

# Being “out of place” in my own country

Settler Colonial regime and its persistent systems, structures and policies

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1 June 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Easter 7C, Reconciliation Sunday

Galatians 3: 23-28, 5: 1, 13-15; The Uluru Statement From The Heart

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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## 1. Out of place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century settler colonial regime

In his paper, Post-Colonialism – Ngarrindjeri & National Perspectives, Rev Ken Sumner, current Acting Chair of the National Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and Leader in the SA Congress, shared a brief history of the colonisation of his people, the Ngarrindjeri people<sup>1</sup>. The Ngarrindjeri is an Aboriginal nation who occupied, and still inhabit, the Lower Murray, Coorong and Lakes area of South Australia. I have known and worked with Ken for 25 years, and I was his Resource worker when he was the State director of the Victorian Congress, 2011-2018.

In his brief historical account, Ken shared that in 1830, Captain Sturt sailed into his people's community. Contact was made. The Ngarrindjeri people welcomed Sturt and the sailors and cared for him and his exhausted crew.

Ken noted that the encounter was not just a historical event. It had emerging social cultural and psychic (inner life) effects/affects on them and their identity.

Ken shared an example of the way contact began to change his community.

A traditional Ngarrindjeri man kept his possum skin coat and his hunting equipment and refused to accept Christianity, affirming his own culture. His wife converted and wore Western clothing. He was buried traditionally, she had a Christian burial!

As Ken reflects:

*This example illustrates how settler colonial systems and structures, represented by and through the church, divided my people in every aspect of their lives and were socially, economically and culturally destructive.*

Ken continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Ngarrindjeri is an Aboriginal nation who occupied, and still inhabit, the Lower Murray, Coorong and Lakes area of South Australia. Their lands and waters extended 30km up the Murray from Lake Alexandrina, the length of the Coorong and the coastal area to Encounter Bay. Today this Aboriginal group is still very strong, with a large community of people based in the Lower Murray and Coorong area.

*Another example from the mission stage in our colonial history started around 1850. Dormitories were built and a demand was placed on children to learn English and not speak their language, along with the directive to wear Western European clothes. These were the normalizing and regulatory forms of settler colonial power, forcing children to identify with new Anglo-Christian values, practices, and social, cultural, spiritual and economic arrangements.*

## **2 Moving beyond the UCA Covenant statement in the 1994 Assembly**

For Ken contact was not just a historical event. Rather, Sturt was a representative of a historically specific regime of power, the British Empire. And this “*regime of power*” was a social, cultural, economic and political system. It was a complex system which held “truths” about life and about Indigenous peoples and their land. And racist truths that have been reshaped but persist today. Which is an ideology, a discourse which is held in the collective, cultural unconscious. Which requires us to uncover and recognise ideology which shapes and determines our place and inner life in unequal and unjust ways.

And this historically specific regime of power of the British Empire went unrecognised, untheorised when the Uniting Church President made the confession to Indigenous people in the Covenant statement in the 1994 Assembly.

*“my people did not hear you [or see you] ... we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom... .. We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture, and confused the Gospel with western ways.”*

So, what the Covenant Statement avoided or misrecognised, did not intentionally theorise, is that the church, did not hear or see the social, cultural and political systems and structures which shaped them or see the causes of destructive policies.

## **2 Nescient people are without civilised knowledge and incapable of ownership and management of land.**

To illustrate how socio-cultural-political systems and structures normalise and regulate power and shape destructive policies, Ken invites us to hear about the encounter between Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, two key colonial government officials, and the Arunta people in Central Australia in 1896.

In this event, Spencer and Gillen were given the privilege to witness the Arunta people’s ceremony around the conception of children. When they asked about conception they were given a story, which was of a spiritual nature, framed in Arunta spirituality. But in Spencer and Gillen’s pre-understanding this answer showed that they were *nescient*: that is, “not knowing”, without knowledge of the biological nature of human birth. And so they concluded that this nescience confirmed that they were primitive uneducated peoples.<sup>2</sup> They concluded that Indigenous people were without knowledge and incapable of ownership and management of land.

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, 6-11.

Then, when Spencer became the Government Chief Protector of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory in 1911 he shaped policies on the basis of this “nescience discourse”. Western scientific and political discourse saturated Indigenous identity and life and decided how they should be assimilated. And, Indigenous public/political identity was and still continues to be constructed and written over with the advance of settler colonial society!

As Ken Sumner reflected:

*19<sup>th</sup> century British Empire related to us as Indigenous people through varied, complex scientific, political, social and economic frameworks – which had already concluded that we were savage, primitive and nescient; and that the real agenda of Empire was the need for land and space for their growing convict population and economic expansion!*

### **3. Out of place in today’s neoliberal settler society**

Finally, to continue sharing Ken’s paper, he concludes:

*We are now here in the 21st Century! There have been advances; many apologies for past injustices have been made, as well as reconciliation statements and commitments: the UCA Covenant, Closing the Gap, and so on!*

*But I still experience being “OUT OF PLACE”! We are on our land, but Western political, economic, social and cultural systems, structures and policies determine every aspect of our lives!*

Yes, we are no longer in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century classical liberalism, settler colonial empire science and government, when we were herded through historical stages of confrontation, dispossession, incarceration and open assimilation.

But we have entered a new phase of settler colonial systemic control in the shape of neoliberalism, a political, economic structural force that shapes every aspect of subjectivity, non-indigenous and Indigenous. This is currently the historically specific regime of power.

It is important for us to understand this current regime of power!

That over the last fifteen years, emerging policies are less concerned with rights and relationships, but are focused on reforming Indigenous behavior, intervening in community dysfunction and driving economic integration through mainstream employment. In Australia, this policy shift is particularly marked. Governments have abolished Indigenous representatives and institutions, and have reformulated Indigenous welfare provision in line with the “responsibility” and “post-welfare” agendas in settler colonial countries.

### **Conclusion: The challenge of unlearning and relearning what we know**

What Ken shared means we are called into the process of unlearning and relearning what ideology shapes our systems and structures in Australian society.

Elizabeth Strakosch, in her book *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy: settler colonialism and the “post-welfare” state*, writes that neoliberalism has blurred the relationship between categorical exclusion and nominally and conditionally including Indigenous people as citizens. So at “*first they were outside, then inside, and then in the borderlands of liberal citizenship.*” (17)

Strakosch directly addresses us! She writes:

*This argument has an important implication for non-Indigenous people seeking decolonising ways. This is that our progressive/conservative liberal political debates over Indigenous inclusion and exclusion have rested upon colonial foundations, rather than calling them into question. We need to understand the implication of our own political framework in the process of colonisation and challenge the assumption that resolution of settler-Indigenous conflict must arise from and take place in that framework. Conversations between liberal and Indigenous political ideas might be more productive in directing us towards truly post-settler colonial futures. (18)*

We need to engage in critical reflection to see how we see, that is, to see the cultural meaning systems that acts as unknown knowns. We are called to uncover this system to see what inhibits compassion to all, and re-order the system as a compassionate society. To do this in the Spirit of Jesus, in a call to equal freedom for all, beyond the deceptiveness of inclusion, which gives power to those who have the power to include.

As Ched Myers reminds us:

*"[h]umans do not apprehend social reality directly. Social reality is apprehended out of and through the cultural meaning systems we inhabit."*

John O'Donoghue:

*When our lives, minds and hearts are domesticated by the symbolic and cultural order around us, our lives are reduced. Our lives as free and equal children of the universe are disinherited. Almost without knowing, we slip inside ready-made familial, socio-cultural, national roles, routines, values ... We acquire sets of convictions in relation to politics, religion, and work. (Eternal Echoes, 142)*