

**Decolonising Fire:
Recognition justice and Aboriginal fire
knowledge in the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire
news narrative**

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. Any material written by other authors, and all assistance received in the production of this thesis, has been appropriately cited and acknowledged in the text. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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Abstract

Australia's 2019-2020 summer bushfires brought to light two key conversations during its news coverage: the need for better forms of bushfire management, and most importantly, the revival of Aboriginal cultural burning practices. The Australian landscape was formed through fire, and for more than 60,000 years, Aboriginal people across the continent have developed knowledge of the land through generations of custodianship and culture. Despite the ecological and scientific value of Aboriginal place-specific knowledge that has developed alongside the changes of this continent's vast ecosystems, the establishment of the settler-colonial system has deemed this knowledge invalid and unscientific. Drawing on the concepts of decolonisation, misrecognition, epistemic violence, Aboriginal academic literature, and recognition as a component of justice especially, this thesis challenges covert themes of settler-colonialism present in the bushfire news narrative, and will showcase why recognition justice must underscore discussions and initiatives concerning cultural burning. Through a thematic content analysis of news articles published prior, during, and after the bushfires, the findings of this study will highlight how Aboriginal people and their knowledge are still undermined in the media, and on a macrocosmic level, Australia as a colonial institution.

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Introduction

Australia has always been fire-prone. The association of fire with fear arrived with settlers who viewed fire as a tool of destruction—a threat to man and property. Australia's physical landscape was created thousands of years ago by fire (Pascoe 2014:165), maintained and protected by the creation of fire knowledge by Aboriginal people. Their diverse ecological knowledge is rooted in the holistic nature of the continent's biodiverse ecosystems and principles of sustainability. This system of knowledge became so intertwined with nature that ultimately, 'the people became part of the living landscape' (Steffensen 2020:107). Since the brutal invasion of European settlers, the land and the lore developed from it were manipulated to suit western political society—a society rooted in anthropocentrism.

The 2019-2020 bushfires brought to life the environmental consequences of this anthropocentrism. The increased presence of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has resulted in steady temperature increases, longer periods of heat, lesser rainfall, and as a result, severe bushfires (Garnaut 2007; Lucas et al., 2007). Questions concerning future bushfire mitigation strategies became a prominent feature of the 2019-2020 bushfire news narrative, and within this, the conversation surrounding Aboriginal fire knowledge and cultural burning rose (Williamson et al., 2020a). The narrative, however, was often written from the settler perspective, one which cannot truly explain the nature of cultural burning.

Cultural burning is a traditional fire practice, rooted in the spiritual relationship between clan and Country¹. A method that applies burns on small-scale areas to regenerate the health of vegetation and animals, so all elements of nature exist in harmony (Allam 2020; Steffensen 2020:32). A key element of cultural burning is understanding that when the right fire is applied to the right Country, balance is formed. This understanding of balance for Country is specific to Aboriginal communities, whose place-specific knowledge derives from generations of custodianship. The dimensions of custodianship and spirituality, intrinsic to cultural burning, are incommensurable with western science. As a result, the science of Aboriginal fire knowledge has been undermined (Steffensen 2020:99). On top of this is the dismissal of disproportionate effects of the bushfires on Aboriginal communities, such as dispossession and loss of sacred sites, the efforts of Aboriginal-led fire practitioner programs, and the inclusion of Aboriginal people in land management planning, recovery, and decision-making (Williamson et al., 2020a).

The delegitimization of Aboriginal² knowledge is what this study focuses on. This research investigates the ways in which Aboriginal fire knowledge has not been *recognised*. I use recognition here in a dual sense: the definition of being seen, and the concept of recognition justice. This concept of recognition, developed by theorists Young (1999) and Fraser (2000), highlights the importance of recognising group differences—the differences in conditions of oppression across race, gender, class

¹ Country is a holistic term used to describe familial and clan connections to specific regions of Australia. It is also a reference to all living beings that exist in harmony with the land. Country is a representation of culture, identity, and the self (Koff 2020)

² Note that I use the term 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous' to refer to Aboriginal people and knowledge in Australia. I recognise that people prefer different terms, and I want to be respectful in not treating them as interchangeable words. I use Indigenous when describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, global Indigenous groups, and in respect to the terminology used by academics in their works.

etc that are foundational to achieving justice (Scholsberg 2017; Young 1990:3). Lack of recognition towards Aboriginal people in Australian settler-society has been used as a tool of domination to limit the level of recognition Aboriginal people receive, compromising the value of their identities (Howitt 1998; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:1). In the context of this study, I focus on the extent to which recognition justice is denied through the bushfire news narratives. Thus, developing the primary research question of this thesis, that is: *To what extent has cultural burning and Aboriginal fire knowledge been recognised by Australian news media during the 2019-2020 bushfires?*

When discussing recognition justice, it is as important to consider how its absence is tied to the maintenance of white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and the superiority of western science and academia (Brigg 2007; Dei 2000). By understanding this, we can understand how maintaining settler-colonialism inherently devalues Aboriginal knowledge simply because it does not derive from white society. These clashes between Aboriginal and western society—one that is eco-centric versus one that is anthropocentric—brings forward the importance of decolonisation and Indigenous custodianship over land. The concepts of recognition justice and self-determination are imperative to the survival of Aboriginal culture within settler-colonial systems (Porter 2014). On a surface level the lack of recognition may be interpreted as harmless misrepresentation. However, misrecognition in settler-colonial discourses have long been used to distort and erase Indigenous identity in Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2004). To misrecognise cultural burning is to invalidate Aboriginal knowledge, to undermine Aboriginal connection to Country, and disrupt the process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and settler society. Acknowledging recognition, decolonisation, and justice unveils the depth at which settler-colonial structures erase Indigeneity. Theories of environmental justice and decolonisation, which will be further

explored in later chapters, then form the secondary research questions of this thesis: *How do these articles perpetuate, or dismantle colonial standards? And: Do the contents of these articles suggest a decolonial turn in Australian society?*

Why does this research matter?

This study matters because it identifies an unbroken bond between Indigenous and environmental justice: the two are inextricably tied. Indigenous justice (IJ) calls for the global recognition and validation of Indigenous people, culture, and knowledge across the world that has, for so long, been denied. Indigenous groups are globally diverse, connected by their deep connections to land that sustain their distinct cultures (McGregor et al., 2020). The environmental justice (EJ) framework emphasises the importance of recognising distributive, recognition, and participative injustices that are worsened by climate change (McGregor 2018; Scholsberg 2004). These intersections of environmentalism and recognition justice link the two together.

Climate change has magnified this interrelationship, as projected environmental catastrophes have sparked global interest in Indigenous knowledge. Yet it is also Indigenous people that are disproportionately threatened by climate change (Tran et al., 2015). Research on Aboriginal communities in the 2019-2020 bushfires by Williamson et al., (2020a) reveals an absence of Aboriginal representation in bushfire inquiries, disregard towards the destruction of cultural artefacts, and underrepresentation of Aboriginal voices in bushfire mitigation planning and recovery decision-making processes (Williamson et al., 2020a). These absences of recognitional, participative, and distributive justice are reflective of Australia's underdeveloped EJ discourse. Only a few environmental assessments focus on EJ in Australia (see Bryne & MacCallum 2013; Chakraborty & Green 2014; Green et al.,

2012), specifically distributive justice. This research will add to that body of EJ discourse in Australia, expanding the discourse to include recognition justice. Furthermore, the focus on the news narrative of cultural burning will demonstrate how the element of recognition justice is crucial for Aboriginal justice, reconciliation, and decolonisation in our settler society.

This thesis has four key components. Chapter one provides a literature review, outlining the key theoretical frameworks and concepts that form the foundations of this research. The purpose of chapter two is twofold; firstly, to explain the colonial history behind academic research and the importance of reflexivity, and secondly, to outline the methods of analysis for this thesis. Chapter three explores the concept of recognition justice in-depth, looking at the shifts in understanding justice from Rawlsian theory to the critical theorists of Young and Fraser who have conceptualised recognition. Following this, the concepts and acts of misrecognition, epistemological ignorance, and epistemic violence will be explored to understand why recognition is so important in the context of cultural burning. Chapter four will be two sections. The first will demonstrate the findings of the thematic content analysis, outlining the characteristics of the articles. The second will be an in-depth analysis, looking at recurring themes, language, and content to identify how misrecognition is perpetuated. Chapter five will tie together the theories and research findings to address the research questions, drawing on the research findings to reiterate why recognition and decolonisation are imperative for justice.

Chapter One — Literature Review

The recognition of Aboriginal fire knowledge in Australia's settler-colonial system is the foundation of my research question: *To what extent has cultural burning and Aboriginal fire knowledge been recognised by Australian news media during the 2019-2020 bushfires?* It is an investigation into whether the recent public acknowledgement of cultural burning symbolises an avenue for change in both Australian society and politics. To address the gap in the literature this thesis will cover, this chapter will discuss key theories of critical environmental justice, recognition, decolonisation, and the relations between them. Moreover, the social understandings that underscore how conditions for injustice have been constructed—such as those of environmental racism, ignorance towards social difference, and Indigenous erasure in settler-colonialism—form the foundation of conceptual analysis for this research

Critical Environmental Justice

EJ discourse emerged during the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s, as locations for toxic waste sites, garbage dumps, and industrial pollution was placed in predominately African-American neighbourhoods (Bullard 1994). This was the first time the concept of 'environmental racism' entered the EJ framework, as the field was predominantly white and ignored the intersections of race and environmental harms. Research undertaken during the movement³ uncovered a correlation between race, socioeconomic status, and waste disposal, where corporations and government agencies often selected neighbourhoods populated by poorer people of colour due to their lower capacities of legal and capital

³ See specifically the 1983 U.S General Accounting Office study of the correlations between waste landfills, race, and socio-economic status

power (Bullard 1994; US Government Accountability Office [GAO] 1983). These events marked the beginnings of EJ discourse, leading on to form the First National People of Colour Environmental Leader Summit. At the summit, a collaborative activist group of Indigenous people and People of Colour (POC), challenged the disproportionate dumping of waste in and beside neighbourhoods predominantly populated by both groups, and working-class communities (Mohai & Bryant 1992; Pellow 2016). The actions at the summit produced three key elements of justice: distribution, participation, and recognition (Scholsberg 2007). Scholsberg (2007) expands on this trivalent conception of justice; outlining a distributive component which requires equitable access to resources, and the conditions that precede unequal distribution; the recognition of social differences and the importance of intersectionality; and equal participation in political and decision-making processes that are needed to fulfil the demands of justice.

Environmental justice is inherently tied to Indigenous justice because both demand 'equity, recognition, and participation' (Scholsberg & Carruthers 2010). Land is central to Indigenous wellbeing, culture, and cosmology (Graham 1999; Whyte 2011). So, as settler-colonial principles value land as an instrument for capital gain, the exploitation of land imposes a direct disruption of Indigenous existence (Briggs 2007; Scholsberg et al., 2017). Globally, custodian relations Indigenous people hold towards land is constantly threatened by cultural genocide, as a result of environmental degradation from government agencies and private companies (Scholsberg 2010).

Two key distributive analyses established the presence of critical environmental justice (CEJ) discourse in Australia's eco-political landscape. Lloyd-Smith and Bell's (2003) comparative case study analysis of hazardous waste sites in Perth and Sydney

demonstrated inequitable distribution and the absence of participatory justice for community members. Second, and arguably most notable for Australian CEJ, is Chakraborty & Green's (2014) analysis of industrial air pollution which discovered disproportionately high amounts of air pollution amongst Indigenous and poorer communities. Chakraborty & Green (2014) go further to address environmental racism, explicitly stating that Indigenous communities faced compounded injustices of cultural ignorance and limitations to economic resources, leaving them vulnerable to pollution-induced health problems. The existence of only one academic paper addressing environmental racism shows that the framework for recognition justice in Australia is underdeveloped. For this form of justice to be achieved, Aboriginal people and knowledge, and the intersectional disadvantages they face, must be acknowledged on a public and governmental scale.

Recognition justice in settler-colonial Australia

To understand the foundations of recognition justice, I refer to critical theorists Iris Marion-Young and Nancy Fraser, beginning with Frasers' (2000) analysis of the Hegelian identity model. It is rooted in the notion that the politics of recognition begins with understanding how is 'dialogically' constructed (Fraser 2000). It is a reciprocal process that occurs between recognising oneself and being recognised by others. In the words of Weir (2008), we are engaged in 'a constant dialectic between the identities we find ourselves in and the identities we are creating' (p. 119). To be stripped of recognition, or to be 'misrecognized' (Fraser 2000), is to have one's own identity and their perceived identity, distorted. Young (1990) focuses on the concepts of 'domination' and 'oppression' as the standpoint to truly perceive recognition justice (p. 3).

Fraser (2000) criticises Young, particularly how Young's approach to recognition may inherently undermine the importance of distributive justice. Taking on a Hegelian approach to identity, Fraser discusses how recognition of the self as an individual subject works in equal partnership with being recognised by an external subject, to establish a legitimate identity. Fraser does not undermine the value of cultural recognition, rather, she states that the link between cultural injustice and economic disparities are often misunderstood. Instead, she heavily critiques Young's centralisation of recognition in the process of justice, arguing that economic redistribution is not immediately remedied once recognition is given (Fraser 1995; Fraser 2000).

For Young, it is from the standpoint of disenfranchisement where we come to understand how the conditions for disparities in both social and economic status amongst different social groups have been created and maintained. By rooting justice in the acknowledgement of group difference, we can address conditions of structural and institutional discrimination that create disparities across social groups—specifically disparities of material goods distribution, power, and political participation (Scholsberg 2004; Young 1990)—to create systems built on equity.

What is gained from appreciating these critiques is the 'trivalency' of justice (Fraser 2000; Scholsberg 2004). Young's (1990) theory lays the foundation for understanding justice in somewhat of a reverse order, beginning with oppressive injustice to understand *how* misrecognition operates, so we can abolish the systems that create it. Scholsberg (2004) reiterates that justice does not have a singular solution. Each component of justice—recognition, distribution, and participation—must all be considered for their inextricable ties to each other.

Misrecognition of Aboriginal Peoples of Australia

When recognition is not given to a certain group, the societal perception of that group is constructed by the system that has positioned itself at the top of the social hierarchy through the means of domination (Young 1990:56). The maintenance of harmful stereotypes pertaining to dominated groups in society directly affect their socioeconomic and political capacities at the individual and collective level (Dotson 2011; Fraser 2000). To revisit Frasers' (2000) concept of misrecognition, the reciprocal process of recognition that constitutes the development of one's identity is arguably absent in the Australian context. Dispossession is exemplary of the repercussions of misrecognition, because the removal of Aboriginal people from their lands severs their ties to ancestry and generational knowledge (Graham 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2015:11-12). To be separated from one's land does not induce destruction to identity to the settler as it does to someone Indigenous. Settler societies do not view the land as a sacred core of cosmological development and life (Graham 1999). Graham (1999) describes the treatment of land as a determinate of our 'human-ness', whilst the relations between land and people exist as a 'template for societal relations' (p. 106). When dispossession and destruction of land takes place, Aboriginal people suffer more than just the loss of Country. Their ancestral connections are broken, the capacity to learn Country-specific knowledge is lessened, the formation of identity is disrupted, and the hegemonic power of whiteness settler-colonialism is reproduced (Brigg 2007; Graham 1999; Moreton-Robinson 2017; Steffensen 2020). The loss of land and forced assimilation distorts the development of self-identity making it difficult to develop cultural connections and creates the conditions for the dominant culture, white Australia, to impose their own definitions of Aboriginality.

It is fair to say that misrecognition of Aboriginal people has been institutionalised in Australia. Australia has exculpated itself from its history of colonial brutality and genocide by creating what Crawford (2013) calls a 'cult of forgetfulness'. Where the understanding of Australia's beginnings is portrayed to be 'uncomplicated and uncontentious' with its interaction with Indigenous people (Crawford 2013). Australia's self-exculpation from its settler-colonial history has been achieved through its social contract. To apply Mills' (1997) racial contract here, white settlers did not view Aboriginal people as citizens of the state, reinforcing their hegemonic power by excluding Aboriginal people in the constitution up until its reform in the 1967 referendum (Parliament of Australia, 2017). This is epistemological ignorance in action, active avoidance of recognition of the social realities outside those built by white people (Mills 1997:18). Where the initial exclusion of Aboriginal people in the Australian constitution, and the need for a referendum to be proposed for change in the first place, is exemplary of institutionalised white supremacy. Deliberately constructed so that colonial history is replaced by white exceptionalism. Aboriginal knowledge systems are invalidated within the hegemony of western science that posts itself as 'the only valid body of knowledge' (Durie 2005:305). It is inherently intolerant of other knowledge forms because it succeeds on the reproduction of its established hierarchy. Moreover, Aboriginal knowledge continues to be mystified through western hegemonic discourse. Steffensen asks the question of what this invalidation means for fire knowledge application across Australia's biodiverse landscape, and how millennia of ecological stewardship can be reduced to myth. Instead, Aboriginal people are posited in society as hunter-gatherers whose systems for living were underdeveloped and inferior (Behrendt 2013:148), confined to an image of ancientness that justifies colonialism, and erases the diversity of Aboriginal

communities across the continent whose knowledge differs across Country (Behrendt 2013:150; Borsboom 1998). This disavowal of Aboriginal knowledge is a form of epistemic violence (Dotson 2011) which devalues the non-western significance of land, in order to avoid confronting colonial injustices.

Epistemic violence as a form of erasure

The erasure of Aboriginal ways of knowing is a power move that normalises western epistemologies as the only form of truth. By doing this, Aboriginal beliefs and identity become perpetually undermined and homogenised, defined through the lens of 'strategic essentialism' (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Moreton-Robinson (2015) explains that the attempt to define Aboriginal belonging—a spiritual understanding of 'what we are' and the interconnectedness to self, to others, and to land (Miller 2009)—through the western knowledge systems can treat Aboriginal people as a monolith. This is because strategic essentialism attempts to ascribe an 'essence' to belonging; an essence of what constitutes as factual knowledge through western definitions that are discordant to the epistemologies of Indigenous belief systems (Moreton-Robinson 2015:12-14; Paradies 2006).

Dotson (2011) defines epistemic violence as denying minority groups the ability to "speak and be heard" (p. 236). We can revisit Young's conceptualisation of oppression here to understand how this silencing occurs. Young (1990) emphasises that hierarchical social structures actively oppress certain groups because they do not value their humanity. This is evident in settler Australia's history where federal and state legislations refused to recognise Aboriginal people as; First Nations people, as legitimate citizens of the state, or as equally deserving of the same human rights as European settlers (MacNaughton and Davis 2001; Paradies 2006). According to

Paradies (2006), constructing the understanding of “Indigeneity” and “Aboriginality” is a means of control over social mobility, socialisation, and biological reproduction. Settler Australia’s control over the construction of Aboriginal identity then subjects Aboriginal knowledge and land connections to continuous invalidation, because Aboriginal people themselves are undervalued within settler Australia’s imagination.

To unpack this further, I draw on Mills’ (1997) deconstruction of the social contract and epistemological ignorance. The social contract is the embodiment of western political theory, a metaphorical agreement between civil society and government. What Mills points out very early in his theory, is that the social contract is not necessarily a contract between the government and people, but rather, those the government sees as people (p. 3). It is at this point where the social contract becomes a racial contract. Epistemological ignorance is embedded in the western imagination. When Mills says the ‘the racial contract includes an epistemological contract’ (p. 96), he refers to the absence of reciprocal recognition white society places upon black people. Black bodies are not recognised as equal; therefore, they are pushed to the background of society. This notion of epistemological ignorance derives from white supremacy, a political system that underscores various modes of society, designed by white people who have transformed their anti-blackness into a racial hierarchy that infiltrates systems of socioeconomic status, knowledge legitimacy, and social convention so that non-white people cannot benefit (Mills 1997:14).

Clashing Ontologies and Decolonisation

Land is the intersection between Aboriginal and settler-Australian political ontology. The intersectional difference between these ontologies is rooted in ‘wider cosmological, ontological, and cultural differences’ (Briggs 2007:405). Briggs (2007)

describes settler-Australian and Aboriginal political ontologies, respectively, as *biopolitical* and *terrapolitical*. Within the *biopolitical* order, humans hold ownership over land, because humans are dominant beings (Briggs 2007; Plumwood 1990:524). There is a distinction made within Aristotelian logic—the foundation of western political philosophy—between speech and voice, where *speech* has the capacity to express, and *voice* can merely ‘indicate’ (Briggs 2007:406). Because man has the ability of *speech*, human life is most valuable. Contrarily, Aboriginal political ontology—the *terrapolitical*—land is an active participant of society. A sacred entity that is central to moral, spiritual, and social life (Briggs 2007; Graham 1999; Plumwood 1990). Land is a representation of ancestral continuity which underscores the custodial ethic and mandates societal function (Graham 1999). It is important to note that the deep links between Aboriginal people and land are difficult to conceptualise through western discourse (Meyers & Mugambwa 1993).

While Aboriginal and settler Australia centre land in societal function, they perceive this centrality differently. For settler-Australia, land is valued for its exploitative potential and capital gains (Briggs 2007; Crawford 2013). For Aboriginal people, land has a larger cosmological meaning. The spiritual and cultural identity of a person resides in the land that is specific to their clan and provides its own specific knowledge of custodianship and belonging pertaining to that place (Briggs 2007; Graham 1999; Miller 2003). The value of land to Aboriginal people has long gone unrecognised by the Australian state up until the 1992 *Mabo* decision.

The *Mabo case* was led by Eddie Mabo, a Meriam⁴ man, who fought for the legislative recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights that existed prior to the

⁴ Meriam people are the traditional owners of Mer (Murray Island)

arrival of the first British fleet ('3 June: *The Mabo Decision*' Reconciliation n.d). The results of the case saw the nullification of *terra nullius*, recognising that Indigenous peoples had lived in Australia for many millennia with their own laws and customs, the recognition of connection to land, and laid the foundations for the *1993 Native Title Act*.⁵ Whilst the results of the *Mabo case* saw the legal recognition of Indigenous land rights, academics such as Meyers & Mugabwa (1993) and Motha (1998) critique the elements of misrecognition that underscore the case. Motha (1998) contends that the Mabo decision was the High Court's recognition of *sameness* rather than *difference*. The acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights was done so through the 'Anglo-European conception of relating to land', that of ownership and possession (Motha 1998:82). The danger in recognising 'sameness' is the misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge systems as their own individual forms of knowing. It re-affirms western ontologies and epistemologies as the benchmark of knowledge and understanding. These critiques are not an invalidation of the Mabo decision, rather, it is an emphasis on the ways that colonialism can be covertly extended where '[Indigenous people] are forced to accept the invaders' law and *its* translation of their relationship to land' (Motha 1998). It is clear that settler-colonial norms are institutionally present within Australia's systems of governance, demonstrating that colonialism is not a past event that *happened*, it is *happening* (Wolfe 1999).

Scholarship on decolonisation in settler-colonial societies stresses the confronting realities that decolonisation demands, an unsettling process of land repatriation (Tuck

⁵ In summary, the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) is a law passed by the Australian parliament which recognises land and water rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as those to protect cultural sites, practice custom, and use water (Native Title n.d)

& Yang 2012). What Tuck & Yang (2012) illustrate is the 'metamorphization' of decolonisation, suggesting that the physical process of land repatriation has been overshadowed by the discourse of critical theory and rejections of colonial standards of education, methodology, and thinking.

Still, in Tuck & Yang's analysis, there is no discussion on the need to be anti-colonial. Land repatriation is still a transferral of *ownership*, it is underscored by settler-colonial standards. This is not to say that returning land to its traditional owners is not imperative for the decolonial process, rather, it is where it begins. It sparks the process of being anti-colonial, unlearning and rejecting not only the systems and binaries produced by colonialism, but colonialism itself. Phrases such as 'decolonise our schools' and 'decolonising our thinking' are those used in discourses of critical thinking and social justice, and whilst these sentiments invoke the notion of decentring whiteness, they often do not. Todd (2016) notes especially that Indigenous people are almost never acknowledged in western academic narratives. When Indigenous knowledge is filtered through 'white intermediaries', it is easier for knowledge to be appropriated because Indigenous people themselves are alienated from the discourse, placing western academics as the face of this knowledge (Todd 2016:7).

Appropriation of Aboriginal culture is inherent in settler-colonial society, Moreton-Robinson (2015:4) and Wolfe (2006) explain because settlers appropriate the notion of Aboriginal belonging to place, using it as a form of 'recuperating indigeneity' to distinguish themselves from their mother nations. Wolfe continues to explain the ideological justifications behind this discourse that is rooted in land, in that the dispossession of Aboriginal people is based on the notion that European settlers could make better use of the land. Simultaneously, there was, and still is, an underlying

understanding of how dispossession actively eradicates Aboriginal people and their Dreaming (Graham 1999; Jenkins 2015; Miller 2003). This is why decolonisation can only begin when land ownership is returned to Aboriginal people. It is inextricably tied to their sovereignty, self-determination, and culture (Jenkins 2015; Tuck & Yang 2012).

Climate Change discourse in Australia

Australia is one of the world's biggest coal and gas exporters. Its fossil fuel industry is symbolic of state power, and as the world begins to implement global treaties that condemn non-renewable energy and promotes emissions reduction targets, Australia's economic power and identity are challenged (Bossleman 2020; Kelly 2020; Moss 2020). On a foundational level, settler Australia's principles of biopolitical order suggest that land should be used for economic gain (Brigg 2007). Australia's divided consensus towards climate change is largely attributed to party politics. Centre-right conservative parties like the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia promote distrust in climate science, whereas left-of-centre parties like the Greens and Australian Labour Party support science on anthropogenic climate change (Fielding et al., 2012; Tranter 2017). Lewis-Beck et al., (2011 *as cited in* Tranter 2017) go on to explain that political party identification often directly shapes personal values and political beliefs. This political party divide towards climate science is a contributor to Australia's shortcomings towards its global climate agreement commitments (Fielding et al., 2012), and the drastic changes to its own climatic conditions.

Ross Garnaut's' 2008 climate change review drew attention to the imperative policy changes required to account for Australia's inevitable climatic shifts. Despite his outline of drastic future environmental changes, there is still a lack of attention to the

urgency of the climate crisis, as well as current climate policies that fall short of the Paris Agreement targets under the Liberal-National coalition (Dooley 2019; Fielding et al., 2012). Australia's current eco-political landscape is similar to that of a decade ago, where its Liberal-led government and its Prime Minister prioritise economic gain over environmental protection (Hudson 2019). Garnaut's' (2008) report clearly forecasts that Australia should expect future bushfire patterns of earlier, high-intensity fire seasons which end later, all of which would be observable by 2020. The Australian landscape has certainly seen the reality of this projection. The 2019-2020 bushfires were exacerbated by extended periods (starting earlier and ending later) of extreme temperature and low rainfall, with the destruction of over 19 million hectares of land (Filkov et al., 2020). According to Filkov et al., (2020), the bushfires burned more surface area than any bushfire season in the last two decades. The socio-economic repercussions of the recent bushfires were catastrophic, with thousands of people displaced from their homes, entire towns decimated, increases in respiratory health issues, and immeasurable emotional trauma (ABC News 2020; Johnson 2020; Filkov et al.,2020). In regards to non-human impacts, an estimated three billion native animals were lost in fire (World Wide Fund [WWF] 2020). Whilst the emotional trauma is incalculable, Filkov et al., (2020) estimated the impact of the bushfires to be at least \$20 billion. The casualties and loss from the bushfires are not only an issue of governance and climate adaption – it is also an issue of CEJ.

Aboriginal people are amongst the most affected by the bushfires. Research by Williamson et al., (2020a) concluded that Aboriginal Australians were disproportionately affected by the bushfires, where over one-quarter of the Indigenous population (which is currently only 3.2% of the national total) live in bush-fire affected

areas. The fires resulted in not only the damage of home and land but damage to cultural heritage as well. Ancient birthing and knowledge sites that hold deep spiritual connections to past ancestors were lost in the inferno, disrupting the process of learning Country-specific knowledge (Duczynski 2020). The disproportionate vulnerability to bushfire destruction, and loss of land and cultural heritage, is compounded upon years of colonial dispossession, furthering the erasure of Aboriginal people and knowledge (Duczynski 2020; Williamson et al., 2020a).

CEJ outlines that Indigenous people are one of the most disproportionately affected populations as a result of climate change (Schlosberg 2007). In Australia, Aboriginal people face additional damaging effects on their relationships to Country, as the destruction of land disrupts future collective cultural and spiritual connections to self, each other, and land (Nurse-Bray & Palmer 2018). Despite this, they remain at risk of being ignored in the national bushfire response (Williamson et al., 2020a). The importance of place attachment to Indigenous Australians continues to be overlooked, most prominently in the case of coal and gas mining (Scholsberg et al., 2017). The environmental degradation caused by coal mining and power plants has destroyed sacred sites of culture and ancestry on Country. The additional impacts of water contamination and agricultural destruction pose threats to the survival of the environment, and the physical and spiritual health of Aboriginal groups reliant on it (Scholsberg et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2020). This deliberate disregard towards disproportionate distribution of environmental bads is present in other areas of waste, as discussed previously with Chakraborty & Greens' (2014) assessment of air pollution disproportionately impacting Indigenous communities. The combination of physical and spiritual loss, environmental degradation, and the disproportionate distribution of environmental bads is a direct injustice to Aboriginal people. Furthermore, this is a

matter of CEJ because Indigenous justice remains overlooked within the environmental framework.

Aboriginal fire knowledge and Cultural Burning

Pascoe (2014) outlines that the recent association of fire with terror in the Australian imagination arrived with settler's exploitation of the landscape (p. 161-162). Aboriginal communities across the continent have developed various forms of environmental management that work with fire, as opposed to against it. Cultural burning focuses on the health and protection of all living elements—the trees, the animals, the water, and the plants (Steffensen 2020:68). As Steffensen (2020) reiterates, the difference between western and Aboriginal fire regimes is the interconnectedness between culture and environment (p. 32). Pascoe (2014:166) outlines five key principles of cultural burning:

1. Agricultural lands burned on a rotating mosaic
2. Burning is dependent on the type of Country and its conditions
3. Weather is a determinant of burning
4. Neighbouring clans are always made aware of burning activity
5. Growing season of certain plants was always avoided

Observable from these principles is the prioritisation of land and its natural changes. Indigenous authors like Allam (2020), Graham (1999), McGregor (2018), Pascoe (2014), and Whyte (2011) emphasise how environmental custodianship is fundamental to Indigenous societies globally, and reiterate especially how this has influenced their principles of living. Steffensen (2020:159) echoes the importance of this 'synchronicity' as a spiritual connection specific to Aboriginal people and the

importance of Aboriginal-led cultural burning initiatives. This centring of Indigenous people, is outlined across decolonial literature (see Bourke et al., 2020; Watson 2014; Tuck & Yang 2012; Steffensen 2020). That is, decolonisation will only be successful when Indigenous justice is centred. If Aboriginal people are not leading and lighting cultural burns, it creates conditions for settler appropriation. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) provides a clear definition of settler appropriation, where western actors 'extract and claim ownership' (p. 1) over knowledge that is not created or produced by themselves, erasing those it truly belongs to. This is dangerous because it profits off non-western knowledge systems to further the image of white exceptionalism in settler societies.

Aboriginal fire practices are a tool of revival, rehabilitation, and reduction of fuel (Giolo 2020). According to Giolo (2020). Western science only focuses on the 'reduction of fuel' element, as opposed to the harmony of ecosystems and spirituality. Oral histories of how to care for Country have created an awareness of when for Country must be burned, it is an extension of care for ancestry (Graham 1999; Steffensen 2020:89). Victor Steffensen's recent book *Fire Country* documents this path of learning traditional knowledge in a settler-colonial system. Steffensen refers especially to Dr. George Musgrave and Dr. Tommy George, two Awu-Laya men of the Kuku-Thaypan people, who passed on the ways of burning to him. As Steffensen (2020) says, 'they knew the traditional lore of their homelands and all the stories within the landscape' (p. 26). The oral passing of knowledge is, as Graham (1999) details, like archives that outline the beginnings of each clan group and their environment. To know the stories of the landscape, and to learn how to protect it, is a method of keeping the land,

ancestors, and Creator Beings⁶ alive (Graham 1999; Giolo 2020; Steffensen 2020). Dr. Musgrave and Dr. George 'were knowledge holders from the last peoples that were living traditionally on country' (Steffensen 2020:26), they embody this aspect of connectedness and an understanding of harmony between human existence and environment.

The 'cultural psyches' of Aboriginal and Western societies drastically contrast, with 'one towards social stability and certainty, the other towards creativity and (especially technological) development' (Graham 1999:109). Moreover, when economic growth and consumerism are prioritised, environmental stability and collectivism are jeopardised (Graham 1999). This custodian ethic behind understanding synchronicity for the environment is absent in the political ontology of the Australian state. Bourke et al., (2020), Steffensen (2020), and Costello (2018), most of whom⁷ are Aboriginal fire practitioners, each recall various firsthand experiences with state law and bureaucracy attempting to appropriate their work with cultural burns.

These incidents of appropriating programs of cultural burning are an example of how the settler can engage in 'metaphorical' decolonial actions—claiming the work of Aboriginal people as their own effort for justice (Bourke et al., 2020; Giolo 2020; Steffensen 2020:87,96). Bourke et al., (2020) discuss how the settlers' approach to *fighting* against fire, as opposed to working with it, has disrupted our ecosystems. They

⁶ Creator Beings are what Graham (1999) describes as deities who rose out of the earth to carve the landscape we know today by interacting with one another. These 'interactions' are described by Graham as dancing, fighting, making love, and battling, etc. These deities brought humans onto the land, teaching them the laws and ethics of their knowledge systems, teaching them how to care for the land, to maintain stability, as an extension of caring for themselves. Graham also states that the locations at which the Creator Beings returned to the earth are still regarded as sacred sites.

⁷ Timothy Neale, a contributing author in the Bourke et al., (2020) academic source, is a non-Indigenous researcher.

speak directly about the native vegetation that is supposed to bloom during certain periods of the year, but instead, are absent due to the settler-colonial neglect of environmental protection. This knowledge of the Australian landscape and its pre-colonial shape is a representation of the situated knowledge that has developed over thousands of years. As Steffensen (2020) outlines, 'Aboriginal people found the way of applying fire that is in sync with the native fauna that live in fire prone systems' (p. 102). Aspects of cultural burning have already begun to be appropriated by western science, relabelled as 'burning for diversity' and 'ecological fire' (Steffensen 2020:98-99), but western science cannot comprehend this 'synchronisation' between Aboriginal spirituality and land.

Contextualising the Research into Current Literature

As Australia faces the inevitability of severe bushfires, higher temperatures, and dryer seasons, the emergence of cultural burning into both academic and public discourse poses questions of justice, appropriation, and decolonisation. There has been a growth of Aboriginal-led cultural burning workshops, larger engagement with young people, collaboration from various Aboriginal groups across Australia, and steadily there is engagement with government agencies and private landholders (Bourke et al., 2020; Costello 2019; Freeman 2018). However, despite the strong presence of Aboriginal voices on the frontlines of this knowledge revival the risk of ongoing perpetration of injustice remains—unless underlying principles of recognition and decolonisation are addressed.

Throughout the course of the 2019-2020 bushfires, media narratives were critical of the government's preparedness and response strategies (ABC 2019; Davies 2020; Rudd 2020). The reportage of the bushfires also saw the discussion of Aboriginal fire

practices as a component within regional and national fire response strategies rise (Williamson et al., 2020a). The question here is the extent to which the narrative of these discussions centres Aboriginal people and their knowledge systems, or if they are examples of appropriation of said knowledge by non-indigenous fire service personnel. As Steffensen (2020) describes, western institutions of governance and knowledge need to support the creation of an Aboriginal knowledge regime into society—a future wave of collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that is rooted in justice. Furthermore, the legitimisation of Aboriginal knowledge cannot take place if Aboriginal people themselves are not recognised. The gap in literature this research then addresses is whether these discourses include a move to recognition justice. My claim is that settler appropriation of Aboriginal knowledge is inevitable if a nation-wide revival of cultural burning is not entirely Aboriginal-led. As Graham (1999) states, Indigenous environmental philosophies cannot be viewed by Western society as a ‘survivalist kit’ for ecological understanding.

The research aims of this thesis are then to examine the media discourse generated during and after the 2019-2020 bushfires, unpacking how the texts suggest either settler appropriation or a genuine move towards a comprehensive recognition of Aboriginal people, culture, philosophy and management of Country and decolonisation of the nation-state.

Chapter Two — Understanding Recognition

Recognition, both as a concept and constituent of justice, continues to emerge as a core principle of Aboriginal reconciliation. It intersects with theories of decolonisation, leading us to address how the process of recognition is tied to land. Recognition and decolonisation are co-constitutive concepts of Indigenous justice. This means that we cannot discuss, nor rightfully achieve either in isolation from the other. If we are to truly *recognise* Aboriginal people, knowledge, and history, the process of decolonisation must be centred in giving land back to its traditional owners. When looking beyond land, particularly towards education and knowledge, it is as important to ‘decentre settler-perspectives’ that evade confronting systemic white superiority built through settler-colonialism (Tuck & Yang 2012). Similarly, if we are to truly *decolonise*, we must acknowledge that Australia is still a settled colony that disenfranchises Aboriginal people through dispossession (Moreton-Robinson 2015:xi; Steffensen 2020:98). To grasp how both concepts are critical to this thesis, that is, how the narrative of Aboriginal fire knowledge affects recognition, we need to understand how recognition is fundamental to justice.

Giving recognition a one-sentence definition is difficult. It has only recently become acknowledged as a mandatory component of justice. Before this, justice was primarily understood through an economic lens. John Rawls is the most recent theorist of distributional justice, conceiving distribution through the lens of wealth and property. The Rawlsian framework holds two core principles. Firstly, the greatest equal liberty principle, where each citizen should be guaranteed basic liberties that are compatible with the liberty of others. Secondly, the difference principle, where the distribution of wealth ‘need not be equal [but] it must be to everyone's advantage’ (1971:214). Both

principles operate off what Rawls calls the 'veil of ignorance', a lens we must figuratively look through to visualise ourselves without our social positionings, in an effort to rationalise what an equitable and fair society may resemble (Rawls 1971:208; Scholsberg 2007). The issue in both principles is Rawls' ignorance towards pre-existing institutional conditions that affect how distribution is decided *before* it occurs.

Critical theorist Iris Young critiques Rawlsian principles, and the attempts to solve the repercussions of oppression through distribution alone. Property is central in Rawlsian justice, used as a measure of social success. This assumption is inherently western, as western political philosophies encourage private property ownership and economic expansion (Brigg 2007). Young rejects this distribution-centred concept and takes on a 'bifocal' (Fraser 1995) approach instead, focusing on recognition and redistributive justice (Young 1990:8-9). What Young suggests is the need to understand justice through the operation of oppressive systems and hierarchies in society (1990:1). By doing this, two realisations about the links between power and justice are made. Firstly, understanding justice through the lens of 'domination and oppression' (Young 1990:8) addresses how privilege has been assigned to certain groups and stripped from others. Young provides a fivefold structure of oppression to aid this understanding, including the components of exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, which she labels the 'five faces of oppression' (Young 1990:40; Gerwitz 2006). Schlosberg expands on Young's framework, explaining that part of the underlying injustice and inequality in distribution—across the fields of Indigenous and environmental injustice—is the lack of recognition of group difference' (2007:514). Here, Scholsberg reiterates the recognition of difference, based on the premise that we must first recognise social differences in privilege and oppression to understand the role they play in distributive

justice. Once we understand how pre-existing socio-cultural institutional conditions create disparity, we can then secondly, realise the importance of recognising group differences. The absence of recognition allows for dominating actors to impose cultural imperialism—a component of Youngs’ system of oppression—appropriating identity and seizing autonomy of a particular group, projecting misconstrued identity and harmful stereotypes about that specific group (Young 1990:123).

Fraser (2000) defines this ‘distortion’ of identity as *misrecognition*. Framing recognition through the lens of identity politics, Fraser (2000) develops her definition through the Hegelian idea that identity is ‘constructed dialogically (p. 109). Moreover, being *recognised* takes place when ‘reciprocal relations’ occur, and most importantly when subjects view each other as equal (Fraser 2000;109). Here, Identity is subjective. The validity and development of one's sense of self are dependent on mutual recognition—especially considering the hierarchies of social groups produced by institutional injustice (i.e., race, gender, class, etc). Moreover, to be misrecognized is to have the relation to self, and one’s perceived identity, distorted and devalued (Fraser 2000).

Aboriginal people face constant misrecognition. Dominant settler-Australian culture continues to dictate representations of Indigeneity on a systemic and institutional level. Beginning from James Cook’s false claim of *terra nullius* in 1788 and the enactment of genocidal colonialism, the categorisation of Aboriginal Australians into the dehumanising ‘noble savage’ narrative emerged (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Erasing the diversity of Aboriginal societies, economy, and governance, and replacing it with the settler constructed narrative of a homogenous uncivilised hunter-gathering society (Borsboom 1998; Pascoe 2014:2; Rowland 2004). Racial hierarchies are crucial in the construction of Australia’s settler-colonial identity. As Wolfe (2006) describes, ‘settler

colonialism destroys to replace' (p. 388). This aspect of destruction was enacted through overt and covert forms of violence. By establishing whiteness as the norm—not just in terms of phenotype, but the conventions of knowledge, governance, and culture as well—it became 'an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life' (Moreton-Robinson 2004:75).

Institutional enforcement of this destruction is especially symbolised by the Stolen Generations, where assimilation was forced upon Aboriginal families through the forced removal of Aboriginal children who were adopted into white Australian families or sent to institutions because of government-led assimilation policies in an effort to enforce white supremacy (Bretherton & Mellor 2006). The destructive implications of these assimilation policies go beyond the intention of 'whitening' Aboriginal children. In this case, 'whitening' encompasses intergenerational dispossession and intentions to erase a 60,000-year-old history. The everlasting tie to one's connection to culture, ancestry, and Country was thus severed. Moreton-Robinson summarises the systemic and institutional removal of Aboriginal people from the settler construction of Australia:

'Through political, economic, and cultural means Anglocentric whiteness restricted and determined who could vote, who could own property, who could receive wages for work, who was free to travel, who was entitled to legal representation and who could enter Australia. These devices of exclusion did not articulate who or what is white but rather who or what is not white' (2004:79)

Such institutional discrimination insidiously constructed blackness as inferior. From the false claim of *terra nullius* by Captain Cook, settler Australian discourse became ingrained with undertones that deemed Indigenous Australian people as nomadic,

innately uncivilised, and 'lazy' because of the opposing ways in which land was central in society (Brigg 2007; Wolfe 2006). This derogation has persisted in Australia and is especially evident in incarceration and policing. Whilst only making up 3.3% of the national population (ABS, 2016), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults account for 28% of the prison population (ABS, 2016). Also, Indigenous communities are subject to higher rates of over-policing and racial profiling because of the racialized colonial discourse embedded in Australian society. A discourse that persists in the criminal justice system, perpetuating the vilification of Indigeneity, and the notion that Indigenous people need to be rescued (Altman 2007; Cunneen 2001:230-231).

Liberation from these forms of oppression, Cunneen (2008) emphasises, is one ultimately gained through decolonisation (p. 47). Land, which is central to Aboriginal ancestry and cosmology, is also the locus of colonial power. The *Mabo* case (outlined on p. 24) is exemplary of why land repatriation must be approached from the Indigenous perspective.

Still, we should not assume land redistribution is similar to that of property. Property distribution centres ownership and capital gain, as explained by the Rawlsian framework. Land redistribution is thus underscored by such principles, in comparison to Indigenous custodianship and ancestral connection. The *Mabo case* can be used again to explain the need for recognition of difference. Motha (1998) argues that recognition of *similarities*, as opposed to *difference*, took place. The High Court imposed western interpretations of ownership, assuming settlers and Indigenous people both value land the same way. What Matho emphasises continuously is the discussion of recognition in such a way that it became 'palatable' for legislative

purposes. Two forms of misrecognition are present here. On an institutional level, Aboriginal custodianship and ancestral connections to Country are legislatively misrepresented. Systemically, however, there is a reification of western conceptions of propriety over nature, and the solidification of colonial standards on a macrocosmic level. This misconstruction of Aboriginal identity to conform to western standards is symbolic of the way the decolonial process has been re-configured as non-disruptive to settler society (Matho 1998; Tuck & Yang 2012). A case aimed to decolonise land ownership has re-centred whiteness by undermining the distinctiveness of Aboriginal custodianship. The discussion of these critiques does not intend to undermine the importance of the Mabo decision. It is simply to draw attention to the continuation of institutional misrecognition.

Moreover, the intergenerational dispossession of Aboriginal people from their Country is imbricated with *epistemic violence* to erase Aboriginal cosmology, and the knowledge produced from it (Steffensen 2020:99). Once another form of knowledge deviates from western definitions, it is then deemed as unverifiable because it cannot be verified through western forms of categorisation and deduction. Such constraints make Aboriginal knowledge systems incomprehensible within the categorisations of western science (Steffensen 2020:98-99). Numerous scholars describe how the institutionalisation of epistemic violence oppresses Aboriginal identity, reproducing a 'Eurocentric cultural imaginary' (Vermeylyn 2019:90) that reinforces western ontology and epistemology through education, media, language, and social norms (Fredericks 2009a; Moreton-Robinson 2011; Vermeylyn 2019; Walker 2015). This is because those with institutional power '[decide] who belongs and who is excluded' (Vermeylyn 2019:90).

According to Walker (2015), this dialogue extends into paradigmatic discourses of governance, academia, and research, all of which predominantly white, used as tools of oppression which force Indigenous people across the globe to continuously 're-centre their own paradigms, languages, [and] methodologies' (p. 160).

Relating to Tuhiwai-Smith's (2013) conceptualization of colonial violence in research, the treatment of Indigenous spirituality and knowledge as something 'to be studied' as opposed to legitimate forms of knowledge, is another injustice. Moreover, when Indigenous ontologies are discussed within the environmental justice field, western theorists are positioned as 'knowers', marginalising the actual Indigenous owners of knowledge (Watson 2014). By doing this, Indigenous people are left 'epistemically disadvantaged' (Dotson 2011). In the Australian context, Aboriginal people as knowers of their respective group knowledge have historically been defined through 'white patriarchal knowledge production' (Moreton-Robinson 2011). This is done in several ways, notably through the colonial homogenization of the Aboriginal experience, whereby the respective socio-axiological and cultural ontologies of Aboriginal group across the continent are erased by the colonial socio-discursive construction of 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginality' (Moreton-Robinson 2011) as a single shared experience (Macdonald 1997; Steffenson 2020; Walker 2015). To quote Moreton-Robinson (2011), 'the social construction of Aboriginality violates our subjectivity by obliterating any trace of our different ontological and epistemological existences' (p. 414).

What allows such racialized constructions to be maintained is its operation from what Mills (1997) calls epistemological ignorance. The colonial and epistemic violence enacted on Aboriginal people in Australia is microcosmic of an exploitative racialized

social contract that devalues the autonomy of non-white bodies on a systemic and institutional level (Mills 1997:32-33). Colonial conquests throughout Africa, the Americas, Australia, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) formulated the racial dichotomies of white–black, reinforcing the civilised–uncivilised dualism, used to set up a ‘two-tiered moral code’ which separated the treatment of white and non-white bodies (Mills 1997:23). Dyer (2000) encapsulates this concept simply, stating that white people ‘set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed’ (p. 12). Australia’s colonial legacy is emblematic of this. The appropriation of land, state-enforced assimilation policies, racialized incarceration, and the White-Australia policy are a few observable examples of epistemological ignorance being naturalised in society.

Epistemological ignorance reinforces the dominion of white people and western ontology. The ownership and destruction of land from both public and private actors directly impact the identity of Aboriginal people, whose relationships between ancestry, spirituality, and knowledge are dependent on land (Graham 1999; Moreton-Robinson 2011). The common denominator between western and Aboriginal ontologies is the significance of land. However, the relationship of land to the function of identity and society contrasts heavily between custodianship and ownership. Briggs (2007) differentiates the two ontologies as biopolitical and *terrapolitical*, respectively.

Biopolitical ontology is anthropocentric. Foundations of the biopolitical landscape derive from human exceptionalism, promoted by Aristotle and Plato. Aristotelian distinctions of speech—or *logos*—signify man’s dominion over nature, as speech is the capacity to express and communicate, traits held by superior political beings (Aristotle 1984 as cited in Briggs 2007). Similarly, Platonic philosophy devalues nature, emphasising that what gives man dominion over nature is man’s ability to rationalise

(Plumwood 1990:525). Western political philosophy, particularly liberalism, have adopted Aristotelian ethics (especially those of human superiority and individual liberty) that lay the foundations for political and economic institutions (Brigg 2007; Brooks 1990; Plumwood 1990). This is clear in the Rawlsian framework and its ideals in individual economic progress as a solution for justice. What is particularly interesting here, is the global recognition of Western philosophical schools of thought. To use the terms 'Aristotelian' and 'Platonic' as terminology to strains of philosophical knowledge is a testament to the domination of Western knowledge. Moreover, the underlying anthropocentric discourse in *biopolitical* ontology present in settler-colonial structures, which view nature—or land—as exploitable, leave Australia without a sense of collective responsibility towards environmentalism (Graham 1999; Thoronton et al., 2020).

In sharp contrast is Aboriginal philosophy, the *terrapolitical* as Brigg (2007) defines. Aboriginal people and their ontologies see land as an integral to the cyclical creation of life, whereby land is an active being that connects living individuals to their ancestors, and vice versa throughout time (Graham 1999; Brigg 2007; Plumwood 1990). Relations to land are bioregional, as particular tracts of land hold a sense of belonging to specific clans (Briggs 2007; Plumwood 1990:531). The term *terrapolitical* itself cannot do justice to the depth of axiological cultural knowledge across Aboriginal cultures as it is still a western term attempting to categorise Aboriginal philosophies.

Cultural burning is often only seen for its physical practices of burning land in certain mosaic forms, leaving its custodial and spiritual components ignored (Steffensen 2020:202). The knowledge base for cultural burning then becomes fragmented by western science, creating confusion on the ways it is conducted, opening room for

appropriation. Aboriginal fire practitioners on the forefront of this knowledge revival continue to warn of the danger's appropriation can cause, particularly in cases when governmental agencies take over Aboriginal-led programs that focus on passing on knowledge and techniques with methods that capture the significance of culture and custodianship. Yirbarbuk et al., (2001) identify the differing goals of ecological management as a barrier to successful cross-cultural collaboration in their research of Aboriginal land management in Northern Australia. Particularly those of non-Aboriginal fire agents and ecologists who use socio-economic goals to shape environmental management (Yirbarbuk et al., 2020). Not only does the ecologically restorative capacities of cultural burning remain restrained, but we see again the placement of Aboriginal knowledge and philosophy made secondary.

There is a knowledge gap in the inclusion of Aboriginal land and fire management practices, underscored by epistemological ignorance and white supremacy. The mysticism around Aboriginal land managers and fire practitioners is rooted in the delegitimization of Aboriginal knowledge, and in addition, the undermining of Aboriginal people themselves (Dei 2000; Steffensen 2020:99). Victor Steffensen (2020), a Tagalaka⁸ man and fire practitioner, explains that the domination of Western knowledge has epistemically silenced Aboriginal knowledge during the 2019-2020 summer bushfires. What Steffensen draws attention to, something that Graham (1999), Ross & Pickering (2002), and Watson (2014) attest as well, is the explanation of cultural burning and other Indigenous methods of ecological management through the lens of western science. Rather, it must be explained and recognised as its own science (Steffensen 2020:102).

⁸ The Tagalaka people are the traditional custodians of the northern Queensland region

Steffensen (2020) explains how the current structure of short-term government-funded programs for cultural burning are restrictive. Cultural burning is a process that depends on the requirements of the environment. It is not one that takes place according to governmental funding cycles. The expectation for Aboriginal knowledge applications to adapt for the settler is covertly present. According to Oliver Costello (2019), leader of the Firesticks Alliance, reciprocity from agencies and organisations play a huge role in the practical process for Aboriginal fire practices. Moreover, within the facilitation of fire practising on land via the bureaucratic process, there needs to be recognition of how certain policies and regulations are counterproductive to enabling living knowledge. If government support is not completely given, not only in terms of finances but leadership and responsibility, the sharing of Aboriginal fire knowledge will continue to operate under a paternalistic system. There must be recognition—on individual, legal, and bureaucratic levels—that cultural burning is its own framework for protecting land (Costello 2019). As Costello (2019) states, these are not strategies for firefighting, this is burning Country. This process requires recognition of difference, it requires the centring of environment and Indigenous justice and demands ongoing reflexivity from settler structures that rethink how existing procedures, discourses, and policies de-centre Aboriginal people and their living knowledge systems.

This chapter asserts that recognition, in the dual understanding of being seen and in the sense of justice, is a crucial component in the discussion and cross-cultural applications of Aboriginal fire knowledge. An analysis of the various ways Aboriginal people have been *misrecognised* in Australia, noting especially the inconsistency of government support towards Aboriginal fire practitioners and Indigenous-led fire

initiatives, is important because it sets the stage to understand how misrecognition operates in the 2019-2020 bushfire news narrative in the future analysis chapters. The next chapter will outline the methodological approaches and qualitative methods that will be used to undergo the analysis section of this study.

Chapter Three — Methods & Research Design

The intent of this chapter is twofold. First, to discuss the importance of reflexivity when engaging with Aboriginal stories, knowledge, and culture as a non-Aboriginal researcher, and secondly, to outline the choice of methods that will be used to understand the extent to which Australians are legitimising, or alternatively appropriating, cultural burning and Indigenous fire knowledge, as future modes of national fire management, after the 2019-2020 black summer bushfires.

‘Researching’ as a non-Aboriginal individual

As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) explains, the term ‘research’ is viewed as harmful amongst Indigenous communities because it is ‘inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism’ (p. 1). It is within research that western institutions set the standard for fact and knowledge, creating the conditions for all that is non-western to be invalid (Dyer 1997:12). It is something that has been done *to* Indigenous people, treating them as objects to be studied, not autonomous people with individual cultures, languages, governing systems, and sciences (Braun et al., 2013). Research has long been used as a shield for settler appropriation, whereby western academia would ‘claim ownership over’ Indigenous knowledge, whilst simultaneously erasing Indigenous people themselves (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:1). This ‘research’ is then used to frame western societies as progressive and civilised, and Indigenous societies the opposite (Braun et al., 2013). As a result, research engaging with Indigenous people—researchers almost always will base their study in Western epistemologies—is active in a preconceived power nexus between themselves and the participants. Misrecognitions placed upon Indigenous communities by white researchers are detrimental to the construction of identity. Non-Indigenous researchers construct an

identity *for* Indigenous people that is disseminated across Western societies, denying Indigenous people the ability to define themselves, and in turn, their knowledge systems.

Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009) explain how this power imbalance is exacerbated by the 'absence of Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and understandings within the dominant research practice' (p. 1). Non-Aboriginal academics and researchers have been accustomed to understanding the world through the western lens, to the point where they assume that their methodologies are compatible with Aboriginal groups and individuals (Besserab & Ng'andu 2010; Reiter 2019). Additionally, the research conducted by non-Aboriginal academics and researchers in Australia has been criticized heavily for the absences of reflexivity, ignorance towards intersectionality, excluding Aboriginal people as stakeholders and beneficiaries of the research, and continuous distortion of Aboriginal identity (Fredericks 2008; Fredericks 2009b; Rigney 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2002; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). There is an ongoing trend of non-Aboriginal researchers speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people, as opposed to centring Aboriginal voices in research. Moreton-Robinson's (2000) critique on non-Aboriginal feminism, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, discusses these implications through white feminism in Australia. Specifically referring how white feminists in Australia ignore how they benefit from colonialism, and then go on to assume an understanding of the struggles Aboriginal women face. This commentary on the lack of cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist scholars parallels the exclusion of Aboriginal people in western academia. This is why reflexivity is imperative, as the ontological stances we assume when developing and analysing research is inherently colonial.

This exemplifies why cross-cultural considerations and reflexivity are crucial for me to consider throughout the research process as a non-Aboriginal individual. Considering I aim to focus on the perceptions of cultural burning and Indigenous fire knowledge in Australian society, it is key that I engage in 'counter-colonial research; (Nicholls 2009). As I engage with Indigenous scholars⁹ and their descriptions of their knowledge and philosophies, I must continuously recognise my position as a non-Aboriginal researcher who may be unable to comprehend the depth of certain concepts. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) reiterates how this incomprehensibility can result in disempowerment, where non-Aboriginal researchers reproduce incorrect representations of Aboriginal people and culture as a result of cultural differences. As a non-Aboriginal student researching at a colonial institution, my learning methods and modes of understanding have become accustomed to Western epistemologies. The methodology to be used for analysis in this research study, that of qualitative content analysis, may not demand the same in-depth ethical considerations of 'cultural sensitivity' and 'establishing trust' as more ethnographic forms of qualitative research (Stronach & Adair 2014). However, I must constantly hold an 'enhanced sensitivity' towards the discourse I use in analysis as it will construct and frame Aboriginal philosophies and knowledge practices (Sikes 2006: Tuhiwai-Smith 1999).

The focus of this study reflects my personal experience as an iTaukei-Ghanaian settler living on Gadigal land. My experiences in the western education system, specifically its erasure of Aboriginal history, is what pushes the prioritisation of reflexivity throughout this research. Still, my position as an Indigenous person does not excuse

⁹ The term scholar is colonial, referring to those who are highly educated within the western academic system. It is used here to reject these definitions. Scholar, here, refers to Indigenous individuals with academic achievements in both Aboriginal and western systems of knowledge.

me from imposing further colonial frameworks on Aboriginal knowledge. Whilst my own people were colonised, I have not experienced the same extent of erasure and dispossession from a settler-colonial system as those experienced by Aboriginal people. The experiences I have as I continuously learn about my own forms of Indigenous beliefs and knowledge practices have influenced the development of the research question and the methods chosen to answer it. I aim to engage with Indigenous methodologies so that my analysis and discussions center the voices and knowledge of Aboriginal people.

Morenton-Robinson & Walter (2009) describe Indigenous methodologies as those that begin with procedures decided by Indigenous people, such as Kaupapa Māori research from Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Indigenous Standpoint theory from Australia, so that their voices and experiences are centred (p. 1). To refer to the scholarship of Indigenous standpoint theory, a key takeaway is the ongoing expression of Indigenous knowledge that is interpreted through 'western understanding, logic, and rationality' (Nakata 1998). The emphasis Nakata (1998) places on Indigenous standpoint theory is the importance of using dialogue that legitimises Indigenous knowledge, articulating it in such a form that allows for Indigenous people to be recognised in relation to text.

The concepts of cultural sensitivity and reflexivity, in collaboration with the frameworks for Indigenous standpoint theory, are what lay the foundations for the qualitative analysis for this thesis. As the analysis focuses entirely on Indigenous environmental knowledge systems and practice, it is crucial that the language I use in analysis 'makes an intellectual space for Indigenous knowledge systems that were denied in the past' (Rigney 2001:9).

Research Methodology

The recurring themes of legitimising Indigenous knowledge; recognition of Indigenous people and self-determination; and decolonising settler-colonial society, have led to the development of the central research question of this thesis, that is: *To what extent has cultural burning and Aboriginal fire knowledge been recognised by Australian news media during the 2019-2020 bushfires?* The discussions prompted from this question aim to analyse how the representation of Aboriginal fire knowledge in Australian news media sets the scope for recognition in a socio-political landscape, the legitimisation of Aboriginal knowledge systems, and the decolonial turn needed for Indigenous justice.

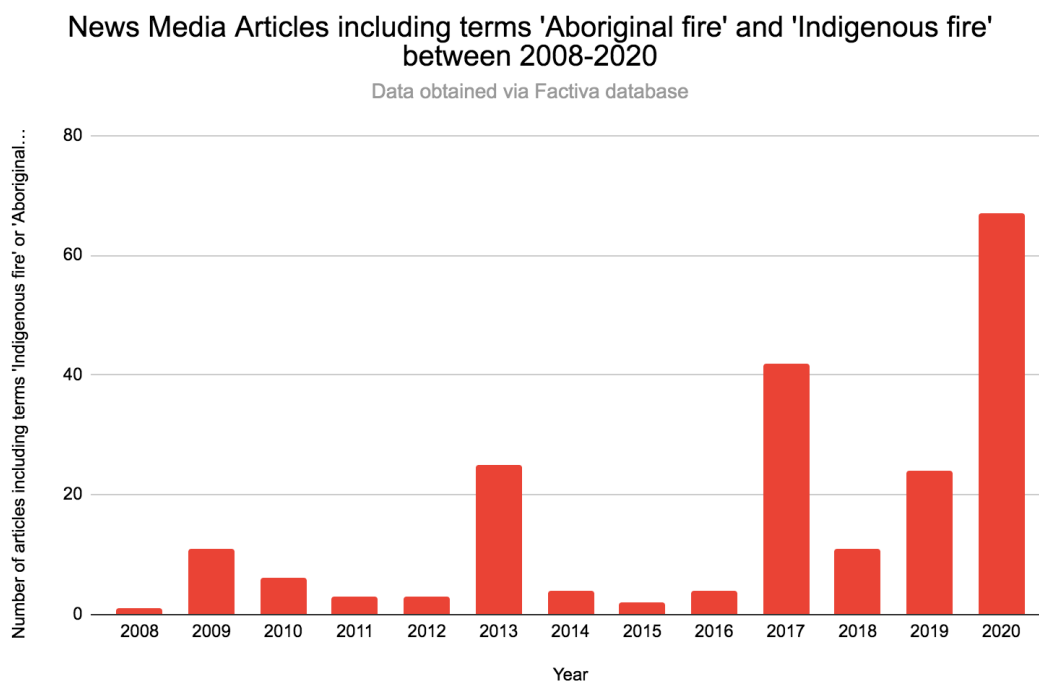


Figure 1: News Articles including terms 'Aboriginal fire' and 'Indigenous fire' between 2008-2020

Figure 1 (p. 47) illustrates the total number of news articles including the search terms 'Indigenous fire' and 'Aboriginal fire' ranging from 2008 to 2020. The data was obtained through Factiva, using the data engine's search tools to include only major news sources and newswires.

The search's time frame took place between the Gautner climate review publication (30th August 2008) — the first economic report concerning climate-centric policymaking—and one month after the end of bushfire season in 2020 (29th June 2020) to account for any gradual decreases in publications discussing Aboriginal fire management. There are four notable increases before the 2019-2020 period, specifically in 2009, 2013, and 2017. In each of these years, significant bushfire disasters occurred. In 2009, Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires took place; the devastating Blue Mountains bushfires occurred in 2013; and the 2017 bushfire season not only saw large-scale destruction but intensive weather changes, record-breaking temperatures, as well as significantly lower rainfall (Hughes & Alexander 2017; Rich et al., 2016). An observable correlation here is the sudden increase of news articles discussing Aboriginal fire knowledge as a method of land management during intensive bushfire season. This correlation is key to the analysis in this study and its focus on whether or not the narrative surrounding Aboriginal fire knowledge and cultural burning suggest a genuine decolonial turn.

However, a discussion of Aboriginal knowledge cannot take place justly if Aboriginal people themselves are not truly recognised. As Graham (1999) states, Indigenous environmental philosophies cannot be viewed by Western society as a 'survivalist kit' for ecological understanding. To appropriately analyse the narratives of Aboriginal fire

knowledge, and the meanings within them, the qualitative analysis section of this study will be undertaken through thematic content analysis.

Methods and Selection of Cases

This research project will use the methods of thematic content analysis and Indigenous standpoint theory to address the research question. Whilst I recognise that thematic content analysis is a western methodology, I believe it can integrate with the foundational principles of Indigenous standpoint theory—by centring Indigenous knowledge and scholars as opposed to rationalising them through western logic (Nakata 1998) —because methods rooted in qualitative data focuses on the diverse understandings of the world, and the situated knowledge that derives from particular human experiences (Clark et al., 2019). Using thematic content analysis as the primary mode of qualitative research enables me to identify recurring themes across various textural data and explain the extent to which they may perpetuate colonial notions such as western ideological supremacy, misrecognition, and settler appropriation. The identification of these themes, or perhaps even the rejection of them, will be analysed against Indigenous scholarship, comparing the ways in which the settler-colonial system must operate from the delegitimization of other forms of knowledge, out of sync with environmental justice and decolonisation.

The thematic content analysis in this study will focus on various forms of textural data, including:

- Newspaper reports
- Academic journal articles
- Blog posts
- Podcasts

- Videos

I focus on these types of texts because they are publicly accessible, and they are a combination of both academic and non-academic sources that will represent how the colonial imagination persists throughout Australian society, even if the groups may challenge conventional forms of knowledge. It is important to note the limitations of thematic content analysis, especially that of scope in the context of this research. The selections of textural data from various time periods during the bushfire crisis will not be a complete representation of Australia's eco-political discourse towards Aboriginal fire knowledge.

Selection of Cases

The chosen texts for analysis were extracted from three different time periods, all occurring within the bushfire season. The first set of textural data was obtained from the 18th of November to the 25th of November, the first month of summer and the early beginnings of catastrophic fire danger were forecast in the Greater Sydney region (NSW Rural Fire Service 2019). The second period selected was during the height of the bushfire crisis, the 2nd of January to the 9th of January, where Australia recorded record-breaking temperatures alongside a week-long state of emergency declarations (Al Jazeera 2020). The third set of data was obtained from a week after the bushfire season concluded: the 31st of March to the 7th of April.

The data from each of these time periods came from Factiva. The search was limited to mainstream newspapers and newswires in order to specifically focus on the news narrative, removing duplicate articles from the search to eliminate repeated texts. A thematic content analysis of these texts was contrasted to Aboriginal scholarship which critically discusses the topics of cultural burning, settler-colonialism, and

decolonisation. Distinguishing if a particular text centres Aboriginal voices and justice was achieved by using a coding form (see Appendix A). The coding form questions do not aim to strictly categorise each article, rather, to identify the themes of environmental justice, decolonial, settler-colonial, and Indigenous discourses. Including Aboriginal scholarship on cultural burning throughout this analysis is imperative. It is a reflexive practice, adopting Indigenous methodologies—such as Indigenous standpoint—to centre Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems as the locus of understanding within a text that includes western knowledge systems where their stories are being told (Nakata 1998; Young 1990:3).

Lastly, I recognise that the use of thematic content analysis as a research method reinforces western modes of analysis upon Indigenous knowledge systems. Moreover, as a novice researcher engaging in western research methods, as well as Aboriginal knowledge systems and counter-colonial methodologies, I recognise that there will be Aboriginal concepts I may be unable to effectively explain. Reflexive practices are important here again. It is constant engagement in counter-colonial research, awareness of western categorisations I may subconsciously impose, and continuous engagement in Indigenous standpoint theory—legitimising Indigenous knowledge in text. Not positioning it in relation to western academia, and instead as its own active epistemology. This chapter attempts to outline the importance of reflexivity and recognition throughout this research, which will be consistent as Indigenous texts and critical theories are used as the foundation of analysis for the content analysis.

This chapter reiterates how reflexive and counter-colonial approaches will underscore the method of analysis, that is, a thematic content analysis (TCA). It has explained that using TCA can be counter-colonial, despite it being a western methodology,

because it can identify how recurring themes of settler-colonialism, such as misrecognition, epistemic violence, and delegitimization, operate in the texts. This chapter also explains why reflexivity is important, and how it will be executed throughout the analysis chapters of this study through constant engagement with Indigenous standpoint theory and Indigenous scholarship. A key takeaway is recognising the hegemony of western academia and its ownership over knowledge, and how the centring of Aboriginal knowledge systems challenges this domination.

Chapter Four — Analysis & Discussion

The results of this analysis suggest that Aboriginal fire knowledge was not truly *recognised* throughout the 2019-2020 bushfire narrative. Obtaining an answer to the research question, that is, *in what ways have Australian news articles published throughout the 2019-2020 black summer bushfire period recognised cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge?* was achieved through undertaking a thematic content analysis of news articles during the bushfire season. The analysis covered three time periods; articles published prior, during, and after the 2019-2020 black summer bushfires. The three intervals (Data sets 1, 2, and 3) were chosen to see if there are any trends in discussion of Aboriginal fire knowledge and cultural burning, and how they may have changed during the worst fire season ever recorded in Australia. I focused on themes such as settler-colonial superiority, misrecognition, and the delegitimization of Aboriginal knowledge. This has been executed by grouping each article into various coded themes (refer to Appendix A) and analysing how recurring characteristics perpetuate the misrecognition of Aboriginal people and knowledge.

I draw these conclusions, firstly, because the number of articles discussing cultural burning and Aboriginal fire management peaked during the height of bushfire season (Data set 2). Following this, the number of articles sharply declined. Secondly, the article characteristics from each data set suggest ongoing centring of settler ideology and an absence of Aboriginal voices in conversations that centre their knowledge. This will be demonstrated in two sections: section one will outline the data set findings and explain article characteristics, and section two is an in-depth analysis of these characteristics. The first section will illustrate the findings of the thematic content analysis, firstly identifying the number of articles looking at the characteristics of the

Australian news media publications, identifying the language, narratives, and recurring topics throughout the articles. The second section will focus on unpacking the representations (or lack thereof) of cultural burning, Aboriginal knowledge systems, and Aboriginal people by integrating theories of environmental justice, decolonisation, recognition, as well as Aboriginal fire knowledge literature. Together these elements answer the research question: *In what ways have Australian news articles published throughout the 2019-2020 black summer bushfire period recognised cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge?*

Chapter Four, Part One

Case Findings

For the thematic analysis, I identified a set of search terms which I believed would encompass most mainstream news articles about cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge. This includes terminology that is both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Table 1: Search terms used in Factiva Database search

Aboriginal centred terms	Western centred terms
Cultural burning	Hazard reduction
Aboriginal fire	Back burning
Indigenous fire	Cool burn

I note here that the selection of terms ‘Aboriginal fire’ and ‘Indigenous fire’ are intentionally incomplete. This was done to ensure the number of articles found in the searches were inclusive of the following nouns: practice, management, and knowledge. By using the incomplete search terms, the range of article content could then become more inclusive of the various descriptions used by authors to describe cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge. The total number of articles in each data set are represented in Figure 2 (p. 57)

Figure 2 illustrates a very small number of articles including the search terms ‘cultural burning’, ‘Aboriginal fire’, and ‘Indigenous fire’ published both before, during, and after the fires. Only three were published in data set one (November 2019), despite the intensity of this bushfire season already visible with unprecedented heatwaves, early bushfires, and thousands of hectares already razed across numerous states (Morton & Readfern 2019). During the height of the fires, a total of 21 articles were published,

following a sharp decline to 2 articles during March and April—the end of bushfire season.

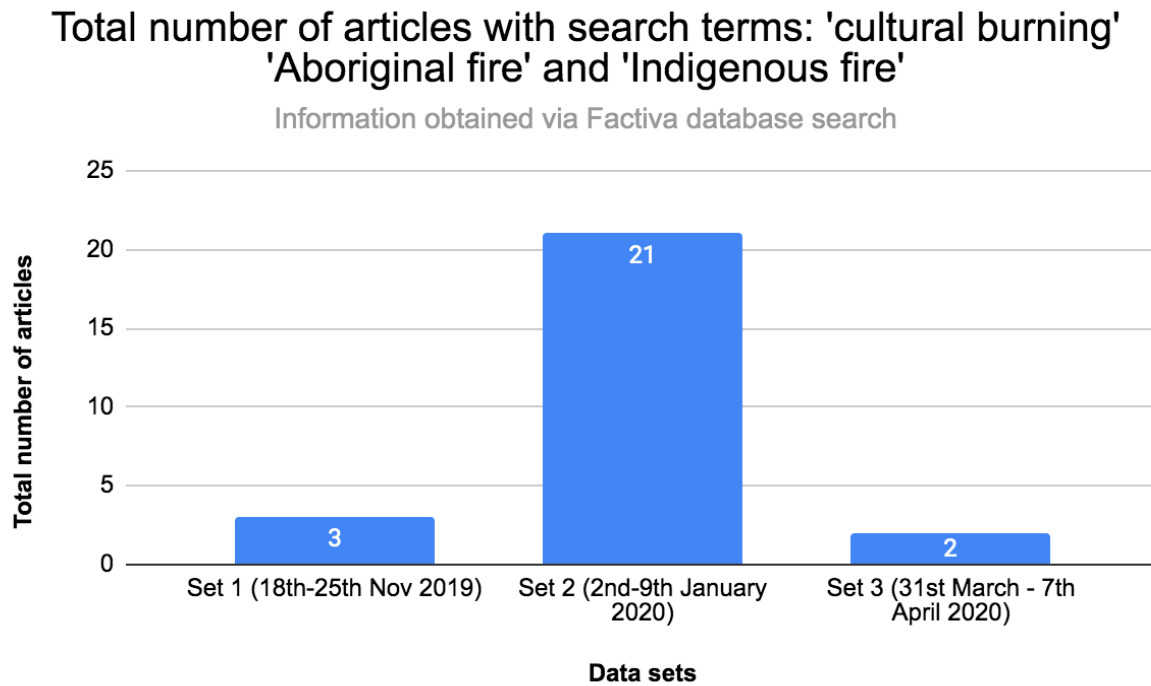


Figure 2: Total articles with search terms: 'cultural burning' 'Aboriginal fire' and 'Indigenous fire'

The major observation that can be drawn from the January surge is that Aboriginal fire practices only seem to enter the narrative during an emergency. They are not integrated into the Australian bushfire management discourse as a whole. This conditional inclusion parallels Graham's (1999) critique of the settler-colonial framing of Indigenous Australian philosophy as a 'survivalist kit to understanding nature, human, or environmental' (p. 105). It exposes the insidious nature of settler appropriation, where the west can pick and choose when Indigenous knowledge matters, and yet, erase the very creators of this knowledge (Rolls 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:1). Taking this into consideration, I conducted a second Factiva database

search, adding terms that may be used to describe western fire management practices, such as hazard reduction, cool burns, and back burning. The results of the second search saw a greater number of results, as displayed below:

Differences in article results when using Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal centered search terms

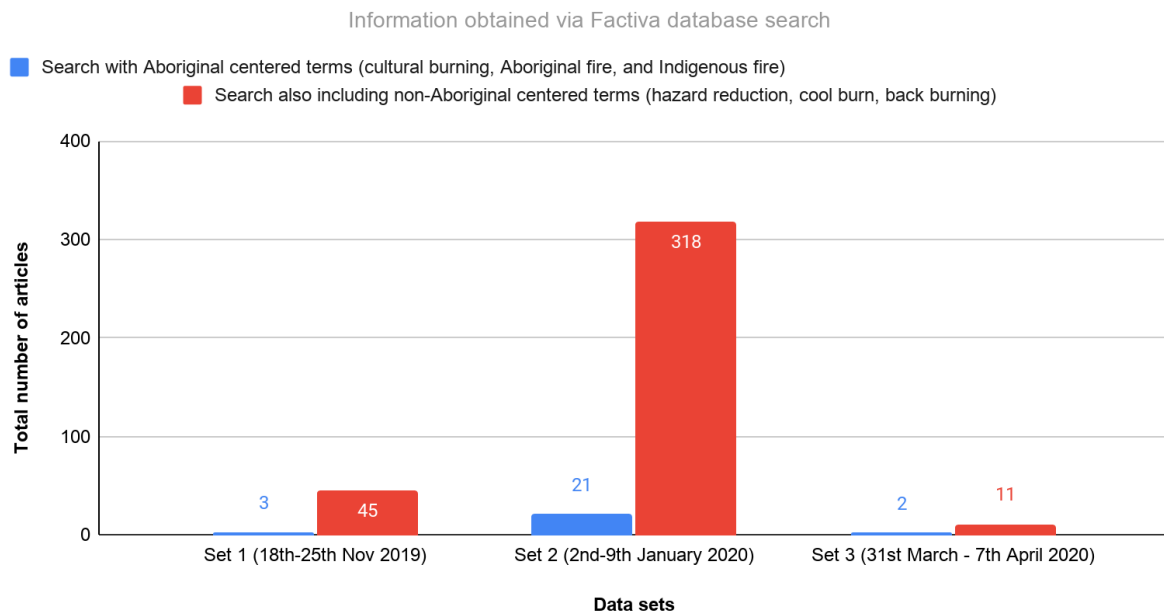


Figure 3: Difference in total articles when using Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal centred terms

As displayed in Figure 3, the inclusion of non-Aboriginal terminology used to describe western fire management techniques saw a large increase in article results. Due to the greater amount of content, I will be undertaking a thematic content analysis on this set of results.

Interestingly, Factiva did not include publications from The Conversation, an independent online non-for-profit academic news and research journal. I performed a separate search of including both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal oriented terms on The Conversation’s website to include their articles in the research findings. In total, there were four, five, and one article(s) for each data set, respectively. What has remained the same, however, is the great number of articles pertaining to cultural

burning and fire management during the peak of bushfire season, and the sharp decline in articles that include discussions of Aboriginal knowledge systems and cultural burning after the bushfire season. The inclusion of non-Aboriginal terms, in addition to the greater results they have yielded, indicates that western fire management techniques are still central in the conversation of bushfire management and mitigation.

This concept will be further unpacked in the analysis of the results of these articles in the following sections, going on to answer the two secondary research questions:

- *Do the contents of the articles suggest a genuine decolonial turn in Australian society?*
- *How do the articles perpetuate or dismantle settler-colonial standards?*

Article Characteristics

Providing an overview of the general trend and topics of the articles, this section will discuss the trends and themes of recognition, environmental justice, climate change, and settler-colonialism. To organise the articles into themes, I formed a coding sheet that listed a set of questions to help identify the number of themes present in one article (see Appendix A). In total, eight thematic codes were created:

- Recognition of Aboriginal knowledge systems
- Continuation of settler-colonialism
- Rhetoric of Climate denialism
- Acknowledgement of climate change in Australia
- Impacts of climate change towards Indigenous people (Environmental Justice)
- The importance of decolonisation

- Misrecognition of Aboriginal people and knowledge
- Western fire management techniques

As outlined previously, the Factiva database research was set to access mainstream news publications. Out of the total 384 articles (including articles from The Conversation) published that included Aboriginal-centred search terms, the article types obtained were news stories, opinion pieces, and letters from the public. A total of 72% (278 out of 384) of the articles were published from newspaper companies whose parent organisation or major shareholder is NewsCorp Australia, such as: The Australian, Australian Financial Review, Sydney Morning Herald, Daily Mail etc. This includes regional and national newspapers, such as the Canberra Times, Queensland times, the Courier, and the Advertiser etc, suggesting that the Murdoch-media largely influenced the news narratives surrounding cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge. This is important because of Murdoch media's notorious support for conservative think tanks that fuel climate scepticism (Holmes & Star 2018:162; Painter 2012).

Data Set 1 - Before Fire Season

Data set 1 (18-25 November 2019) included a total of 49 articles. 2 of which were duplicates. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the spread of articles across news outlets and the frequency of thematic codes in this data set.

Number of Articles per News Outlet in Data Set 1

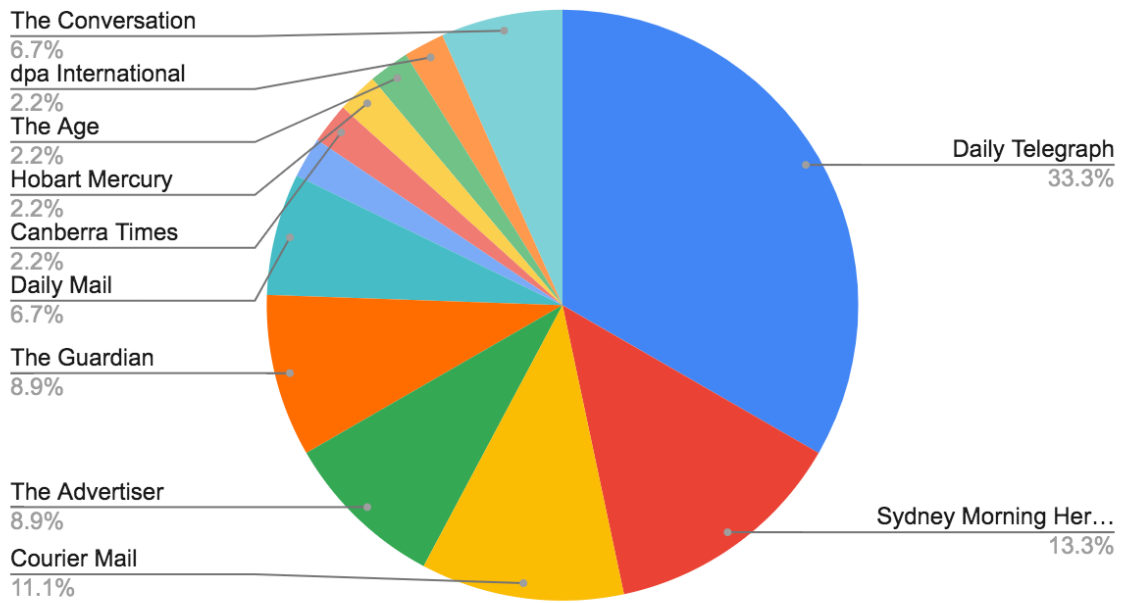


Figure 4: Number of Articles per News Outlet in Data Set 1

Frequency of Thematic codes in Data Set 1

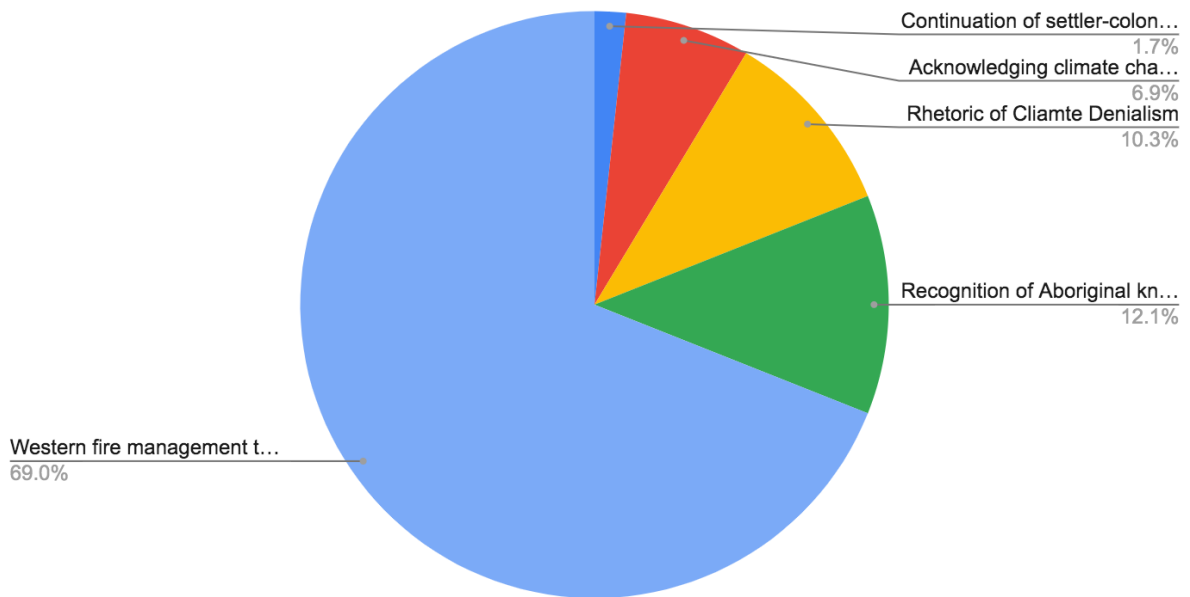


Figure 5: Frequency of Thematic Codes in Data Set 1

As illustrated in Figure 4 (p. 63), Murdoch-media dominates the number of news outlets publishing bushfire-related content. Only 16% of data set one includes articles published by progressive outlets—The Conversation and The Guardian. Amongst these, 40 articles mention western fire techniques management, especially focusing on hazard reduction. A total of 4 articles briefly discuss Aboriginal fire knowledge and its potential for mitigating Australia's bushfire crisis, and two out of these four articles (published by Mail Online and Sydney Morning Herald) briefly mention how Aboriginal knowledge sustained Australia's landscape prior to European settlement. One article, a public letter column published by The Age (2019) explicitly undermines Aboriginal knowledge, insinuating that pre-colonial practices are not adaptable to contemporary society.

During this bushfire season, the correlation between global warming and longer, intensified bushfires were topically discussed, going as far as to having the role of climate change included in the Bushfire Royal Commission (Dominey-Howes 2019; Harvey 2020; Karp 2020). Regarding climate denialism, five articles published by Murdoch media (Financial Review, The Advertiser, and Sydney Morning Herald) blamed the fires on arsonists, and four articles (The Advertiser, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Review, and The Age) blamed Greens policies that did not support hazard reduction, despite this being untrue (Redfearn 2019).

As outlined above, two climate-centred thematic codes (Acknowledgement of climate change in Australia and Impacts of climate change towards Indigenous people) were included. 7 out of 49 articles published in data set one explicitly address climate change as a key catalyst for hotter and drier weather conditions that intensify bushfires. One article—an opinion piece published by the Daily Telegraph on the 19th

of November—directly denies climate change as a contributor to the bushfires. None of the articles in this data set discussed decolonisation or environmental justice.

Data Set 2 - Height of the Fires

Of the 323 articles published in data set two (2 to 9 January 2020) at the height of the season’s fires, 136 were duplicates. This left 142 original articles. The media outlets and their percentage of the articles are shown in Fig 6 below:

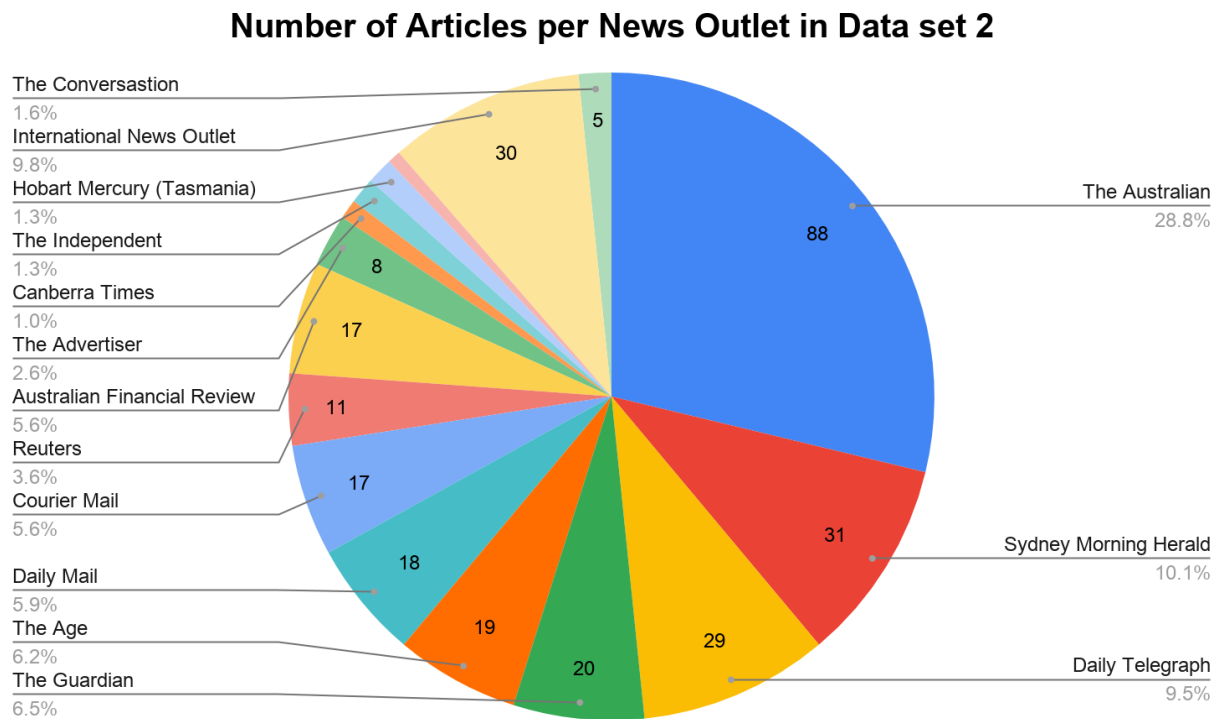


Figure 6: Chart displaying the number of articles per News Outlet in Data Set 2

146 (out of the total 323) articles were published by Murdoch media outlets, such as The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, and the Daily Telegraph, etc. This includes regional newspaper outlets such as The Advertiser, Canberra Times, and The Mercury (Hobart). A total of 29 articles were published by liberal-progressive news media

outlets, 20 articles in The Guardian, 5 articles from The Conversation, 2 in The Independent Australia, 1 article released by Al Jazeera, and 1 in The New York Times.

Frequency of Thematic Codes in Data Set 2

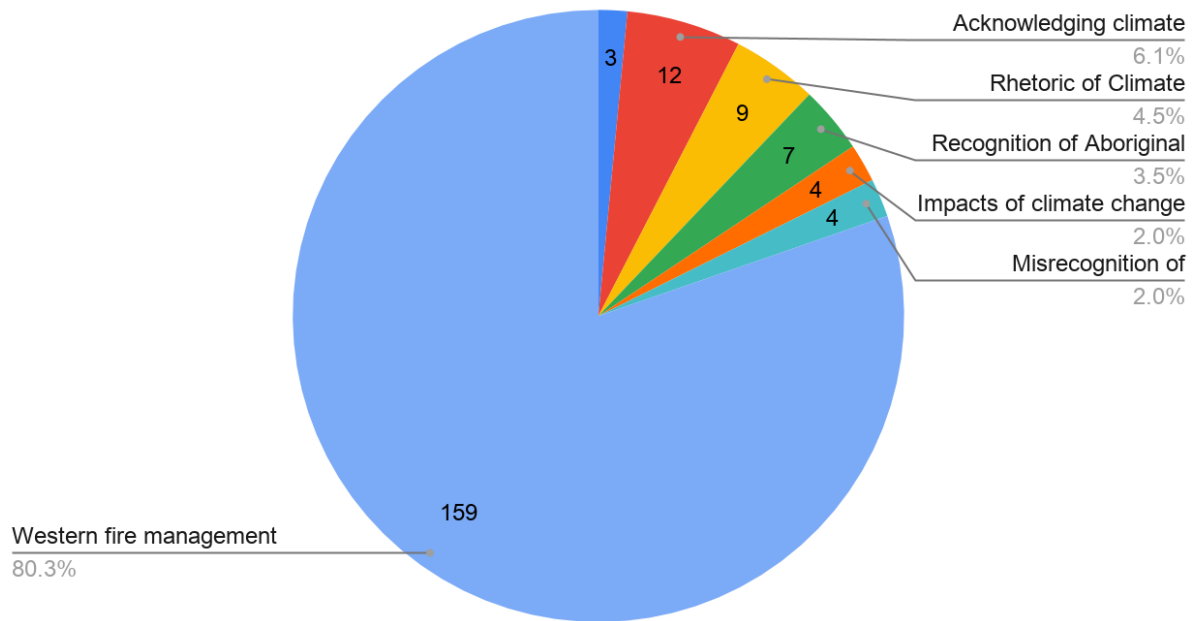


Figure 7: Frequency of Thematic Codes in Data Set 2

Only 3 articles (Financial Review, Daily Telegraph, The Conversation) mention Australia’s settler-colonial history, specifically in the context of cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge as the primary form of land management pre-colonisation. 12 articles address the topic of climate change and its direct link to longer seasons of dry and warm weather which prolong bushfire season (New York Times, The Guardian, The Advertiser, Mail Online, The Australian, The Independent, The Strait Times, South China Morning Post, and The Conversation), while 6 articles undermine the impacts

of climate change, focusing especially on the nature of the continent as dry and fire-prone, as well as invalidating the importance of climate policy in Australia (Financial Review, The Australian, Wall Street Journal, The Advertiser). 3 articles, published by The New York Times, The Guardian, and The Independent identify climate denialism in Murdoch press and critique Prime Minister Scott Morrison climate denialist rhetoric.

A total of 7 articles discuss Aboriginal fire knowledge. 2 of 7 articles were published by progressive outlet The Guardian and The Conversation. 5 out of 7 were published by Murdoch press, specifically The Australian, Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, Courier Mail, Sydney Morning Herald. In each of these cases, however, the authors are not active in recognition or counter-colonial critiques. 2 of the 5 are reports on individuals who support cultural burning, specifically Dan Tehan—Federal Education Minister—in an article by Courier Mail, and Neil Morris, a Yorta Yorta musician who raised funds for Indigenous-specific bushfire relief in an article by The Australian. One of the articles, published by the Daily Telegraph, quotes an interview with CEO of Bundanon Trust Deborah Ely where she recognises the success of a Nowra Firesticks group that provided protection for Bundanon properties. The remaining two of 5 Murdoch press articles were letters from the public published by the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph. Illustrated in Figure 7 is the frequency of thematic codes across this data set. Illustrated in the dominant portion of the articles mentioned western tools of fire management, a total of 80%, while not one addressed settler-colonialism in Australia

Data Set 3 - After the Fires

Data set 3 (31 March to 7 April 2020) has the smallest number of publications that include articles on fire management, with only 12 articles, 6 of which were duplicates.

Only one article, published by *The Conversation* and co-authored by Bhiemie Williamson, a Euahlayi¹⁰ academic, addresses the absence of Indigenous environmental justice within governmental agency bushfire response and recovery, as well as the importance of Aboriginal knowledge.

3 of the 6 articles—including the aforementioned article—refer to cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge. One article, in *The Canberra Times*, briefly discusses cultural burning and the Firesticks Alliance through the experience of Patty Mills—a Muralag¹¹ and Ynunga¹² basketball player—who promotes the integration of Aboriginal knowledge into national land management. Another, in *The Guardian*, mentions cultural burning only in the context of Australian author's book recommendations, suggesting Victor Steffensen's *Fire Country* for its contributions to Aboriginal knowledge and climate solutions. The remaining 3 articles discuss western fire management techniques, specifically hazard reduction burning and the bureaucratic difficulties that must be addressed for conducting hazard reduction burns.

Overall, the common characteristics across all the articles is the centrality of western land and fire management, even in discussions pertaining to cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge. Across the 384 articles obtained from Factiva and *The Conversation*, 89% of the articles focused on western fire management, and only 11% focused on Aboriginal fire management. I note again that the sharp decline in articles following the height of bushfire season is emblematic of Graham's (1999) 'survivalist kit' sentiment, where Aboriginal knowledge is treated as an environmentalist guide as

¹⁰ The Euahlayi people are the traditional owners of the northwest and north central region of New South Wales.

¹¹ The Muralag people are the traditional owners of the land and sea surrounding Waiben (Thursday Island).

¹² The Ynunga people are the traditional owners of the north-west South Australia region.

opposed to its own science and ontology. This is especially present in the bushfire narrative as Aboriginal fire knowledge was mostly discussed during a time of worry and danger—the height of the bushfires—quickly reverting to ‘normal’. A ‘normal’ where Aboriginal voices and knowledge are largely silenced. The existence of a ‘normal’ discourse that excludes Aboriginal representation and scholarship is a form of epistemological violence and ignorance, where the silencing of Aboriginal people and cultural knowledge operates off a system that inherently denies their value.

The following section will delve deeper into the contents of the articles, using the theories and literature described in chapter one—environmental justice, decolonial theory, recognition justice, and Aboriginal fire literature—to understand how the news narrative actively delegitimizes Aboriginal people and knowledge systems.

Chapter Four – Part Two

Interpreting the Results

Chapter Four, Part 2 — Thematic Content Analysis

This second section analyses news narratives through the lenses of critical environmental justice, decolonisation, recognition justice, and Aboriginal fire philosophy to evaluate the extent to which Aboriginal fire knowledge is given recognition justice. These academic frameworks centre the experiences of social groups who have been historically oppressed. The analysis will be undertaken in relation to the thematic codes outlined in part one of this chapter (see Appendix A).

Environmental (In)Justice

As Graham (1999) explains, land is a sacred being across Aboriginal communities, a being that connects past and present kinships. It is the centre of Aboriginal existence. Custodianship over land and water are ethics deeply embedded across Indigenous cultures, and the destruction of land severely disrupts the practice of these ethics (National Indigenous Television 2020). Moreover, to have their connections to Country severed, and ignored, is an injustice. The infrequent address of environmental and Aboriginal justice throughout the data sets reflects how Aboriginal people and knowledge is marginalised in Australia.

Of the 323 articles examined, only 5 addressed Indigenous environmental justice in Australia. Tellingly, in each case, it is an Aboriginal individual or organisation drawing attention to the importance of Indigenous justice. For example, The Australian article 'US mag backs Aboriginal fundraiser', quotes Yorta Yorta musician Neil Morris on his fundraising efforts for 'Aboriginal-specific relief services' (Ore 2020). In the article, Morris addresses the absence of support services tailored to Indigenous people as well as the ignorance of ancestral connection and custodianship. Another article, in

The Guardian, quotes Rodney Carter—Chairperson of Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council (VAHC)—on his recognition of the trauma caused by the bushfires upon Indigenous heritage and culture (Readfearn & Remeikis 2020). Carter calls for the Victorian government to collaborate with traditional owners and to acknowledge the effectiveness of traditional knowledge. These two examples reinforce observations from Steffensen (2020), Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), and Williamson et al, (2020a), that the Aboriginal knowledge sought by researchers and authorities is often separated from the lived experiences of Aboriginal people. Of all the material reviewed, Williamson et al., (2020b) gave the greatest coverage of environmental justice, specifically the disproportionate effects of the bushfires on Aboriginal people. The article explicitly outlines that whilst Indigenous people comprise 2.3% of the total population in NSW and Victoria, they make up 5.4% out of the 1.55 million people living in bushfire affected areas. It goes on to discuss how these disproportionate impacts are deepened because the loss extends to species extinction, loss of sacred sites, birthing trees, and the destruction of Country—losses that exacerbate dispossession. In Williamson et al., (2020a) study of the 2003 Canberra bushfire and Victorian Black Saturday bushfire inquiries, they found that Aboriginal people were seldom mentioned, often ‘relegated to a historical footnote’ rather than being recognised as ‘contemporary residents’ (p. 14). This is a matter of EJ because the active dismissal of the ‘distinctiveness of the Aboriginal experience of bushfire disaster’ (Williamson et al.,2020a:iii). As former MP Lidia Thorpe, a Gunnai-Gunditjmara¹³ woman, asserts—‘to destroy our spiritual place of connection is to destroy us as people’ (Duczynski 2020). Land is the core of spiritual development, identity, and culture— ‘it is the law’

¹³ The Gunnai people are the traditional custodians of Gippsland, and the Gunditjmara people are the traditional custodians of southwestern Victoria

(Graham 1999). As Steffensen (2020) says, the 'country is a teacher: we [Indigenous people] learn all our knowledge from the land, waters, and skies' (p.138). Destruction of Country disrupts ancestral connection, severing the ties of present communities to learn, practice, and revive knowledge of the land. Sites of clan history such as birthing and scarred trees, markers, sacred sites are forever lost in the inferno. Additionally, the loss of certain vegetation, animal species, and water sources impact certain Aboriginal groups who have custodian roles over lost Country (Duczynski 2020; Pickerell 2020). When these relations are neglected, Aboriginal people and Indigenous environmental justice is abandoned. This lack of recognition undermines the importance of the landscape to Aboriginal people and the existence of their cultures.

These 5 out of 323 mentioning environmental justice only make up 2% of the total articles. The remaining 98% do not mention the physical, spiritual, and cultural disproportionate effects of bushfires felt by Aboriginal communities, nor the dimension of cultural and spiritual erasure. The news articles I examined that discussed environmental justice were in *The Australian* (two articles), *The Guardian* (two articles), and *The Conversation* (one article). Of these five, only one included an Indigenous author (Bhiamie Williamson), while the others directly quoted Aboriginal people without any extended commentary or criticism of environmental injustice in Australia.

Although EJ discourse is still underdeveloped on an academic and political scale in Australia, it is not new to Aboriginal communities. Schlosberg et al., (2017) emphasise that Indigenous environmental justice extends beyond inequity, focusing especially on 'threats to land, country, resources and culture, concomitant with developmentalism and environmental degradation' (p. 592). When we take into consideration settler

Australia's lack of awareness of dispossession, displacement, and custodianship (Graham 1999; Scholsberg et al., 2017), it is unsurprising that little commentary has been made on how these lived experiences intersect with environmental disaster. It should not be the task of Indigenous people to bear the sole responsibility of promoting anti-colonial and CEJ critiques. What this research has demonstrated through the analysis of the bushfire narrative is that Aboriginal voices often remain 'on the margins', often relegated to non-contemporary and traditional identities (McGregor et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020b) The amplification of Aboriginal knowledge cannot happen without properly addressing the disproportionate effects of the bushfires—or any form of environmental destruction—has on land and Aboriginal identity, taking into consideration especially how the destruction of Country and sacred land exacerbates the displacement and dispossession that endures under the structure of settler-colonialism (Scholsberg et al., 2017).

Misrecognition of Aboriginal people

Inherent in misrecognition is epistemic violence—an act that limits one's ability to speak and be heard (Dotson 2011). Misrecognition is the experience of having one's self-identification distorted, not only to yourself but to those who perceive you. The two are linked because often it is those who have had their agency stripped that suffer misrecognition. As a result, their identities, cultures, and experiences are silenced by the representations forced upon them. Colonialism has erased non-western knowledge by privileging western science through the normalisation of misrecognizing those who are oppressed and their knowledge systems. Amongst the 323 articles, 16 mention the terms 'cultural burning', 'Aboriginal fire', and 'Indigenous fire'. The ways in which misrecognition is enacted upon Indigenous Australians and their knowledge

in these cases are both implicit and explicit. A letter from a public column in *The Age* (2019), displayed below in Figure 8, is symbolic of this.

Look to the past to battle the present . . .

Tony Wright (16/11) is on target about the lack of rationality associated with the bushfire crisis in NSW and Queensland. His observations and recollections about burning by settler descendants learnt from the Indigenous people and reflecting the long experience of historic strategic burning of the latter go to the very nub of our current fiasco.

Notwithstanding climate change effects, the occurrence of fire-friendly weather conditions or the proximity of houses to forest areas, the simple reality is that by pre-burning the fire-prone bush, patch by patch, regularly and with due diligence mitigates the effects of fires, their intensity, capacity to spread uncontrollably and resources required to fight them in extremis.

Although firefighting is a state responsibility, it is perhaps time the federal government stepped in and engaged directly with the Indigenous community to come up with an approach including personnel, training, burning methodology and short-term accommodation for persons locally affected.

I suggest using the Indigenous community in this role for obvious historic reasons, as a vector for restoring some otherwise well-deserved respect not currently given them and because it is plain as day the "settler" population has made this whole area a complete and utter dingo's breakfast. The Greens and "white" eco-supremacists are particularly to blame on account of their evangelical approach to the environment that lacks any real understanding of the reality of nature. Mike Seward, Port Fairy

. . . That's all very well, but don't forget science

While I agree that **Indigenous fire** management experience should be taken into account along with what our fire scientists have learnt, we don't want to idealise these practices. We don't know how often burning "went wrong" pre-white settlement after all. Indigenous people weren't operating in a continent with 25 million humans, a vastly complicated infrastructure, and a climate regime that is rapidly becoming more fire-ready and unpredictable. The science must be the main guide if we're to get through this with a minimum of destruction.

Mick Webster, Chiltern

Figure 8: Snippet of The Age's public letters column from 18 Nov 2019

The letter demonstrates the violence of idealising western science over Aboriginal knowledge. It suggests while cultural burning should be considered, there is danger in 'idealising these practices' due to the difference in population numbers, 'complicated infrastructure', and complex climatic conditions that didn't exist 'pre-white settlement' (*The Age* 2020). The usage of 'pre-white settlement' here is a reinforcement of the racial dichotomy between 'black' and 'white'—suggesting, perhaps, that Australia's 'pre-white' era was simple, underdeveloped, and primaeval. Additionally, there is an

undertone of locating Aboriginal Australians and knowledge in the past, separating them from contemporary society. It is key to remember here that violence is not restricted to physical force, nor does it need to be intentional. When we confine our understanding of violence to the physical, we ignore its institutional capacities. Epistemic violence holds dominating authority in its power to *silence*, according to Emerick (2019), minimising a subject's capacity to be a knower. This is what the letter attempts to do. Undermine the legitimacy of Aboriginal science by locating its feasibility in the past, insinuating it is incapable of adapting to 'western society'.

These same patterns are replicated¹⁴ throughout the articles that discuss Aboriginal knowledge systems. Bowman and French (2020) refer to cultural burning as a 'slow and ancient' craft, and the pre-white settlement era as a time when 'Aboriginal people were a constant presence in the landscape'. An article in The Australian uses outdated, racially offensive language referring Aboriginal Australians (Newman 2020), whilst another published by Mail Online only mentions Aboriginal Australian knowledge once, stating that 'fires were managed for 40,000 years without modern equipment' without any following commentary or explanation (Bevege 2020). Both articles perpetuate colonial frameworks of primitivism through the power of language. Newman's (2020) use of a derogatory term is reductive of the diversity and multiculturalism across Australia's First Nations people (ACTCOSS 2016; Creative Spirits n.d). Similarly, when Bevege (2020) states that Aboriginal people managed fires 'without modern equipment', there is an implicit undermining and belittlement of traditional knowledge, and an upholding of western governance and infrastructure that is rooted in the belief that modern 'equipment' is superior (Ross & Pickering 2002). In

¹⁴ Newman (2020) used the derogatory term Aborigin*e. This term is considered outdated, racially offensive, and has been condemned by First Nations people in Australia.

addition to this, the term 'modern' in this context is negatively juxtaposed against the placement of Aboriginal people and knowledge in the past, making it seem as if Aboriginal Australian land management was non-existent. Bowman & French's (2020) article, despite it being critical of western science, posits Aboriginal people as 'ancient' beings that *were* present in the land. The use of the past tense subjunctive 'were' places Indigenous existence in the past. As Steffensen (2020:138) explains, 'the land is the oldest living Elder...and has been there all along'. What I aim to point out here is how the media perpetuates, even when unintentional, western paradigms of time, knowledge, and reality. This is something that we as non-Aboriginal researchers must reflect on, as the westernisation of our own ways of knowing may unknowingly undermine Aboriginal identity.

Misrecognition of Aboriginal knowledge

An additional form of misrecognition that occurs across these articles is the lack of acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of cultural burning. Of all the articles, only one mentions spirituality in reference to cultural burning, stating that 'traditional Aboriginal fire practices are based on local knowledge and spiritual connection to country' (Bowman & French 2020). Even in this case, the Bowman & French article does not go further in-depth concerning the holistic importance of spirituality in Aboriginal society and environmental philosophy. Here we see the incommensurability of western science, a concept Steffensen (2020) emphasises, where the way that western science communicates knowledge, by separating information into material categories, does not apply to Aboriginal knowledge because its spirituality and science

are inextricably tied (p. 98-99).¹⁵ This incommensurability translates to settler-Australian depictions of Aboriginal knowledge, mystifying spirituality because it cannot be 'categorised' through western science (Steffensen 2020:99). Steffensen puts it quite simply, Aboriginal knowledge systems are relational: in natural lore, 'the knowledge that has been learned from country is how Aboriginal people strengthened their wisdom to live sustainably for thousands of years' (p. 106).

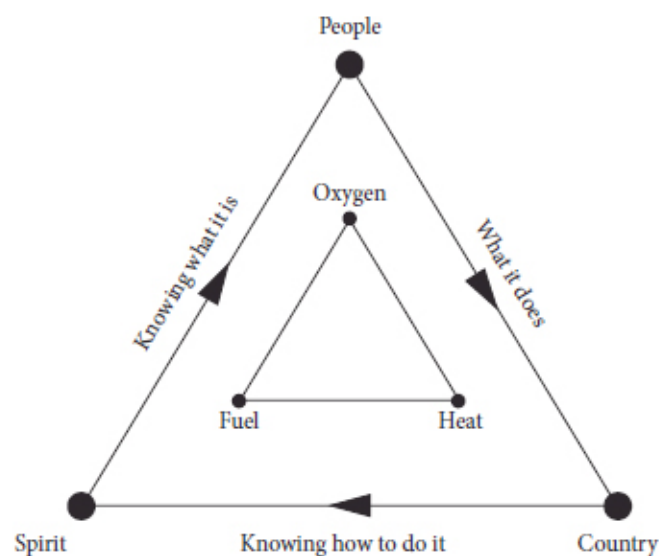


Figure 9: Fire Knowledge diagram (Steffensen 2020:106)

Figure 9 displayed above was created by Steffensen for the Traditional Knowledge Recording Project, used to demonstrate the foundations of fire knowledge. Steffensen (2020:106) explains how this triangle is a representation of Country and spirituality, looking especially at how Country is a teacher. He also highlights how the triangle is in harmony with natural elements; fire needs oxygen, heat, and fuel; people need

¹⁵ I recognise that as a non-Aboriginal person, my explanations of Aboriginal spirituality will not capture its depth and complexity. This is indicative of the hegemony of western epistemology that dominates educational institutions.

oxygen, food, and water to survive; 'if you take away one of the triangle's sides, the process of life cannot take place' (Steffensen 2020:106-107). This is where Steffensen differentiates between hazard reduction and cultural burning science. Western regimes of environmental management do not value synchronicity—the importance of understanding how 'all elements of nature were living in harmony with one another', or recognising when parts of Country need fire, and when it does not (Steffensen 2020:32).

Failure to recognise the spiritual component of cultural burning is epistemic violence. As Pascoe (2014) explains, the culture of Aboriginal society is easily misinterpreted within the structures of settler-colonial society (p. 178). The holistic nature of Aboriginal philosophy—the inseparability of the spiritual, social, and economic—was taken apart by western society as a tool to bury the advances in Aboriginal society under the misrecognition of spirituality as 'superstition' (Pascoe 2014:178-179). It creates room for society to assume hazard reduction burning and cultural burning are somewhat synonymous, and as a result, cultural burning becomes unworthy of consideration. Western fire management techniques are underscored by fear (Steffensen 2020:87). Cultural burning centres life and revival. If the two are then considered to be similar, it opens up room for appropriation. Western science can come in and adopt the techniques of fire knowledge, performing burns without understanding what a particular ecosystem needs (Bourke et al., 2020; Steffensen 2020). When these dimensions of culture and spirituality are not given recognition justice, the societal understanding of what Aboriginal knowledge *truly* is becomes perpetually misconstrued

The importance of Decolonisation

The results of the content analysis found that none of the articles specifically mentioned decolonisation. In this context, I focused on how articles engaged with acknowledging the importance of land repatriation, if they offered any decolonial approaches, or discussed the need for Aboriginal sovereignty. Accordingly, the following questions were used in the coding sheet to assess how an article recognised decolonisation:

- Any mention of the decolonial process in Australia
- Any mention of decolonial theory
- Any mention of no of a treaty with Indigenous Australian people
- Discusses Indigenous sovereignty

Any reference to colonialism in Australia appears in 2 of the 323 articles. These references are made by Bowman & French (2020) in an article published by The Conversation, and secondly an opinion piece by Friedmann (2020) in The Globe and Mail.

While Bowman & French (2020) do not discuss the importance of decolonisation in regards to the return of land to its traditional owners, they imply decolonisation in the context of denouncing western ideology and promoting Indigenous sovereignty. The article implies decolonisation in this context twice, first in the title which states directly that 'western science does not have all the answers' and goes on to encourage the implementation of Aboriginal-led fire programs and cross-cultural programs that facilitate respectful learning environments between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire managers.

Friedmann's (2020) opinion article in the *Globe and Mail* uses language that confronts the brutality of colonialism, describing Australia as a 'forcibly settled' country. It identifies the disruption of Australia's environment as a result of non-native livestock and mismanaged environment. Interestingly, Friedmann (2020) draws a correlation between the colonial imagination and fear of fire that is echoed by both Pascoe (2014) and Steffesen (2020), when she states, 'it's as though every bushfire since [since settler invasion] is in the blood; the fear of fire runs so deeply'. Pascoe (2014) references the 2009 Victoria Black Saturday fires as the beginnings of this deep fear (p.161). Steffensen (2020) looks further into Western environmental philosophy where the 'vision of fire is all about life, property, fear, and fighting fire' (p. 87). It is this fear that limits greater applications of cultural burning. Land management and government agencies prioritise risk aversion because fire is so deeply associated with fear that its healing and restoring capacities are disregarded (Costello 2019; Freeman 2019). As Steffensen's (2020) explains, this knowledge is rooted in the balance between fire and land in fire-prone systems, and has developed through tradition over millennia (p.146).

To elaborate on this principle of harmony, I revisit Bourke et al., (2020) and their knowledge of the Victorian landscape. They explain that when the landscape is deprived of fire, native flora that is generated by fire begins to disappear. They stress that while Country can no longer return to what it once was, with the integration of Aboriginal knowledge, it can adapt and return to a biodiverse, healthy environment. Lewis O'Brien, Kurna elder, comments on the limitations of western environmental philosophy and science. He says settlers must be active in critiquing the limitations of

western science, and openly re-centre Aboriginal knowledge if the decolonisation of knowledge is to take place (Watson & O'Brien 2014).

The lack of article content addressing how Australia's settler-colonial structures affect how Aboriginal people and cultural knowledge is perceived addresses one of the secondary questions of this research, that is: *Do the contents of the articles suggest a decolonial turn in Australian society?* Genuine decolonial discourse should advocate for the return of land to Indigenous communities and be actively critical of the institutions and structures that continue to oppress them. The absence of this discourse across the data sets does suggest this turn is not being made.

I do recognise that these data sets are a small sample size of Australian media and may not be totally representative of Australian media as a whole. The narrative in other media forms such as radio, television, and podcast, etc could be further areas of study. The results may differ; however, many media types remain settler dominated (Arvanitakis 2020) and may perhaps yield similar results. In the context of this study, it is fair to conclude that the conversation surrounding decolonisation is far from where it should be if a regime of Aboriginal fire and land management is to be established and recognised.

Amongst the media articles I surveyed, specifically those that discussed cultural burning, colonialism, and Aboriginal knowledge, that Aboriginal-centred content was absent. The ways that cultural burning was described, and as a result how it is perceived to the public, made no mention of how cultural burning is practiced nor the importance of understanding Country. Articles that did mention that cultural burning is rooted in spirituality, made no attempts to explain why or how it is important. Instead, articles undermined the validity and particularity of Aboriginal science, insinuating that

Aboriginal fire knowledge did not have ‘modern equipment’ (Bevege 2020), is ‘ancient’ (Bowman & French 2020), and that ‘science must be the main guide’ (The Age 2020). Such narratives underscore the colonial rhetoric of the ‘noble savage’. As discussed earlier, the inability of western logic to comprehend Aboriginal spirituality hinders how it is represented in media, and by default, how the public may come to understand it. Steffensen (2020:99) explains how the constant suppression of Aboriginal knowledge under western structures has created a ‘knowledge gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. This ‘gap’ Steffensen talks about is the inability for Aboriginal knowledge to be recognised for its scientific value. This ongoing misrecognition is in itself a form of colonisation.

Decolonisation is never mentioned across the articles. Nor is decolonisation mentioned in the ‘metaphorical’ sense, which Tuck & Yang (2012) describe as an ongoing effort to critically unlearn and challenge institutions of colonialism such as education and governance. The absence of decolonial discourse, even in the metaphorical sense, is telling of the power settler-colonial ethics hold over our realities. Moreover, to disregard the decolonisation of land—the return of land to First Nations people—allows the settler-nation to exculpate itself from its history and actively maintain colonial standards that delegitimize Aboriginal people and their knowledge. (Augustinos et al., 1999). Aboriginal people must be centred within the frameworks of decolonisation and given the recognition to tell their own stories. Recognising Aboriginal knowledge is about more than land management. It is about Aboriginal sovereignty, recognition, and identity.

Delegitimising Aboriginal Knowledge and Exculpating the Settler

Graham (1999) captures the essence of a key finding of the content analysis, that is, the temporary turn to Aboriginal knowledge as an environmental 'survivalist kit' when western methods prove inefficient. This is represented by the sharp decline in bushfire-related articles once the season concludes. This includes content that discusses Aboriginal fire knowledge and western tools of fire management. Looking back at Figure 1 (see p. 47) the momentum for both Aboriginal fire knowledge and western management related news media articles reach their peak during the apex of bushfire season. Soon after, there was a sharp decline in the discussion. While we expect the number of articles published during the peak of bushfire season to be higher, the issue with this is that fire only becomes a concern when it is a threat. The settler view towards fire, or rather, towards environmental management, focuses on the short-term rather than the ongoing future (Steffensen 2020:89). Aboriginal knowledge cannot be treated this way. It is not a short-term solution, it is about the 'big picture'—the development of culture and spirit, coming to understand our place as humans, the protection of Country, and the interrelationship between all living beings. This ethic cannot be fully understood through the settler view, which is why Aboriginal people must be those leading cross-cultural initiatives for cultural burning.

Aboriginal-led programs and conversation regarding the capabilities and national implementation procedures of Aboriginal fire knowledge, however, have not stopped. Aboriginal Fire practitioners such as Oliver Costello, Rachael Cavanaugh, and Victor Steffensen, are some of many who continue the conversation and demand recognition for Aboriginal knowledge systems, most recently through their cultural burn workshops and learning forums alongside Firesticks Alliance (Chenery & Cheshire 2020; Costello et al., n.d; *Fighting Fire with Fire* ABC 2020; Johnston 2020; Kusmer 2020). Steffensen's recent book *Fire Country* is especially significant. It details how traditional

fire knowledge works, how it differentiates from hazard reduction and explains the importance of Aboriginal spirituality that derives from connection to Country. Indigenous-led organisations such as the Firesticks Alliance and Koori Country Firesticks, alongside annual events dedicated to knowledge revival such as the National Indigenous Fire Workshop, demonstrate the resilience and efforts made by various Aboriginal communities amongst the difficulty of governmental bureaucracy, appropriation, and dispossession (Bourke et al., 2020; Steffensen 2020:87).

Based on the results of the content analysis, the lack of Aboriginal-centred content, partnered with the decline of any bushfire-related discussions post the fire season demonstrates that the settler voice in news media fails to legitimise Aboriginal people and their knowledge on a public scale. There is ignorance towards the disproportionate effects of environmental disaster—those of cultural and spiritual loss compounded by higher rates of bushfire affected residents per population (Williamson et al., 2020a) – –that Aboriginal people face, an ignorance that fuels the lack of recognition and agency, and avoidance to the importance of decolonisation. For discussions of cultural burning to only become topical during a time of environmental disaster and uncertainty pigeonholes Aboriginal people and knowledge to matters of bushfire risk (Williamson et al., 2020b). It only makes attempts to acknowledge Aboriginal knowledge in areas where western knowledge has proven to be inefficient. It matters in context and is then pushed back to the past. Maintaining the ‘status quo’ in western academies allows for Indigenous knowledge to be marginalised, remaining on the ‘in/outside of the academy—never fully recognised (Dei 2000). It also allows the settler to evade confrontation. A confrontation of privilege, of epistemological ignorance, of their complacency in misrecognising and delegitimizing Indigenous people and science. It

would mean the relinquishing of power, an act that is daunting for the settler because they, for so long, have set the 'standards of humanity' (Dyer 1997:12).

We must question the extent to which Aboriginal knowledge can thrive if the land is still colonised, both physically and as a system. It is through the process of refinement and appropriation that the true nature of Aboriginal knowledge is epistemically erased, and in turn, Aboriginal people are made invisible. Media plays a large role in reproducing negative identities of dominated subjects (Brooks & Herbert 2006). According to Meadows (2001), Australian media continues to *study* Aboriginal people, instead of having Aboriginal communities build their own narratives (p. 208). When settler-Australian news media casts aside discussions of cultural burning and Aboriginal knowledge, it is emblematic of the domination of western science as the ultimate provider of solutions, thus framing Aboriginal knowledge as unorthodox.

Chapter Five — Concluding Discussions

This research has shown that while the discussion of Aboriginal knowledge in news media has risen this fire season, recognition justice, the acknowledgement of social difference that is linked to privilege and oppression (Scholsberg 2004), is absent in the narrative. The survival of Aboriginal knowledge is a symbol of resilience against settler-colonial misrecognition, as the knowledge continues to live through people and Country (Giolo 2020; Rigney 2001; Watson 2014). The Aboriginal fire literature this study has engaged with, those of Bourke et al., (2019), Costello (2019), Steffensen (2020), and more etc, highlight the growing presence and readiness of Aboriginal-led knowledge revival. Aboriginal cultural fire practitioners are ready to teach the ways that Country should be cared for.

The analysis of interval periods during the 2019-2020 fire season—before, during, and after the fires—has led to various conclusions about the settler-colonial system in Australia, particularly how the absence of recognition justice perpetuates the erasure of Aboriginal people and knowledge. Most articles centre western fire management principles due to the incommensurability of western academia. Connection to Country is the embodiment of custodianship and spirituality, two ethics that are inextricably tied to Aboriginal knowledge production, principles that western science ignores (Graham 1999; Steffensen 2020:68). This is constant throughout the data sets, where re-centring western fire management is interpreted as an inability to understand Aboriginal knowledge systems through western epistemology.

This intentional ignorance reinforces the hegemony of western science and continues to colonise Aboriginal people and knowledge in its process. When using the term colonise, I refer to the colonisation of land, the reification of settler knowledge and logic, and the power over constructing the identity. Aboriginal people have been constantly misrecognized throughout history (Pascoe 2004:2-3; Moreton-Robinson 2004), and this research demonstrates how misrecognition persists in news narratives. Aboriginal identity is often placed in the past, as is their knowledge, made to seem unfit for contemporary society through language describing them as ‘ancient’ (Bowman & French 2020) and ‘without modern equipment’ (Bevege 2020).

This research shows that western academia has historically played a role in colonisation (Rigney 2001). In particular, when Aboriginal people are treated as objects of study in academia, their cultures and philosophies are reduced to settler legends as opposed to valid, meaningful realities (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:8,10-11). Analysis of the bushfire narrative uncovered how ignorance towards traditional knowledge is prevalent in the absence of Australia’s colonial history or the importance of decolonisation in the media articles. This lack of recognition contributes towards the ignorance towards disproportionate effects of the bushfire on Aboriginal people in terms of physical and spiritual loss that occurs when the landscape is destroyed. We see the intersections of Indigenous and environmental justice, where lack of recognition of the disproportionate effects of environmental disaster on Indigenous communities maintains ignorance of their distinct relationships to land.

The key argument this research highlights is how the absence of recognition within the news narrative contributes to the distortion of Aboriginal identity, ignorance of the

effects of colonisation, and leads to ongoing environmental injustice, and the delegitimization of Aboriginal knowledge. The news fails to *recognise* the specific and differentiated injustices the fires and lack of agency over the fire management practices have on Aboriginal Australians. While the sample size of data used in this research is too small to make definitive statements on the decolonial attitudes in Australia, the analyses made from the 2019-2020 fire season can be used for indicative directions for closing the knowledge gap between Aboriginal and settler Australia.

Concluding Remarks

To deny Aboriginal people the ability to be seen and heard, the ability to tell their own stories, to have their knowledge and histories recognised, 'is the greatest impediment to intercultural understanding' (Pascoe 2014:229). This thesis has focused on applying theories of recognition justice to themes of settler-colonialism present in the 2019-2020 bushfire news narrative where Aboriginal fire knowledge gained relatively more visibility (Williamson et al., 2020a). What is clear is the need for decoloniality to be centred, and it must be a primary objective of the government. As Pascoe (2014) says, it is more than just 'handing them [Aboriginal people] fluorescent vests so they can work in a billionaire's land mine' (p. 228), it requires the recognition and participation of Aboriginal people in the conversation of this country, a justice they have long been denied. Continuously discussed throughout this study is the established presence of Aboriginal-led cultural burning initiatives that are often interfered with by government agency interference (Bourke et al., 2020; Costello 2019; Steffensen 2020). A pivotal

suggestion derived from this study is the need for dismantling settler-colonial standards, which requires those with the power to *enforce* and *maintain* change.

A key observation made by Bourke et al, (2020) is the importance of fire practices to be 'lit by us [Aboriginal people], and led by us' (p. 2). Cultural burning is specific to place, and Country is not the same across Australia. Aboriginal communities hold knowledge of their Country and how it must be protected. These elements of caring for Country are those that non-Aboriginal fire agents and land managers cannot wholly understand for two key reasons. First, their ideas of fire management are rooted in risk aversion, and secondly, their knowledge of the land begins with its settled history, as opposed to the ethics of custodianship and ancestry that have formed from caring for Country for thousands of years. Aboriginal fire practitioners and knowledge holders must have complete control over cross-cultural teaching initiatives.

Another suggestion drawn from this study is the need to decolonise how knowledge is defined. The hegemony of settler-colonial political philosophy, or *biopolitical order* (detailed in chapter 2), hinders the capacity for Indigenous and environmental justice to be taken seriously. This is especially relevant in the Australian context where the valorisation of the fossil industry takes precedence over climate efforts (Hudson 2019; Scholsberg et al., 2017). To 'decolonise' knowledge in a way that centres Aboriginal science is difficult because knowledge is an intangible system constructed over time. However, it can begin with better integration of Aboriginal knowledge systems in Australian education institutions. Introducing Aboriginal knowledge into the primary, secondary, and tertiary education systems could assist in advancing Aboriginal recognition and validating their science. To position Aboriginal people as

valid knowledge holders requires this becomes the main agenda not a minor interest (Thornton et al., 2019) Moreover, Graham (1999) suggests that such teachings must be underscored by 'reflexive motives' so that people are constantly aware of their positions as settlers, and the history of erasure Australia is built upon.

It can also begin with the return of land (Tuck & Yang 2012), and land management roles, to Aboriginal communities. Cultural burning, for example, will always be inherently undermined if it operates under institutions that fund the expansion of a coal industry that profits off land degradation and exacerbates anthropogenic climate change. The process and steps towards decolonising land are complex, and these steps to its execution are beyond the research capacities of this thesis. Rather, this research reiterates the fact that recognition justice and decolonisation cannot happen without each other.

The emergence of cultural burning as a topical discussion in the bushfire's narrative is considered a step forward in cross-cultural collaboration and attitudinal changes in western science (Bowman & French 2020; Steffensen 2020; Williamson et al., 2020a). It is now the responsibility of settler society to recognise and support the Aboriginal-led initiatives of cultural burning. Within this recognition, it is crucial that Aboriginal voices and methodologies are centred—ensuring that Aboriginal knowledge is not interpreted through the colonial lens. The narratives of cultural burning, that are sure to arise again, requires authors of news narratives to be active in decolonial writing. This means engagement with Aboriginal literature, recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and its validity as science, reflection on colonial discourse in writing, recognition of Indigenous environmental justice issues, challenging the systems of

western science that exclude Aboriginal knowledge. Importantly, it is maintaining these decolonial discussions so that they do not only occur when fires rage, ensuring recognition justice is constant, not conditional.

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Appendix A — Coding Sheet

Article #:

Is the author of this article:

- Indigenous
- Non-Indigenous

Political alignments of the newspaper: _____

What is the topic of the article: _____

Are Indigenous people recognised in the article?

If yes:

Does this article recognise, mention, or suggest the following:

- Aboriginal knowledge and science
 - Aboriginal knowledge as its own valid knowledge system
 - Differences between western and Aboriginal knowledge
- Continuation of settler-colonialism
 - Delegitimizes Aboriginal knowledge
 - Misrecognises Aboriginal people and culture
 - Prioritises western science
 - Incorrect or offensive language
- Climate Denialism in Australia
- Acknowledges climate change
- in Australia
- Climate change and its impacts on Indigenous people (Environmental Justice)
- The importance of decolonisation
 - Any mention of the decolonial process in Australia
 - Any mention of decolonial theory
 - Any mention of no of treaty with Indigenous Australian people

If no:

Does the article contain any of the following misrepresentations:

- Misrecognition of Aboriginal identity
- Settler-appropriation
- Delegitimization of Aboriginal knowledge
- Denial of climate change