Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies, *Volume 1 (Issue 1: January-April, 2025): Pages 12-29*
Published on: April 03, 2025.

Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies

Contents available at: *https://www.swamivivekanandauniversity.ac.in/jlcs/*

History, Culture, Democracy and 'the Voice' Referendum

Dr. Paul Sharrad

University Fellow, English Literatures, University of Wollongong. Mail psharrad@uow.edu.au

Australia's current Labor government was elected in 2022 with a promise to hold a referendum to establish an advisory committee on Aboriginal affairs to parliament. This would consist of Aboriginal representatives selected by the Indigenous population, and it would have a permanent presence by being legislated into the nation's constitution. The referendum was known as promoting a 'voice to parliament'. It failed by winning only 40 percent approval from the voting population overall and approval in only one state. Factors behind this outcome illustrate many elements of Australian history, culture and democracy. Some of them are set forth in what follows.

Two India-related reactions to the 'voice' campaign exemplify the polarised reaction to the 'voice' proposal. Pradeep Pathi is a banking and financial expert. He has aspirations to become a Liberal (conservative) politician and campaigned actively for a 'no' vote, saying he could not support 'preferential treatment' that would divide the nation. (Jain 2023). On the other hand, Australian of the Year, Amar Singh, known for his Sikh-based charity work for flood and fire victims, drove around the country supporting the 'yes' campaign on the basis that multiculturalism rests on recognition of the rights to dignity of all Australians and on respect for the nation's first inhabitants (Burgess 2023).

The Voice campaign is at base a request on the part of Indigenous Australia to be heard by those making national policies on behalf of — and often counter to the interests of — the people directly affected. A desire for grass-roots participation in governance is at the heart of both the proposal and the campaign

against it. This can assume the appearance of clamour for better inclusion in the democratic processes of the nation, or (and sometimes, and) it can seem like a claim for anarchic secession from democratic structures in the name of freedom of choice and self-determination.

History

Part of the opposition to the 'voice' proposal comes from Australia's post-Vietnam war history of immigration. Many migrant groups, particularly those holding to their native languages and communities, had never met an Aboriginal person, have no idea about Australia's history of colonisation, and did not know anything about the nature of the referendum. Arguably, the 'yes' campaign left things too late to educate these groups about the matter. One community leader reported that people were ringing him asking whether this was another debate about gay marriage, and there were many comparisons of the plebiscite to approve that and the subsequent referendum to give rights to Aboriginal people (AMES 2023; Karvelas 2023).

One of the claims behind the campaign was for a structure like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that would enable 'truth telling' about 'settler' Australia's history of physical and systemic violence against its first peoples. The sad fact is that many members of the majority European-heritage population remain ignorant, and often wilfully ignorant, of Aboriginal matters because they feel deep down that they cannot admit that Aborigines are a special case within the nation without also confessing to themselves that they live on stolen land (Lee 2023). This becomes evident in the fractious rhetorical question of conservative journalist Janet Albrechtsen, who protests the use of Aboriginal place names by 'politically correct' organisations:

> When the ABC tells us its broadcasts come from Gadigal land rather than Pyrmont, or when Qantas welcomes us to Naarn instead of Melbourne, is this because we are illegitimate occupiers of someone else's land? (Albrechtesen 2023)

Her question assumes the white readership of *The Australian* will indignantly respond 'No!' but the legal and historical reality requires a positive reply that demands a reassessment of the national polity. Inability

to accept this led to angry accusations that pro-voice people were angry troublemakers (Craven 2023). Opposition to the 'voice' was able to plug into fear-mongering dating back to the High Court's Mabo decision, when conservative politicians and mining groups took a lot of media space to warn people (incorrectly) that they could lose their homes or backyards to Native Title claims (Gottliebsen 1997).

Historically, the referendum in 1967 that recognised Aboriginal people as citizens of the country was hailed as a triumph of tolerance and has been commonly regarded as finished business for equal rights. It wasn't. It was based on Aborigines being recognised as 'the same as us', so was comfortable to white voters (Attwood 2023). It left unaddressed ongoing prejudice and social inequities known now as 'the gap' between black and white Australia in life expectancy, completion of education, rates of incarceration, employment, etcetera. This gap has resisted efforts by well-intentioned white governments to close it. The new committee proposed in the referendum was intended to provide advice from the people who knew best what the problems and needs were.

The proposal for a constitutionally guaranteed body arose from frustration that five or so similar bodies had existed in the past but they were legislated by parliament and so could be (and were) terminated by new governments or when their advice was deemed inconvenient. As Rachel Perkins pointed out, enshrining an advisory body in the constitution would prevent an ineffective round-about of removing and re-establishing advisory bodies. (Crowe & Sakkal 2023)

Some form of structural recognition of Indigenous needs began under the rubric of reconciliation, and during the conservative coalition of John Howard. An expert panel on constitutional recognition for First Peoples was established in 2010, but both the Gillard Labor government and the opposition voted down its recommendations. Later, Malcolm Turnbull suggested a referendum to acknowledge the special status of first peoples and in 2015 a consultative Referendum Council began a set of regional dialogues to work out the best form for this (Appleby & Sinnot 2023). Meanwhile, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, elder of the Yolngu people in Arnhem Land and leader of the nationally popular band Yothu Yindi, was following up his hit song 'Treaty Now' by talking with other Indigenous leaders about structures that might lead to such a settlement between nation and first nation. All this consultation resulted in a conference of Aboriginal people at Uluru in 2017, when 250 delegates voted for a 'statement from the heart' calling for

'voice', 'treaty' and 'truth telling' (Chrysanthos 2019). When its proposals went to the Coalition leader, Malcolm Turnbull, he succumbed to pressure from his right wing and rejected them as setting up another third house of parliament. This was quite false but carried some weight with voters. Following Yunupingu's death, Labor leader Anthony Albanese committed to instituting the Uluru statement principles (Houghton 2023).

Culture

Culture and its politics played a part in the failure of the referendum. Already 'weaponised' by hard-line conservatives as 'culture wars', 'Australian values' were touted to be under threat by special interest groups and 'activists'. 'Culture wars' divide society into 'woke' postmodern postcolonial (urban chardonnay swilling) dictators of orthodoxy versus common sense (footy-going beer-drinking) honest workers.

In this context, one Australian value invoked was sympathy for the battler, the small-business struggler and hard-up labourer. Large corporations (for some time under pressure to show a social conscience) came out to back 'the voice', but banks and Qantas in particular had been exposed as heartless exploiters of staff and customers. Their support was represented as empty virtue signalling and the cause itself became suspect by association.

The same culture of suspicion of authority, cities, and intellectuals was deployed against the team of 'yes' campaigners. Most of the leaders were well-known national figures, many attached to universities or parliament. They included Linda Burney (Minister for Aboriginal Affairs), Senator Pat Dodson, Professor Megan Davis (Law, UNSW), Dr Marcia Langton (Politics and health, University of Melbourne), Dr Jackie Huggins (advisor to the Queensland government), media presences Noel Pearson and Rachel Perkins. Whites could be swayed against these 'ivory tower' radicals (Albrechtsen 2023), while black Australians could be turned to see them as white-ified sell-outs.

Peter Dutton, leader of the conservative opposition in federal parliament, is a former policeman and, like Tony Abbott before him, inclines towards the anti-intellectual 'sport' culture of Australia. It came naturally to him to say, 'If you don't know, vote No' (SAARI 2023). It played into cultural support for

freedom of choice, and the fundamental laziness of most people, who didn't want to hear the alternative slogan: "if you don't know, find out" (Bennett 2023). Dutton was backed up by Australia's own Trump, the egregious dabbler in mining and real estate Clive Palmer, who in the guise of championing the average Australian, spends millions to buy votes for a couple of maverick politicians (Palmer 2023).

The other cultural factor in the 'voice' campaign was the attempt by the 'yes' team to avoid divisive polarities. It chose to emphasize the 'soft' unthreatening language of the Uluru statement, which fitted into comfortable reconciliation processes by talking about generosity, invitation and love. This clearly failed to attract. By some it seemed like middle-class sentimentality; more hardened whites could not accept that a minority were in a position to initiate invitations to the majority, thinking, 'we are the ones who do that; we have the right to direct reconciliation, not you lot'.

Soft language did nothing to prevent scaremongering. The 'no' campaign stridently shouted that opening up debate about 'race' was to create upset and division. A loud voice fuelling division in by fomenting it came from Aboriginal urban developer, Warren Mundine. This catered for a new generational culture in which anxiety is a 'no no' and we all need to have 'safe places' where we are insulated from any unsettling differences, with 'trigger warnings' to prevent unexpected confrontations with different ideas, unpleasant images, and so on. This is backed up by the idea of a 'community' as a group of somehow marginalised people who share similar experiences that define them against wider society from which they derive identity and belonging. It is further supported by digital media platforms that feed us what they know we already like and generate online groups of enclosed feedback loops leading to extreme views of one kind and another and an aversion to reasoned debate.

Many people surveyed about their knowledge of Australia's political structure thought the constitution enabled them to plead the 5th if they were ever put on trial. This shows the cultural shift engineered by US television, such that people could support Dutton's confected worries over the constitution, thinking it had the kind of sanctified status accorded the American equivalent. It extends to revealing how a US Trumpian post-Covid era of 'me too' individualism/populism/and anarchic sovereign citizens has infiltrated Australian political discourse. The 'voice' first referendum was the first to be held in a digital media environment. Barnaby Joyce admitted that the 'no' campaign let in a Trump-like populism where

ignorance and easy ‘fake news’ sources like Twitter allowed a hollowing out of debate and a ‘doughnut’ politics of leaving the urban centres alone and campaigning to the outer rings of suburbia (Hartcher 2023). The twitterscape filled the debate with conspiracy theories: the UN would take over; the flag would go; Australia Day would go; blacks would get yet more special privileges (mythical handouts of free cars and houses).

Democracy: The Constitution

The most significant factor in the voice campaign was its attempt to alter the constitution.
A third to a half of respondents to surveys didn’t know Australia had one (Miller 2015, Brent 2023). Many others clearly had no idea of the nature of what they at least knew we had. The Constitution is a tiny document that deals only in broad principles, the details of which are to be determined by parliament. The constitution says that Australia will have a defence force — how that is shaped and run is not dealt with at all. Opposition to constitutional recognition of first peoples fussed about not knowing details of the government’s proposal, when the decision to change the constitution did not at all engage with how an advisory body would be set up.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton scared voters by saying that change to the constitution would be permanent. As a foundation document, it has to be pretty solid or the national building it supports might topple. This is why changes require a referendum and why referenda must meet stringent conditions: a majority of ‘yes’ votes not just in total, but from a majority of Australia’s states and territories. Referenda rarely get positive outcomes, as was seen in the 1997 attempt to change to a republic. However, by definition, if you are voting to change the constitution, then the constitution is not a permanent document.

Public education about the nature of Australian democracy and its constitution would also have scotched an argument promulgated by the ‘no’ campaign. This was that voting yes would inject racial division into a ‘neutral’ document supporting equality for all Australians. In fact, the constitution contained racial discrimination from the start, and its history has been one of trying to delete clauses that make exclusionary exception of Aboriginal people and confer special powers on government to legislate the rights and duties and provisions for that one racial minority. The ‘yes’ vote would in fact have continued efforts to de-racialise the constitution.

Some might argue that PM Albanese made an error in declaring during his election campaign that Labor would introduce the referendum once in government. Referenda have never succeeded without bipartisan political support and linking 'yes' to Labor made it seem like a party-political project, almost forcing the new opposition to position itself with the 'no' camp (Craven 2023). It allowed people like Warren Mundine on any number of media appearances to blame Albanese for dividing the nation as though the Prime Minster were personally responsible for putting forward the Uluru proposals.

Those proposals also played a part in spoiling the referendum. On the one hand, as the result of grass-roots Aboriginal discussions, the Uluru statement stood as counter to the loud protestations that the vote was whitefellers yet again telling blackfellas what was good for them. On the other hand, the Uluru statement exceeded the remit of the Voice referendum by making it one small step in a three-part process: voice, truth-telling and treaty. The non-Indigenous majority could be led to suspect that there was a more radical hidden agenda behind the establishment of an advisory voice to parliament, and the already more radical Greens and elements of Aboriginal politics were able to point to 'treaty' and claim that 'voice' was an inadequate cop-out avoiding proper sovereignty for first peoples.

The idea of listening to Aboriginal voices was itself problematic for the referendum, as the commercial media selectively featured a range of Aboriginal voices in support of the 'no' campaign. Warren Mundine has already been mentioned. Jacinta Price became a poster-girl for conservative Australia. Coming from Central Australia Warlpiri on her mother's side, with a white father, she took up a 'modernity is wonderful and assimilation is best' line, arguing that we'd all be better off if we knuckled down, went to school and got a job, enjoyed electricity and running water, and that generational trauma was no excuse even if it did exist. Her rhetoric avoided the obvious facts that the stolen generation have been significantly damaged by their experiences, that trying to assimilate will still earn you racist abuse, and that Aboriginal people outside of a few educated city dwellers do not enjoy many of the goods and services of white Australia. But Price's version of self help played well to migrant groups and many Anglo-Celt Australians. Her most compelling arguments perhaps were twofold: that the 'voice' as an advisory body was a vague symbolic gesture that could not guarantee parliament would act on its advice or ensure that advice would result in improved social conditions for first peoples; and that the democratic

system had already produced a half-dozen Indigenous members of parliament, so no change was required. Her own case, however, demonstrates that having a seat in parliament does not necessarily represent the voice of most first peoples.

The other example of this was Lydia Thorpe. Elected as a Greens member in the Senate, she quickly changed to an independent, and has been a kind of black mirror image to someone like Pauline Hanson. She opposed the 'yes' vote as submitting to the colonial government and its invaders' constitution, despite drawing a government salary. She demanded sovereignty based on demands of 'her' grass-roots people, although the 'Voice' supported treaty and it is very hazy who her grass roots actually are. She would not submit to white men telling her what to do, even though the movement arose from Aboriginal consensus. Regardless of her idiosyncratic arguments, her forceful rhetoric served to convince many that the referendum was being driven by radical extremists.

One final factor affecting the referendum outcome was economics. The contemporary reality of impossible house prices, the rising cost of living, and the constant airing of both in the media had the country nervous. The man on the street saw the referendum as the government wasting taxpayer money when everyone was financially strapped and voted 'no' in protest, irrespective of what the issue really was.

The referendum campaign was partly fought over different ideas of equality. The no vote carried an implicit ideal of sameness grounded on the old assimilationist notion that one citizen should have no more rights than anyone else and that harmony means that society should suppress differences. Populist nationalism could be martialled in support of this. Against the sameness of equality is the difference of equity and the idea that people cannot be equal unless their different positions are taken into account. Paul Kelly attributes this view to 'cosmopolitan elites' that 'put less emphasis on national citizenship, unity and responsibility [and] champion human rights' (Kelly 2023), but equality for an indigenous minority cannot be achieved unless we recognise the material and psychological disadvantage attaching to the loss of land and livelihood as the result of invasion. Australia exists without any legal agreement or conquest in war, so there is indeed a special Aboriginal case with prior claims to sovereignty. Under the inextricable regime of settler government only a politics that allows for special treatment to reduce

disadvantage in sectors of society has any hope of engineering the kind of social equality touted by the 'sameness' citizenry.

The media cycle/ twitter and polls turn democracy from allowing representatives to lead us forwards to forcing them to follow us who hold them to the lowest common denominator of complacence and self-interest. Constant polling created at first a comforting illusion of positivity that arguably lulled the yes supporters into not campaigning hard early on (Griffiths 2021). Buoyed by this and encouraged by the positive plebiscite on same-sex marriage earlier, 'yes' campaigners failed to make their case strongly and widely enough. Later on, much reported negative polls created a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom and voter opinion shifted ("How the mood changed" 2023).

The referendum occurred after a long period of progressive loss of trust in 'career' politicians and the Liberal–Labor duopoly fighting only to stay in power. Career politicians had got used to the stability manufactured under Menzies and Howard and are now having to wake up to the fragmentation of interests and an increasing number of minor parties and independents entering parliament. In this climate, as Zygmunt Bauman notes in *Liquid Modernity*, trust 'floats unanchored, vainly seeking…havens' (Baumann 2012, 135). Representative democracy is still supported by older generations as they retain the comforting illusion that people elected are likely to look and sound like themselves. Younger voters have no such illusions and seem to favour popular plebiscites or don't want to have compulsory voting so they can have freedom of choice and opt out. The argument is made that referenda rules are no longer fit for purpose: voting slips should at least have a 'don't know' box. Democracy can only work well with an educated, rational populace that trusts its leaders. Culture is against that and referenda become even more difficult to manage successfully.

One aspect of the referendum campaigns that emerged in voting patterns and in some of the rhetoric during the campaigns, was the division between urban and rural Australia. 'Of the 33 electorates that voted yes, 26 were classified as inner metropolitan… while all of the nation's 38 rural seats voted no' (Tanner & Lynch 2023). Labor's traditional electorates in the working-class outer suburbs tended to vote no (Wright 2023). Voting patterns showed that there are, as *The Australian* claimed, two Australias (Kelly 2023). They did not arise as a result of the referendum campaign; they were already there.

Underprivileged rural people of any race or political persuasion resent their urban counterparts, and working class suburbanites resent inner-city professionals. It is a divide exploited by the right of politics. The National Party (formerly the Country Party) read the signs early and chose not to support the referendum. The Liberal Party (now a conservative group) had lost what had been 'blue ribbon' (i.e., safe) electorates to women in business and the professions. In an effort to give renewed profile to the Coalition, opposition leader Peter Dutton chose to oppose the voice referendum. The small-L liberals elected as independents did not return to his fold: they voted 'yes' quite firmly, but were a minority (Hartcher 2023). Barnaby Joyce, former leader of the Nationals, saw the vote divided between the rich (who had nothing much to lose) and the not so rich (who were worried they would lose some of what they had).

Aboriginal communities on their own lands in 'remote' locations voted solidly for the voice, whereas Indigenous people in cities were not nearly as positive. It has to be remembered that the Uluru 'statement from the heart' originated with traditional leaders in north and central Australia. Younger, urban 'detribalised' Aboriginals have formulated an identity politics based on a notion of Aboriginality that both rejects as stereotypically racist an image of 'bush' Aborigines and envies their surviving contacts to land, language and tradition. In return, it is not unknown for people living on country according to ancient custom to look down on their city counterparts. Such a variety of conflicted positions allows Australian politics to despair of there being an easy uniform 'solution' to Aboriginal issues.

As Christopher Lee observes in relation to Australian fiction, addressing the wicked problem of colonial occupation and national belonging needs to create imaginative alternatives to the status quo — new myths to live by (Lee 2023). Perhaps the Humanities might contribute to resolving some of the divides affecting the referendum outcome by invoking the work of ecocritics. A reshaping of the urban–rural divide, for example, could help de-racialise some of the social inequities that continue to curtail the quality of life for both black and white Australians living in 'the outback'. It could also turn to national advantage the characteristic of Indigeneity commonly touted by both 'remote' and city Aboriginal people: the love of and care for the land as both material environment and acculturated 'country'. ••••

Chantelle Beyes in *Reimagining Urban Nature: Literary Imaginaries for Posthuman Cities*,

makes the point that ecocritics so far, especially in Australia, have fixed their attention largely on the bush, seeing environmental care as protecting nature, whether that takes the form of protecting native wildlife, old growth forests, controlling bushfires, building sustainability against floods, and so on. We can see something of this in the ongoing citation of work by Val Plumwood and Deborah Bird Rose, valuable as that has been in shifting attitudes away from a white settler ethos of thoughtless environmental plunder. Theorists like Bayes and Christensen and Heise argue for an 'urban ecology' that will bring city and country together (Christensen and Heise 2017 457 : Bayes 9). In Schliephake's words, 'The city, too, is a form of nature.' (Schliephake, 2014, p. 12: Bayes 10) and we can revise that to see nature as subject to processes of 'urbanisation' (Bayes, 10).

In this relationship we can see the most remote communities as always already part of urbanisation. Even the most nomadic of desert tribes would gather at specific sites, often with other tribes, at certain times of the year for ceremony and seasonal food harvests and they manufactured and traded axes, drugs, pearlshell ornaments across the continent (Westaway et al 2021). Post-contact, for various reasons both benign and malign, people gathered or were obliged to gather on cattle stations, missions, and government ration depots, many of these sites taking on the size and functions of small towns.

Seeing the country as 'urbanised' undoes the division between 'tribal' and 'urban' Aborigines. It redraws boundaries not at the edges of racial difference, but between local communities and 'fly in fly out' workers, between old inhabitants and new managers of agribusiness corporations. The current turn away from fossil fuels is placing 'industry' in the heart of the outback, solar power providing remote outstations with the same access to communications, lighting, heating and cooling as anywhere else in the country. People could have more direct access to communication channels. Local land councils and members of parliament could be in more productive dialogue. Enabling all people to think of themselves as part of the urbanising network of the nation would have to be accompanied by better schools, more access to health care, jobs training and so on, and this would be more possible if urbanites no longer thought of rural places as remote, separate and forgettable.

Such a more consistent and compelling dialogue could occur whether or not there is a national advisory body built on constitutional change. Some aspects of this new imagining are outlined in Bruce Pascoe's recent book, *Black Duck*.

Thinking connection doesn't do away with actual geographical distance and the economic differences that accrue from it, but it may promote a new kind of democratic exchange that avoids the clashes and failures of the voice referendum. This kind of reimagining is at the centre of a recent literary work, *The Visitors*, which also dramatizes some of the challenges of democratic process and the referendum.

Jane Harrison, Melbourne based writer with Muruwari family from northern New South Wales, came to public notice as the author of *Stolen* (1998), a play depicting the suffering of children taken from their parents and raised in institutions. In response to negative images of Aboriginal men used to justify the suspension of civil rights in northern Aboriginal communities and have direct government intervention, Harrison drafted a play that would show men as thoughtful leaders of 'sophisticated and complex' societies (Rubbo). She took the idea of the film *Twelve Angry Men* in which one principled person changes the opinions of a jury (Steger) and created a play in which Aboriginal elders meet to decide how they will respond to the appearance of alien ships in Sydney harbour in 1788. It is a more detailed and Black-centric update of Eleanor Dark's 1941 historical novel *The Timeless Land* in which Dark, as a white writer, imagines what Sydney Aborigines thought as they watched the first fleet of convicts and soldiers arrive. Harrison's play, titled *The Visitors*, debuted at the Sydney Festival in 2020 and has been reworked as a novel, appearing in 2023.

Its appeal lies in the conceit of role reversal. The Aboriginal characters are given English names and dressed in suits. They attend a gathering that is run like a white council meeting, with a chairman and rules of debate.

Like the mock anthropological documentary film *Barbekiuaria* (1986), which has black officials taking white children from their families 'for their own good', the intent is to challenge the colonialist theatrical tradition of white actors performing in 'blackface', and to present a situation familiar to white audiences that obliges them to see it from a different perspective. The suits and names work to refuse historical stereotypes of naked savagery and cultural otherness. In the novel Harrison offsets the 'whiteface' surfaces of the play with lots of ethnographic detail, and Black-centric language. The novel opens: 'Gadalung marool seasons, the hot time. Wangal country.' (Harrison 2023, 1)

Seventeen-year-old Lawrence lives at Kamay (Botany Bay) and sees a huge 'nowee' (canoe) arrive, followed by others. News is sent to Elder Gary, the current head of the committee of tribal elders to call a meeting at Warrane (Sydney Harbour) of all the 'mobs' around Sydney to discuss what to do about it. Young Lawrence is delegated to attend the council and watches his elders, changing his opinions about them as they reveal their different personalities.

The society around the Sydney area is not an idyll of peace. Lawrence's father has been killed in clan war, his uncle was beaten up by Gordon from the Gadigal tribe, Nathaniel has taken Gary's wife in another fight, and there are clashes of personality. However, despite occasional fights, things work according to rules and in harmony with nature and the seasons. The new 'visitors' do not connect with local understandings at all:

> they hack down a tree just to burn it when there is plenty of seasoned firewood available…. They present the senior men with gifts of unusual materials that have no purpose. Why not trade useful things – tools, foodstuffs? Such poor manners. (11)

Older men like Joseph recall a visit from French explorers, and the council rehearse stories of the strange power of guns and wonder whether they shouldn't meet with the newcomers to trade for things like the new technology steel axe that was acquired in the earlier visit (135-7). Gordon wants war that will send the aliens on their way. Walter cautions against kneejerk responses, pointing out they could perhaps learn useful things from them. The sailors seem so puny and unhealthy that the council feel they should extend them the benefits of their own medicines. As debate about the new arrivals progresses, and as Lawrence warns the council, new ships keep arriving, raising the stakes. His youthful curiosity has led him earlier to paddle up close to the ships and watch the strange creatures on board, during which he is coughed on by a sailor hanging over the rail (178). During the meeting he falls into a fever and speedily wastes away, seeming to have infected old Joseph as well. Discussion swings to and fro until finally they agree almost by default to welcome the visitors.

The construction of the Voice to parliament as a reconciliatory appeal for love and respect (expressed most vividly by Noel Pearson 2023) is echoed in the idealism of Walter, the thinker, who argues: 'Us mob exchange knowledge all the time. Why not with them?.... Perhaps where their knowledge meets ours, something new and unique can be created.' (195) But the novel's position after the fact of white occupation and its stories of guns show that exchanges under colonialism new and old are rarely equal. In the novel there is very little understanding on either side of the beach, both regarding the other as barbarians (205). In this situation, love is *not* all you need.

Nor is it enough to posit an equal and opposite voice in democratic debate. The novel presents the council of elders holding to traditional protocols of talking until consensus is reached while operating as though they are subject to white committee procedure. Neither aspect of their deliberations generates an effective answer to the historical dilemma. The action of the play/novel intends to give agency to Aboriginal people rather than leave them, (as white history has done until recent times) as passive hapless victims to the machinery of modernity and progress (Steger 2023). Certainly, they did have some agency in deciding how to receive the unforeseen invasion, but the brute realities of different weapons systems and diseases for which there were no immune defences or medicines, and the sheer wilful ignorance of the invaders about codes of reciprocity, meant that whatever the council decided, it would be a negative outcome for them.

The referendum supporters presented diversity of opinion as a democratic positive that would give a degree of self-determined agency to First Peoples. However, as the play shows, leaving Aboriginal delegates to decide what gets aired/ what line to push does not guarantee being heard, being properly understood, or generating effective outcomes. Harrison aims to validate an Indigenous process of arriving at consensus, and it suggests that collective wisdom will lead to a positive outcome. The council chair pre-emptively echoes the calls during the voice campaigns for measured respectful discussion, and the gathering enacts the heated arguments during the referendum campaign and the knee-jerk interpretations once the no vote occurred. The implication might be that democracy will reflect the collective wisdom of the people. However, as we read the story, we see the elders changing their ground for no solid reason other than rivalry, impatience, tiredness, and the final collective decision is suddenly effected by a vote

that is more a set of abdications and defaults than a considered agreement (245. It also has disastrous consequences.

The other problem is the same as would apply if the referendum had succeeded in forming a statutory body to advise the nation on Aboriginal affairs. If Indigenous voices do get to formulate a collective policy, then they carry the responsibility for what happens. In the play/novel giving agency to the tribal council means that its decision to welcome the strangers makes it (not the colonists) responsible all that ensues. Clearly, this is not the intended message of the play. Nor was it the intent of the referendum to set up an advisory council that would be regarded as marking the 'end of history' by creating national reconciliation. Fictional or real, an Aboriginal council dealing with the machinery of colonisation is caught in a cleft stick: if it cannot agree on anything, it's Black failure; if its advice is heeded and doesn't work out, it's the council's fault. Democratic discussion and representation does not do away with difference or guarantee a perfect society.

Perhaps the message is that we have to keep discussing and listening and deciding regardless and something will eventually work out — that, as others have said, democracy is a poor tool but it's the best of a lot of worse alternatives. And trying to imagine genuine alternatives is part of the creative work of both literature and politics.

Works Cited

Albrechtsen, Janet. 2023. "Radical idea about 'occupied Australia' must be confronted". *The Australian* (28 October): 24.

AMES. "Migrants, refugees confused over Indigenous Voice to Parliament – survey finds" 2023. *Impact* (26 July). https://amesnews.com.au/lead-story/migrants-refugees-confused-over-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-survey-finds/

Appleby, Gabrielle and Eddie Synot. 2023. "The Voice: what is it, where did it come from, and what can it achieve?". *The Conversation* (29 March) https://theconversation.com/the-voice-what-is-it-where-did-it-come-from-and-what-can-it-achieve-202138

Attwood, Bain. 'A referendum in trouble' *Australian Book Review*. 455 (July): ••••

https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2023/july-2023-no-455/991-july-2023-no-455/10384-bain-attwood-on-the-voice-referendum

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2012. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bayes, Chantelle. 2023. *Reimagining Urban Nature: Literary Imaginaries for Posthuman Cities*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 280.

Bennett, Ebony. 2023. "Voice to Parliament: If you don't know, just ask". The Australia Institute (3 September) https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/if-you-dont-know-just-ask/

Brent, Peter. 2023. "Just remind me, what *is* the constitution?" *Inside Story* (15 February) https://insidestory.org.au/just-remind-me-what-is-the-constitution/

Burgess, Annika. 2023. "Powerful grassroots efforts could be decider for multicultural Australians' Voice to Parliament referendum vote". ABC News (2 September). https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-02/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-multicultural-vote-referendum/102758130

Chrisanthos, Natassia. 2019. "What is the Uluru Statement from the Heart?" *Sydney Morning Herald*. (27 May) https://www.smh.com.au/national/what-is-the-uluru-statement-from-the-heart-20190523-p51qlj.html

Christensen, J., & Heise, U.K. 2017. "Biocities: Urban ecology and the cultural Imagination". In U.K. Heise, J. Christensen, & M. Niemann (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. London: Routledge: 452–61.

Craven, Greg. 2023. "After pain, Indigenous leaders will rue voice of rage, blame". *The Australian* (24 October): 11.

Crowe, David and Paul Sakkal. 2023. "Kindness costs nothing". *Sydney Morning Herald* (14 October): 8.

Diversity Council of Australia, "Constitutional Recognition and the Uluru Statement from the Heart". https://www.dca.org.au/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/constitutional-recognition-and-the-uluru-statement-from-the-heart

Gottliebsen, Robert. 1997. "Backyard native title is no joke". *Financial Review* (5 May). https://www.afr.com/companies/backyard-native-title-is-no-joke-19970505-kb1y3

Griffiths News. 2021. "New survey results show clear public support for constitutional First Nations Voice" *Griffith News* (9 April) https://news.griffith.edu.au/2021/04/09/new-survey-results-show-clear-public-support-for-constitutional-first-nations-voice/

Harrison, Jane. 1998. *Stolen*. Strawberry Hills: Currency Press.

Harrison, Jane. 2023. *The Visitors*. Sydney: Fourth Estate.

Hartcher, Peter. 2023. "How the Voice vote trumped PM". *Sydney Morning Herald* (21 October): 36.

Haughton, James. 2022. "Responding to the Uluru Statement from the Heart" (October) https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReviewOctober202223/Responding_to_the_Uluru_Statement

"How the Mood has Changed". 2023. *The Australian* (14–15 October): 4.

Jain, Vrishali. 2023. "As early voting kicks off, Indian Australians have their say on the Voice". SBS Hindi (6 October). https://www.sbs.com.au/language/hindi/en/podcast-episode/indian-australians-debate-their-vote-as-early-voting-underway-on-voice-referendum/c90ozbx64

Karvelas, Patricia. 2022. "Five years after the same-sex marriage plebiscite, does it hold a lesson for the Indigenous Voice referendum?". ABC Radio National (13 November). https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-13/australia-referendum-indigenous-voice-same-sex-marriage-survey/101643560

Kelly, Paul. 2023. "Referendum shows Australia is two distinct nations". *The Australian* (21-22 October): 17, 20.

Lee, Christopher. 2023. "White Lies: Colonial Mythology and the Decolonial Impasse". In David Carter (ed). *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 386–404.

Miller, Nick. 2015. "More than one third of Australians have not heard of the Consititution, survey finds". *Sydney Morning Herald* (21 February) https://www.smh.com.au/world/more-than-one-third-of-australians-have-not-heard-of-the-constitution-survey-finds-20150221-13kxri.html

Palmer, Clive. 2023. United Australia Party advertisement, *The Australian.* Various dates.

Pascoe, Bruce. 2024. *Black Duck: A Year at Yumburra*. Port Melbourne: Thames & Hudson.

Pearson, Noel. 2023. "For the Love of Country" Address to National Press Club. *Cape York Partnership* (27 September) https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/for-the-love-of-country/

SAARI (South Asian Australians Representing Ideas). 2023. "Don't just 'vote know if you don't know'. Get informed" (14 September) https://saaricollective.com.au/community/blog/dont-just-vote-no-if-you-dont-know-get-informed/

Schliephake, C. 2014. *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Steger, Jason. 2023. “What if the British were sent packing? Writer dares to rethink history”. *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 October). https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/what-if-the-british-were-sent-packing-writer-dares-to-rethink-history-20230920-p5e67k.html

Tanner, David and Lydia Lynch. 2023. “Income, education reveal all”. *The Australian* (21-22 October): 7.

Westaway, Michael C, Douglas Williams, Kelsey Lowe et al. 2021. “Hidden in plain sight: the archaeological landscape of Mithaka Country, south-west Queensland”. *Antiquity* 95 no. 382. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/hidden-in-plain-sight-the-archaeological-landscape-of-mithaka-country-southwest-queensland/9661E7F90EB7ED535012484DC35FB01A

Wright, Shane. 2023. “More to who voted Yes than you may think”. *Sydney Morning Herald*. (21 October): 28-29.