conflicts” (Androff 2018, p. 276).

The importance of language is highlighted by Androff, who argues that “language used to describe an issue automatically evokes underlying values; controlling this language shapes how people think about an intervention based on their morals and values. Framing interventions to connect with people’s shared values is a critical dimension of community practice” (Androff 2018, p. 278).

“Truth” as a frame connotes objectivity and honesty and communicates that the GTRC was an inclusive intervention for the whole community, as opposed to solely for the survivors. (Androff 2018, p. 278)

Androff makes the point that because community-based restorative justice initiatives lack the political or legal authority of more formal mechanisms, grassroots community support is critical. The GTRC commissioners were chosen via an inclusive selection process to ensure community engagement and public acceptance of the Tribunal’s legitimacy (Androff 2018, pp. 279-80).

Three public hearings were held; more than 200 statements were provided in personal interviews; there was also a Community Dialog meeting held to reflect on the testimony provided in public hearings. 80 community organisations acted as “report receivers” to promote readings and discussion of the GTRC report. The report’s recommendations included public apologies, commemoration, anti-racism training, the establishment of a community justice centre, and the incorporation of the history of the event into school curricula (Androff 2018, pp. 280-1). There was widespread community acceptance of the Final Report although the Greensboro City Council voted to oppose the report’s findings (Androff 2018, p. 282).

For Androff, the GTRC demonstrates that communities can use a participatory process of public dialogue to forge new relationships through confronting their past (2018, p. 283). The Greensboro TRC has inspired many other community-based examples in the United States, which utilise local community-based restorative justice processes in communities struggling with hate crimes, racial disharmony, and civic divisions (Androff 2018, p. 284).

## ***The W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) work***

Another US-based example of relevance to Australian truth-telling is the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) work of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in the US. Drawing on the truth and reconciliation commission model, the approach has been developed to address the racialised history of the US. Five key areas requiring intervention were identified:

1. Narrative change – designed to promote understanding of how racial hierarchy has been embedded in the US from its foundation and to develop a new and more complete narrative;
2. Racial Healing and Relationship Building – focused on healing the wounds of the past and building respectful relationships across ethnic difference;
3. Separation – addressing segregation, colonization and systemic poverty in neighbourhoods;
4. Law – reviewed discriminatory laws and policies;
5. Economy – studied structural inequality and barriers to economic opportunities (Christopher 2021, p. 671).

The TRHT is currently being implemented in 14 communities in the US, and involves a diverse group of core participants ranging from philanthropic organisations to elected officials, faith groups, grassroots activists, youth, community media and other “narrative change agents” (e.g., the publisher of the local newspaper, head of the local TV station, local bloggers, filmmakers, historians, storytellers, artists), people who work with civil or criminal law or public policy and people who work with changing the local economy” (Christopher 2021, pp 672-3).



## *Place-based truth-telling at the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial*

Despite the extensive history of frontier massacre in Australia documented by recent initiatives such as the University of Newcastle's *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* project, the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial remains one of very few established memorials at a massacre site in Australia. The brutal murder of around 30 Aboriginal people, primarily women, children and elderly men, in June 1838, and the subsequent trials and eventual hanging of seven of the perpetrators, represented a pivotal moment in relations between Aboriginal people and settlers in NSW. The memorial was established in 2000 and an annual commemorative event involving descendants of both the victims and perpetrators of the massacre attracts a large audience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "have long held the memory of massacre events as deeply personal stories, because official histories swept them under the rug" (Neath & Andrew 2018, p 132). Memorials to the impacts of colonisation are particularly important because the structural impacts of colonisation are ongoing (Ryan & Lydon 2018, pp. 12-13). It is interesting to note that at both the Myall Creek and Sand Creek massacre sites, First Nations and non-Indigenous people come together to commemorate the past (Neath & Andrew 2018, p. 132). The memorialisation of massacre sites can function "as an example of localised truth-telling and a symbol of reconciliation within the community" (Joint Select Committee 2018). For example, in the Australian context the Final Report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition noted the success of the memorial at Myall Creek, with over 2,000 people attending the annual event; memorials are also planned to commemorate the Coniston massacre and the Waterloo Bay massacre (Joint Select Committee 2018). There is a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take the lead role in the memorialisation of colonial violence; historical acknowledgement is important and memorials can create the possibility of consensus and shared understandings of the past (Ryan & Lydon 2018, p. 13).

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