

Re-Settling Australia? Indigeneity, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Postcolonial Nation in Kim Scott's *Taboo*

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Abstract: Based on a reading of Kim Scott's *Taboo* (2017), this article argues that only through a sincere acknowledgement of material and mental Indigenous sovereignty can postcolonial nations eventually attempt to move beyond embedded colonialist structures. Sovereignty, as the novel emphasises, relates not only to questions of physical displacement but also, importantly, to the issue of representation. This article contends that a dual approach informed by both postcolonial and Indigenous studies can be useful in challenging existing colonising elements in the construction of Indigeneity and offering alternatives. Employing Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's notion of "Aboriginalism," this article shows how postcolonial theory offers vital tools to identify, describe, and criticise ubiquitous colonialist images of Indigeneity and is hence able to raise an awareness of these structures and make change possible. With its insistence on the diversity and mutability of Indigenous identities, critical Indigenous theory, such as James Clifford's formulation of an "articulated Indigeneity," on the other hand, emphasises that recognising the complexity of Indigeneity represents an important step towards Indigenous sovereignty, as *Taboo* rightly identifies.

Keywords: Aboriginalism, articulated Indigeneity, Indigenous sovereignty, Kim Scott, postcolonialism



I. Introduction

It is perhaps one of the great paradoxes of postcolonial studies that although Australia played a key role in the formulation of a distinctively postcolonial theory—the authors of the seminal *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) are Australian or Australia-based (Schwarz 14)—its relevance to settler colonies has been a troubled one. While some critics argue that settler colonies should not be considered postcolonial, others complain about postcolonial theory's inability to aptly describe the situation of settler colonies.¹ Indigenous scholars, in particular, are frequently wary of postcolonialism, which they often see as obscuring ongoing colonialism (Weaver 223). In the Australian context, many Indigenous intellectuals have pointed out that to understand Australia as a postcolonial nation is to disregard the colonised positions that Indigenous Australians still occupy.² Indeed, even in contemporary Australia there is a lack of acknowledgement that European settlement was contingent on the un-settlement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their sovereignty has still not been recognised.

Employing this notion of un-settlement, I propose that in his most recent novel, *Taboo* (2017), Kim Scott, who identifies as a Noongar writer,³ illustrates that the need for Indigenous Australians to re-settle both materially and emotionally is not of significance only to Indigenous communities but also to Australia as a whole. Through this process of resettlement, *Taboo* suggests, Australia would have to re-evaluate its position as a postcolonial nation by acknowledging that it can never be—and has never been—the white nation that it imagines itself to be. To be clear, when I use the term postcolonial, I understand it as “the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba 16), physically (in that land is returned officially to its rightful owners), mentally, and in the realm of cultural production. *Taboo* suggests that Australia has only perfunctorily contested colonialism and that, in order to move beyond embedded colonialist discourses and institutions, the nation needs to challenge the hegemony of whiteness and acknowledge the sovereignty of its Indigenous inhabitants. Importantly, sovereignty in this context operates on a mental as well as material level. While Scott's novel voices the need for geographical sovereignty, in which the

nation recognises the particular role of Indigenous groups in relation to their land, I argue that it advocates for sovereignty relating to the mind most strongly. It addresses the problem of representation of Indigenous Australians and calls for confident Indigenous self-representations of Indigeneity.

It is exactly in this context, I believe, that a dual approach informed by both postcolonial and critical Indigenous studies⁴ can be valuable in order to identify, describe, and criticise colonialist images of Indigeneity. After all, as Henry Schwarz notes, “[p]ostcolonial studies works to make [the] relation of unequal power more visible, with the goal of ending it” (4). Hence, it is “not merely a theory of knowledge but a ‘theoretical practice,’ a transformation of knowledge from static disciplinary competence to activist intervention” (4). In particular, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra’s formulation of “Aboriginalism” (27), which draws on Edward Said’s considerations of Orientalism, is helpful to explore the limitations of Indigenous representations still existing in contemporary Australia. It denotes a set of discourses that construct Indigeneity solely from the point of view of white Australians, creating a stereotypical, fixed vision of what it means to identify as Indigenous. Recognising these discourses and expounding their problems is an important step for an interventionist strategy whose eventual (though perhaps utopian) aim is the end of these problematic discourses altogether. Indigenous sovereignty, *Taboo* suggests, must also be recognised with regard to issues of representation. This does not mean that representations of Indigenous people can only come from Indigenous people themselves. Yet the novel makes clear that the ways in which they conceive of Indigeneity are most meaningful and that non-Indigenous people must recognise the primacy of these representations.

When thinking about the representation of Indigeneity, it is necessary to acknowledge its contingent and constantly changing character. To this end, the insights of critical Indigenous studies and, in particular, James Clifford’s notion of an “articulated Indigeneity” are helpful. However, as Scott’s novel illustrates by employing at times mutually exclusive discourses of rootedness and constructedness, Indigeneity is necessarily multi-layered and eludes simple definitions. It is, then, valuable

to consolidate postcolonial and Indigenous critical theory rather than viewing them as antagonistic, so as to uncover persisting colonialist elements in settler colonies and offer alternatives beyond such structures.

In this article, I first address the two theoretical concepts of “Aboriginalism” and “articulated Indigeneity” in greater detail. Subsequently, I focus on four issues: first, I argue that the novel’s protagonist, Tilly, becomes the symbol of a future, more inclusive Australia that understands the special position of Indigenous Australians; second, I show how *Taboo* highlights the problematic nature of white representations of Indigeneity in the continuing existence of Aboriginalist discourses; third, I juxtapose Aboriginalism with a more open understanding of Indigeneity, as disclosed by the text’s Indigenous characters, and illustrate how Indigenous sovereignty only becomes possible once Indigenous people are able to show the complexity of Indigeneity rather than having to mirror simplistic images of it created by non-Indigenous people; and, finally, I discuss how far the penultimate and final scenes of the novel offer an optimistic outlook on whether the creation of such an Australia can ever be successful.

II. Theoretical Considerations: Approaches to Indigeneity and Indigenous Sovereignty

Indigeneity is a notoriously difficult term to describe and some Indigenous activists, such as Jackie Huggins (60), suggest that white people are not in a position to define it at all. Yet, while attempting to provide firm definitions of Indigeneity is problematic, it is useful to consider the wide range of ways that Indigeneity has been theorised. Among other interpretations, Indigeneity has been understood as a primarily politically motivated category (Kuper), a specific form of “autochthony” aligned with the category of ethnicity (Zenker), and, more generally, a process (McCormack). For the purposes of this article, the idea of Indigeneity as a constant process is particularly valuable. Yet since white majoritarian discourse still tends to conceive of Indigeneity as a monolithic entity, I start my theoretical considerations by introducing the white representations of Indigenous Australians that persist today.

Said's work on Orientalism offers the theoretical starting point for Hodge and Mishra's considerations of Aboriginalism. For Said, Orientalist discourse manifests in the belief that "since the Orientals cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than Islam knows about itself" (97). Hodge and Mishra extend this idea to the Australian context. They argue that since Indigenous Australians could not be excluded from the construction of the Australian nation entirely, a form of representation had to be found that, while seemingly including them, did not question the allegedly intrinsic whiteness of the nation (Hodge and Mishra 27). They refer to this "Orientalist" representation of Indigenous Australians as Aboriginalism. According to Bain Attwood, this Aboriginalism appears in three variants:

first, as 'Aboriginal Studies'—the teaching, research or display of scholarly knowledge about indigenes by European scholars who claim that the indigenous peoples cannot represent themselves and must therefore be represented by experts who know more about Aborigines than they know about themselves; second, as a style of thought which is based upon an epistemological and ontological distinction between 'Them' and 'Us'—in this form Europeans imagine 'the Aborigines' as 'the Other', as being radically different from themselves; third, as a corporate institution for exercising authority over Aborigines by making statements about them, authorising views of them, and ruling over them. (i)

For my purposes, Attwood's second and third modes, which are tightly interlinked, are particularly important. Such an "othering" of Indigenous Australians, in which they are seen as the fundamental opposite of non-Indigenous Australians, objectifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and in turn leads to a loss of power on their part. Even though Indigenous people can define who is Indigenous and who is not for their own purposes, non-Indigenous visions of Indigeneity eventually form the basis of governmental and legal decisions and hence have material consequences for Indigenous Australians (Attwood ii-iii).

Indeed, as Attwood suggests, new forms of thinking about Indigeneity that recognise the contingency of knowledge production—he calls them “post-Aboriginalis[t]”—have developed, but Aboriginalist structures persist (xiv).⁵ Even the 1992 ruling of the Australian High Court in the *Mabo* case,⁶ to which I will return later, exhibits Aboriginalist tendencies continuing until the present moment, since it imposes a stereotypically white image of Indigeneity onto Indigenous peoples.

While Hodge and Mishra’s approach, informed by postcolonial studies, illustrates the continuity of colonising tendencies relating to the issue of Indigenous representation, critical Indigenous theory helps to demonstrate the multiplicity of forms that Indigeneity can take. Specifically, I would like to highlight Clifford’s notion of an “articulated Indigeneity.” Clifford’s theoretical starting point is articulation theory as conceptualised by Stuart Hall, which in turn builds on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, who conceived of the theory as a way out of the impasse of classical Marxist class reductionism.⁷ For Hall, an articulation is “a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (141). It is an inevitably fluid and contingent form, which, as Clifford suggests, defies the assumption that anything, including cultural forms, can ever be truly authentic (61). Rather than focusing on questions of authenticity and origins, articulation theory is interested in how cultures are continuously changing (60). In this sense, it becomes a valuable vehicle for the study of Indigeneity, since the living realities of Indigenous societies have also seen major alterations in recent decades. Especially in settler colonies, many Indigenous people now live in urban areas, a shift which has led to the formation of what Clifford calls “indigenous diasporas” (70). Importantly, however, the existence of such diasporas does not undermine the strong emotional ties to imagined or real homelands (77). After all, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes, place plays a central role for many Indigenous peoples around the globe, including Indigenous Australians (“Home” 36). Approaching Indigeneity through articulation theory means acknowledging the significance of place while challenging the assumption that there are authentic (Indigenous) cultures (Clifford 63). Rather than assuming that there is only one way to understand Indigeneity, articulation theory helps to

make visible the diversity of Indigenous experiences without concealing what all Indigenous people share, namely their “experiences of invasion, dispossession, resistance and survival” (Clifford 15). Though Clifford’s concept builds on Western theories, which could draw criticism from Indigenous scholars, it simultaneously recognises that Indigeneity defies clear definitions. Rather, it is a highly complex form of identity that is marked by various—at times mutually exclusive—dimensions, such as diasporic elements as well as “[a]bsolutist invocations of blood, land, and return” (Clifford 88).

Claims of sovereignty are part of this latter dimension. In the Australian context, Indigenous sovereignty has lately become a central preoccupation, though the meaning of the term is anything but fixed. Moreover, not everyone subscribes to Indigenous sovereignty equally, and Scott remains especially sceptical of the term, if not so much of the concept itself (“Nation” 243). Instead of being an unchanging, monolithic concept, Indigenous sovereignty distinguishes itself through a high degree of difference, which is not a drawback. According to the Indigenous scholar Irene Watson, because it “embraces diversity, and focuses on inclusivity rather than exclusivity,” it “poses a solution to white supremacy” (20). Importantly, Indigenous sovereignty differs markedly from Western conceptions of it in that, as Moreton-Robinson maintains, “it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land” (“Introduction” 2). A particularly powerful assertion of the importance of such sovereignty marks the signing of the “Uluru Statement from the Heart” in 2017, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people asked for the establishment of an Indigenous representative body in parliament. Sovereignty, for them,

is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better,

of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Turnbull Government rejected the “Uluru Statement” in 2017, but despite this failure, the statement’s significance must not be understated, for it established “a historic national consensus on the reforms [Indigenous Australians] want” (Morris). Importantly, the statement calls not for a form of political sovereignty that advocates for the establishment of various Indigenous states but instead for more representation within the existing state structures. In this sense, Indigenous sovereignty and the Australian nation need not be two incompatible concepts. Rather, the first is a condition for the latter, since only through a formal and explicit recognition of Indigenous sovereignty can Australia become a nation ready to aptly face its colonial history.

III. Tilly and Postcolonial Australia

Taboo tells the story of a Wirlomin Noongar family who, for the first time in generations, travels to a massacre site considered taboo. There, in the fictional town of Kepalup, they are asked to attend and participate in the opening of a Peace Park organised by a white man named Dan Horton; the park commemorates the killings of local Noongars at Kokanarup, the fictional counterpart of the actual property of Cocanarup (Scott, *Taboo* 284).⁸ On this trip, they aim to reconnect with the land of their ancestors. At the centre of the novel is Tilly Coolman, a teenage girl who is part of the Wirlomin Noongar family but has just recently found out about her Indigenous ancestry and who, as a baby, briefly lived with Dan Horton and his family.

As the novel’s protagonist, Tilly most clearly personifies an articulated form of Indigeneity. She lives in the city rather than on her ancestral land, speaks English rather than Noongar, and uses modern technology like any other teenager (28). Yet she also understands the importance of place for her and her Indigenous family. In this sense, she defies any constraints that Aboriginalist discourses put on Indigenous Australians and instead becomes the potential symbol of a future postcolonial Australia

that recognises the multiple forms Indigeneity can take. Her gender is noteworthy in this regard: being female challenges stereotypical conceptions of Aboriginality, which tend to be “masculinist” (Moore et al. 219). At the same time, however, by using a female character to symbolize the nation, *Taboo* resorts to a well-known and recurring trope in literature that envisions the nation in female terms (Boehmer 4).

Her name, Tilly—or Matilda, as her mother prefers to call her—is meaningful, too. After all, not only is the name not of Indigenous origin, but, more importantly, within the Australian context it forms part of a white national narrative. The phrase “to walk (also waltz) Matilda,” meaning “to carry a swag, to travel the road” (“Matilda, n.”), is commonly associated with the white transient labourer, whom the poet A. B. “Banjo” Paterson famously commemorated in his ballad “Waltzing Matilda” (1895). The swagman became one of the most iconic figures of the emerging Australian nation at the turn of the twentieth century and “Waltzing Matilda” one of the best-known texts in Australian literary history (O’Keeffe), and so the name “Matilda” cannot be easily detached from this narrative that has excluded Indigenous people.

Despite its undeniable white bias, however, the name does not simply place Tilly in the same narrative. On the contrary, the text re-appropriates it, highlighting how existing stories of the nation need to be adapted to aptly describe the new kind of postcolonial nation that Australia may become if Indigenous Australians receive the chance to resettle both geographically and mentally. Tilly indeed travels a road, in two senses of the phrase. Firstly, she and her family literally travel to Kepalup and Kokanarup. Secondly, and more importantly, she metaphorically travels a road in that she comes to recognise her Indigeneity. Of course, this is not a linear process from an assumed whiteness to an invigorated assertion of her Indigeneity. Rather, she gradually comes to terms with her status as an Aboriginal woman, which complicates the sense of self she has held so far. In this way, Tilly’s journey becomes the allegory of the journey Australia should also take by acknowledging that it is based on the un-settlement of the traditional owners of the land.

IV. Ongoing Colonialism: White Representations of Indigeneity

By thematising an Australia that is aware of its postcoloniality, *Taboo* is a narrative of hope. Yet it also highlights the lack of sovereignty conceded to Indigenous Australians. In particular, it makes visible the ubiquity of persisting colonial structures in the realm of representation, such as Aboriginalist discourses, and hence emphasises that colonialism, which Nicholas Thomas understands not merely “as a singular enduring discourse, but rather as a series of projects that incorporate representations, narratives and practical efforts” (171), is still ongoing in Australia. In this section, I focus on the white characters of the text and their approaches to Indigeneity and Indigenous sovereignty, respectively, and show to what extent Scott’s novel demonstrates the ongoing currency of Aboriginalism as a form of continuing colonialism in contemporary Australia.

A central character in this regard is Maureen McGill, the non-Indigenous Aboriginal Support Officer at Tilly’s school. When she meets Tilly for the first time, her patronising attitude towards Aboriginal Australians is hardly concealed. She asks Tilly, “Where are you from? That’s what matters to Aboriginal people, did you know? That’s what *they* always ask” (Scott, *Taboo* 191; emphasis added). By using the personal pronoun “they,” Maureen exhibits an intrinsically Aboriginalist attitude that assumes that Aboriginal Australians form a homogeneous group separate from an assumed “us.” Significantly, she identifies not only herself but also Tilly as outsiders. In Maureen’s view, Tilly cannot possibly qualify as a genuine Aboriginal person, since she does not conform to stereotypical images of Indigeneity that leave no room for fluidity. For Maureen, only those Indigenous people living in the “north,” “[c]ultural people, still on their country” (192) can be truly Indigenous. Here, the passage mirrors a scene in which Gerry, one of Tilly’s father’s cousins, criticises that many Australians are still not aware that “Blackfella stuff, it’s not just up north in the desert, it’s here and we’re the ones to be passing on how to really belong here” (96). The Coolman family epitomises the concept of Indigenous diaspora, highlighting that diaspora and strong connections to a particular place are not incompatible, but Maureen, as a representative of white Australia, is unable to understand

that. While Tilly is the figure of an optimistic future Australia, Maureen personifies contemporary Australia and its simplistic attitude towards its Indigenous population. After all, just like Maureen, official Australia does not acknowledge the multiplicity of Indigenous experiences, which is best reflected in parts of the *Mabo* decision and practices surrounding land claims (Johnson 191; Povinelli 2; Short 497). The High Court states in its legal decision that “[a] native title which has ceased with the abandoning of laws and customs based on tradition cannot be revived for contemporary recognition” (“*Mabo v Queensland*” par. 66), thus ironically not recognising the role of the state in the conscious demolition of Indigenous communities (Gray 67). Moreover, the *Mabo* ruling does not understand the mobility of Indigenous cultures that becomes evident, inter alia, in the formation of Indigenous diasporas mentioned above. In the *Mabo* decision, just as in Maureen’s understanding of Indigeneity, “indigenous subjects are called on to perform an authentic difference in exchange for the good feelings of the nation and the reparative legislation of the state” (Povinelli 6). They inevitably remain “the other,” and the dominance of whiteness within the nation remains uncontested. Maureen, then, becomes an emblem of what Ghassan Hage calls the “‘White nation’ fantasy,” an Australia in which “Aboriginal people and non-White ‘ethnics’ are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will” (18). *Taboo* highlights that even in supposedly liberal forms of whiteness, colonial structures persist.

Besides Maureen, the two Horton brothers, Dan and Malcolm, also personify this kind of white Australia, though Dan’s position is far more ambivalent than Maureen’s. His plan to give part of his property to Tilly as a representative of the Noongar community may be an important step in the right direction, and yet it remains highly dubious whether “real reconciliation” (Scott, *Taboo* 261), as envisioned by Dan, is possible this way. After all, in the conversation with his brother he expresses the necessity to hand over the land to Tilly, but when facing her directly, he talks of his intention to “[o]ne day” give it back, evading any concrete dates (274). More importantly, though he might be sympathetic to the material process of reconciliation, he does not seem to consider

the emotional dimension as equally significant, despite its importance to the novel's Indigenous characters. Just like his brother, he is unable to accept the term "massacre" to refer to the killings (10). For him, "[t]hat's a word that hurts us" (221). He attempts to relativise the atrocities committed by white Australians, arguing that although "[t]here were lives lost, yes, absolutely" (221), the word "massacre" seems improper. In this sense, Dan Horton indeed becomes the stereotype of Australian whiteness, revealing the "underlying cultural ambivalence towards Indigenous rights" (Zavaglia 4) in majoritarian society. His desire to apologise for past injustices committed by his ancestors and give the land back to the traditional owners on the one hand and his emphasis that the killings did not constitute a massacre on the other exemplify what Liliana Zavaglia calls the "*white* double movement of apology and apologia" (3; emphasis in original) regarding Indigenous issues in contemporary Australia. While Dan arguably shows regret for the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, he simultaneously defends colonial settlement by downplaying the extent of the killings. This tendency to minimise the brutality of the frontier wars is characteristic of contemporary Australia as a whole, as the lack of knowledge young Australians disclose about the subject reflects.⁹ Taking into consideration the persistence of Aboriginalist discourses, as in Maureen's view of Indigeneity, and the inclination to defend the dominant role of colonialism, as Dan does, *Taboo* illustrates the limitations contemporary Australia still encounters when facing the lived realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

V. Language, Culture and Land: Sites of Indigenous Sovereignty

While *Taboo's* white characters perpetuate Aboriginalist discourses, the novel's Indigenous characters illustrate a flexible Indigeneity and therefore offer a vision of what a geographical and emotional resettlement that emphasises Indigenous sovereignty may look like. In this section, I focus on three sites on which Indigenous sovereignty plays out in *Taboo*: language, culture, and land. As the text shows, all three are integral elements of contemporary Indigenous societies. Yet, while the novel highlights the central role of these factors, it equally demonstrates that to

make strong claims about these aspects does not mean falling into a form of biological determinism.

Language is arguably one of the key elements of Indigenous cultures worldwide, and it is without doubt one of the elements most deeply affected by the colonialist enterprise. According to linguistic estimates, around 250–300 languages were spoken in Australia prior to British invasion, and few of them have survived with a considerable number of speakers (Dalby 43; Walsh 27, 30). Current figures describing language use in contemporary Australia illustrate the difficult situation in which Indigenous languages find themselves. In the 2016 census, eighty-four percent of all Indigenous Australians reported that they spoke English at home, while only ten percent spoke an Australian Indigenous language (“Census”).¹⁰ In Scott’s novel, language is a central preoccupation. As Melissa Lucashenko notes in her review of *Taboo*, it becomes a way “to heal a traumatised people” (“Review”). While the novel is indeed, then, “about the alchemical power of words” (Gleeson-White), the text complicates an essentialist understanding of language by challenging the notion that it can be easily recuperated.

For Tilly, as for the rest of her family, the Noongar language is one of the main means of asserting Indigenous identity. For Gerry, it is even a way of “reshap[ing] him from the inside out” (Scott, *Taboo* 15). Yet, like most of his relatives, he does not truly know, let alone speak, the Noongar language. Only through the efforts of Tilly’s dying father, Jim, who during his imprisonment gains interest in his own culture and consequently teaches language and culture classes to his fellow inmates (among them Gerry), can Gerry reconnect with his language. Still, even Jim depends on “wordlists, genealogies, language and songs and stories and photos and stuff” (14) sent in by older clan members to teach his family about their own culture. Language, like culture more generally, is thus not readily available but, on the contrary, must be actively acquired and distributed. It is this process in which the Noongar characters of *Taboo* are engaged when Tilly refers to the Noongar language as “[h]er language, but not her mother’s language” (91). By playing with the ambivalence of “mother’s language” and “mother language,” the text makes an important point. Indeed, Noongar is not the first language of her

white mother, nor is it Tilly's own mother tongue, though she identifies it as "[*h*er language" (emphasis added). While this understanding of language as forming an intrinsic part of her identity suggests a kind of rootedness, it also highlights that the ability to speak a language with which one identifies is not a biological condition. "Her language" is not her mother tongue and perhaps never will be. Though she is emotionally attached to the Noongar language, linguistic resettlement is far from complete, if it is possible at all.

At this point, it is helpful to think about the status of languages in Australia more generally. Indeed, as Clifford suggests, in line with his concept of an articulated Indigeneity, the preservation of language is not a prerequisite for Indigeneity (60). As the figures of the 2016 census show, one can speak English at home and simultaneously identify as Indigenous. Yet Clifford's argument may be criticised for downplaying the emotional effects of the death of Indigenous languages on their communities. It therefore makes sense to distinguish between two dimensions: on the one hand, the lived realities of many Indigenous peoples, since "indigenous societies have . . . persisted with few, or no, native-language speakers" (Clifford 60), and on the other hand, the responsibility of the state to foster the revitalisation of these languages, since the state as a colonising institution was a driving force in their dissolution. While Tilly's status as an Aboriginal woman speaking English, the language of the coloniser, illustrates that Indigeneity is not tied to language, her family's desire to resettle linguistically presents a fundamental step in the creation of an Australia that acknowledges Indigenous sovereignty. Scott, who is engaged in the process of reviving Indigenous languages himself, is aware of the centrality of such an undertaking. Describing his contact with a language on the brink of extinction such as Noongar, he makes the point that "[w]orking with an endangered language can become in itself a story of recovery. And 'rebuilding' language and connections between its people and country is also a crucial part of 'rebuilding' spirit and getting communities 'back to a point where we are no longer just victims of a system that sets out to destroy us'" ("Drill" 12). To revitalise language means to revitalise culture, and it should be a central concern for all postcolonial

nations; an invigorated sense of Indigenous culture, as Scott shows, enables postcolonial nations to go beyond questions of oppression. Formally, the novel emphasises that this process is still ongoing through its almost complete lack of Indigenous words and phrases. In contrast to Scott's previous novel, *That Deadman Dance* (2010), which is pervaded by the Noongar language, *Taboo* typically translates everything the characters say in Noongar into English. Since Australia is still not dedicated to aiding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their geographical and emotional acts of resettlement, an excessive use of Indigenous words remains impossible. However, through the few Aboriginal words that do appear, most notably *kaya* ("hello") (Scott, *Taboo* 130) and *yoowarl koorl* ("come here") (153, 185), the novel highlights that the purpose of enabling Indigenous Australians to resettle is not to merely blame white Australia for past and present wrongdoings. Rather, Indigenous Australians invite non-Indigenous Australians to create something new together, a process from which settler Australia, too, has much to gain. Still, such a process must unavoidably include the sincere acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty, as the text makes clear through the fact that the fourth and final Noongar word that comes up in the text is *wirlo* (106). This word does not only designate the curlew but also appears in the name of the Noongar group of south-west Western Australia to which Tilly and her family belong (Scott et al. 34; Whitehurst 25). By using the word of their namesake, the curlew, Wilfred, Tilly's great-uncle, self-confidently proclaims that Indigenous people are here to stay and that their special role has to be recognised by the wider national community.

The process of coming to terms with one's language, *Taboo* suggests, inevitably includes exposing the articulated nature of language itself. Precolonial languages did not remain immune to colonial influences and, even on a purely linguistic level, languages are bound to change, as Scott illustrates by drawing attention to the differences between Noongar spoken in 1931 and today (Scott, "Drill" 14). *Taboo* also repeatedly addresses the changeability of language. While, for example, Gerry takes language to be the means of accessing his true self because of its ancient character—for him it is "the real me" (Scott, *Taboo* 16)—

what he actually speaks is not so much the language of his ancestors, but rather “what he *believed* was the old people’s tongue” (16; emphasis added). He remains unaware that the language that he speaks necessarily differs from his ancestors’ tongue. The toponym Kokanarup also reflects the articulated nature of language. Kokanarup, *Taboo* explains, is “a new word in that old tongue. It means something like ‘place of sheep; sheep issuing forth’” (217). The fact that it refers to sheep is doubly interesting, since sheep not only came to Australia in the process of British colonisation (D’Arcy 1) but were also a key force in colonising the newly acquired land. In this sense, they played a central role in the un-settlement of Indigenous Australians. The word Kokanarup, then, is a good example of the “inclusiveness” and “flexibility” of “classical Noongar culture” to which Scott points (“Not Just Warriors or Victims” 10). The place name shows that, although language is not immune to the colonial process, it has not been simply a victim of colonialism but has actively responded to it. To look for an authentic language, and consequently culture more broadly, is necessarily a futile task; but the adaptability of Indigenous languages, epitomised by the semantics of a word such as Kokanarup, highlights the significance of Indigenous languages in the contemporary world.

Apart from language, *Taboo* also comments on the ever-changing form of Indigenous cultures more broadly. For example, the novel includes a conversation about food between two of the Noongar characters: “‘Damper; it’s not real blackfella food, is it?’ ‘Well . . .’ ‘It wasn’t, then it was. Now it is. So are hamburgers, doughnuts, spaghetti . . . All the things we Noongars eat, now. That’s our food. Don’t have the great big farm like we used to have, our own country; used to harvest with fire, that fire-stick farming’” (Scott, *Taboo* 209). This passage is striking because it links an articulated understanding of Indigeneity with claims to sovereignty. Indeed, it is not entirely clear whether damper, an Australian soda bread, is a traditional Aboriginal kind of food or whether it was introduced to the outback by more recent non-Indigenous travellers. Yet, by dispensing with the question of authenticity, as articulation theory encourages, what matters is not the origins of the food but rather that Indigenous Australians, as in this case, see it as a genuine part of their

diet. The passage also includes other, more explicitly non-Indigenous kinds of food in this diet, highlighting the adaptability of Indigenous cultures. To understand Indigeneity properly, it is therefore pivotal to be aware of its changeability. Importantly, however, the text shows that to be Noongar—or Indigenous more broadly—in the twenty-first century does not mean to simply adopt a quintessentially white lifestyle. Rather, it illustrates that kinds of food that are not traditionally Indigenous can happily coexist with more conventional bush-tucker, such as kangaroo or goanna (209). *Taboo* uncovers the mobility of Indigenous cultures in their articulated form.

As I have already suggested, the passage above also explicitly calls for Indigenous sovereignty. By pointing to the loss of “the great big farm . . . we used to have,” the novel makes clear that Indigeneity nowadays necessarily includes non-Indigenous elements as an effect of the colonial enterprise. After all, due to the catastrophic impact of colonialism, Indigenous societies were unable to sustain their modes of living and forced to adopt non-Indigenous ones. Moreover, this passage actively dispenses with the common stereotype, confuted by recent scientific findings, that Indigenous cultures did not practise any form of agriculture and were instead only hunter-gatherer cultures (Moore et al. 55; Pascoe 13–67). As a narrative, *Taboo* constantly speaks up for Indigenous sovereignty, justifying it on the basis of the deep connections its Noongar characters have with their land, which the text repeatedly invokes. The act of resettlement only becomes possible through an acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty. Indeed, as the Noongar character Milton says about Dan Horton’s act of returning grinding stones of their ancestors to the Noongar characters, “Nice to get those stones, but if he give [sic] us the farm, that would really mean something!” (Scott, *Taboo* 228). In this passage, the text voices the necessity for geographical Indigenous sovereignty and resettlement most explicitly. By picturing Dan Horton contemplating returning the farm to the traditional owners of the land (a move that is not, however, completely unproblematic), *Taboo* suggests that white Australia is not entirely disinclined to the idea of Indigenous sovereignty, though such an assertion becomes ironic in light of the Australian government’s rejection of the

“Uluru Statement” only months after the publication of the novel. Yet, as Shireen Morris observes, many Australians are indeed interested in seriously discussing Indigenous sovereignty. Sovereignty and resettlement, then, include both an emotional and geographical dimension, for they manifest themselves most clearly in the revival of Indigenous languages and the return to country. Still, as Scott’s novel highlights in its treatment of language and culture, for such a resettlement to be successful one must not be tempted by discourses that evolve around biological determinism and authenticity, since such a move would trivialise the forms that contemporary Indigeneity takes. In its call for geographical and mental Indigenous sovereignty, *Taboo* is part of a recent tradition of Aboriginal fiction that Geoff Rodoreda calls “Indigenous sovereignty novels” (161), a genre that emphasises that the contemporary white Australian nation cannot aptly make sense of how Indigeneity operates without conceding sovereignty to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

VI. The Penultimate and Final Scenes—Towards Indigenous Resettlement?

In the final part of this article, I would like to focus on the penultimate and final scenes of *Taboo*, which offer a glance at whether the vision of an Australia in which Indigenous people have resettled geographically, emotionally, and culturally might indeed come true. When Tilly and Wilfred take Dan Horton’s truck to get to the Peace Park opening at the end of the novel, the truck’s brakes fail. They lose control of the vehicle, which is full of Dan’s wheat, and end up in a ditch. The shape of wheat spilling out of the truck instantly forms a human figure, something that looks “like a skeleton, but not of bone, or not bone only. Some parts—the dark and burnished skull—were timber, and the teeth shone in pink gums” (Scott, *Taboo* 278). The figure approaches Tilly and her great-uncle, and when Tilly eventually “clasped its hand firmly” (279), it immediately dissolves. Directly afterwards, “[a] voice called out Triumph. Victory. Called it out in the old language. Then: ‘Did it, Tilly’” (279). As *Taboo* promises at the beginning of the novel, the Aboriginal dead have now indeed “return[ed], transformed, to support [their descendants]

again and from within" (7). Importantly, however, the return of the family's ancestors, needed for resettlement, is not to be equated with the preservation of a primordial Indigeneity. Rather, Indigeneity can survive and prosper in the future only if it is conceived of as a practice and performative process in which old and new elements are combined. Such an Indigeneity both maintains a strong sense of sovereignty, manifested in the self-confident claim to Indigenous languages, and recognises that colonialism has inevitably altered Indigenous cultures; these two elements are illustrated by the voice at the end of the passage shouting out in Noongar as well as English.

This understanding of Indigeneity, *Taboo* suggests, is relevant not only to Indigenous Australians but to the entire Australian national community. The novel emphasises this through the large crowd of onlookers, drawn from the local pub and elsewhere, witnessing the scene of the accident (280). By stressing that this is a considerably larger group than the official opening of the Peace Park would have attracted, the text demonstrates that creating an Australia in which Indigenous Australians have resettled is a bottom-up rather than top-down process. It must not be a primarily white project, such as the creation of the Peace Park, led by political and social elites and emerging out of guilt rather than true commitment to change. Only through the collective effort of both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, led by the earnest desire to overcome embedded colonialist structures, can a newly conceptualised Australian nation come into being.

In the novel's very last paragraph, a prolepsis pictures an old Tilly. Sitting at a secret campfire in the future, she contemplates the past. She "[w]ould see not timber limbs but the bones of something both new and ancient, something recreated and invigorated, and would think of when she first heard a voice rumbling from a riverbed, and how something reached out to her" (281). This passage again emphasises the articulated nature of Indigeneity, though while the figure that teenage Tilly witnesses in Kepalup consists of bone and timber alike, this version consists of bones only. The organic metaphor of the bone suggests that through the consolidation of old and new elements, the still incomplete form of Indigeneity of bone and timber has prospered further and turned

into a strong, organic whole. In this scenario, Australia has accepted its Indigeneity and has incorporated it into visions of the nation. Yet since the bone, as Zavaglia reminds us, is also “one of the motifs that reference the genocidal moments in the history of the frontier” (48), the metaphor equally suggests that a transformed Australia must demonstrate a heightened awareness of the past crimes committed by white settlers. At the same time, the metaphor does not suggest biological rootedness. When, earlier in the narrative, Wilfred explicitly identifies Tilly as “our backbone,” “[o]ur skeleton” that can “[h]old us together” (Scott, *Taboo* 268), he already takes up the image of the bone found in the final scene. Then, however, he equally acknowledges, “Better than bones; voice and spirit” (268). In this way, *Taboo* suggests that the resettlement it advocates is not about a crude form of nativism in which everyone occupies a stretch of land that belongs exclusively to her/him (Clifford 65). More important than geographical resettlement is a self-confident form of mental sovereignty that speaks out against the othering of Indigenous Australians. It is this “voice and spirit” that needs to uncover the problematic nature of ongoing Aboriginalism and advocate the right to Indigenous self-representation picturing Indigeneity in all its complexity.

VI. Conclusion

Scott’s *Taboo*, as I argue above, negotiates the possibility that Australia may indeed become a postcolonial nation that is conscious of the fact that it is based on the dispossession of its Indigenous peoples. To that end, the text emphasises that Australia must recognise Indigenous sovereignty both geographically and mentally and offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the genuine possibility to resettle. Some have attempted to describe the nature of such a nation. Germaine Greer, for example, has voiced that Australia needs to come to terms with its Aboriginality, which, she argues, must inevitably become the basis of a reconceptualised nation. Indigenous scholars have welcomed parts of her arguments,¹¹ but her overall premise is problematic. When she argues that accepting Indigeneity means that Australia should become a “hunter-gatherer nation” (Greer 78), Greer pictures Aboriginality as a

primordial way of life and hence mirrors Aboriginalist discourse that in fact prevents the creation of the kind of nation she advocates. *Taboo*, on the other hand, highlights that Australia must necessarily depart from persisting colonial structures and instead acknowledge the complexity of Indigeneity and diversity of Indigenous experiences. To say, then, as *Taboo* does, that Australia must enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to resettle does not promote nativism but highlights that, especially regarding Indigenous matters, the voices of those who have been silenced through the colonial enterprise must be listened to.

Taboo, Scott concedes at the very end of his afterword a bit too pessimistically, “is only a book, only a novel. Cocanarup is Kokenarup is Kokanarup is Cocanarup...” (287). He may underestimate the power of fiction here. After all, fiction can challenge existing conceptions and imagine ways beyond them. *Taboo*, in its depiction of Tilly and her family, voices the necessity to move forward in the project of decolonisation, both in physical and mental terms, which must necessarily culminate in the acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty. The insights of both postcolonial and critical Indigenous studies, I believe, can help us in such an undertaking, since change is imaginable only once there is an awareness of existing structures. Only by recognising the ubiquity of Aboriginalist discourses and juxtaposing them with the fluid reality of Indigenous identities, described by Clifford’s articulated Indigeneity, is it, perhaps at some point in the future, possible to overcome these problematic discourses. Rather than setting up postcolonial and Indigenous theory as oppositional or antagonistic, it is, then, more valuable to see them as complementary and consider how their consolidation might offer tools to identify, describe, and criticise colonialist images of Indigeneity.

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Notes

- 1 For these arguments see Johnston and Lawson pp. 366–68; Mishra and Hodge p. 40; and Moreton-Robinson, “Home” p. 30.
- 2 See Lucashenko, “Black” p. 115; Moreton-Robinson, “Home” p. 30; Moreton-Robinson, “Introduction” p. 2; and Scott, “Covered Up With Sand” p. 120. There are, however, also Indigenous scholars who value the insights of postcolonial theory for Australian Indigenous studies (see Judd).
- 3 The name “Noongar” is used by a number of Aboriginal peoples who live in south-western Western Australia, including Perth (Allbrook 146; Berg 1).
- 4 Following Judd, I understand Australian Indigenous studies “not as an academic discipline but as an area of studies” (145) that is strongly influenced by other disciplines, such as anthropology and history.
- 5 Though this approach intends to pay more attention to the demands of Indigenous Australians themselves, it is not met without criticism. Moreton-Robinson, for example, remains wary of post-Aboriginalism, criticising that it does not acknowledge the role of whiteness in knowledge production. According to her, it is problematic in that it “fail[s] to imagine that Indigenous intellectual production might be inspired by a different understanding of the human subject because whiteness operates as an epistemological and ontological *a priori* in [Attwood’s] work” (“Whiteness” 85).
- 6 The *Mabo* decision is frequently praised for acknowledging for the first time that the British colonisation of Australia did not extinguish Indigenous land ownership.
- 7 For an overview of articulation theory, see Slack.
- 8 There exist various spellings of Cocanarup. For information on the historical events, see Forrest.
- 9 In a study examining the knowledge of Australian tertiary students of the frontier wars, Bailey and Brawley have shown that many have either never heard of them or have not been aware of their dimensions (23).
- 10 Geographical differences are noteworthy in this regard. While, for example, in the Northern Territory sixty percent of the Indigenous Australians spoke an Indigenous Australian language at home, in New South Wales and Victoria the figure was only one percent (“Census”).
- 11 See, for example, Watson p. 19.

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