

# **‘Throwing mud’ on Questions of Sovereignty: Race and Northern Arguments Over White, Chinese, and Aboriginal Labour, 1905–12**

BEN SILVERSTEIN

*This article addresses two arguments about Chinese settlers in the Northern Territory. The first, in 1905, was sparked by criticisms of Chinese mining practices and accusations that Chinese people contaminated those Aboriginal people with whom they met. The second was prompted by the 1910–11 restrictions of Chinese rights to work and employ in the Territory.*

*Both were opposed by the Chinese, who represented themselves as deserving and indispensable settlers who had made their home in the Northern Territory. The article argues that these racialised discourses of labour, population, and contamination were ways of both speaking about and obscuring sovereignties.*

## **Introduction**

We have ‘made this our home’, declared a group of fourteen Chinese merchants of Darwin in September 1905. Throughout that year, the Chinese community of the Northern Territory had been subjected to a litany of direct attacks launched by Samuel Mitchell, the Northern Territory’s representative in South Australian Parliament. Mitchell had described Chinese people as ‘a menace to the Northern Territory’, but the more ‘serious menace’, the merchants declared, was in fact men like Mitchell who ‘know little about ... [the Northern Territory], and who ... are ready to throw mud at it when it suits their purposes’.<sup>1</sup> In response, the

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<sup>1</sup> C. Yam Yan, Wing Sang Tong, Chen Kim Kee, Yet Loong, Wing Wan Loong, Wing Chong Sing, Hop Wan, Sun Kwong Sing, Yet Sing, Man Foong Lau, Kung Hing, Quong Lee Chong, Sun Hing Kee, and Chong Kee, ‘Throwing Mud [To the Editor]’, *Northern Territory Times*, 22 September 1905, 2.

merchants defended their position as legitimate settlers, describing their ongoing contributions to the development of the north. They had built infrastructure, paid duties and taxes, patronised storekeepers, and funded the railway and steamship companies through their business. But their position continued to come under scrutiny, most notably in relation to their contact and interactions with Aboriginal people. For one white Darwin resident, who wrote to the *Northern Territory Times* to support Mitchell, it was Chinese damage to Aboriginal people that best symbolised their harmful effects. ‘No matter what Chinese camp one visits’, he wrote, ‘the direful results of opium are to be plainly seen among the aboriginals who appear to be permanent resident of the camps, and are lured there by the pernicious drug’.<sup>2</sup> Attacks such as these framed contact between Chinese and Aboriginal people in the north as perilous and illegitimate.

Hostility to these relationships was central to the white Australian government of the Northern Territory, and was expressed publicly once again in debates around the transfer of governing responsibility for the Territory from South Australia to the Commonwealth in 1911. In 1910 Chinese people were denied the right to acquire a licence to employ Aboriginal workers in their homes or businesses. In response, a series of deputations, letter-writers, and petitioners made their case over a number of years, refuting the claim that they were unfit employers. Interpreting the introduction of this restriction as part of a plan to drive them out of Australia, they described their commitment to a settled life in the Northern Territory. Seven Chinese storekeepers and tradesmen, five of whom had also signed the 1905 statement mentioned above, wrote once again to Mitchell, now Government Resident in Darwin. Many ‘of us have lived in Palmerston [renamed Darwin in 1911] for a great many years’, they declared. They described having ‘expended ... money in business here’, having ‘always been

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<sup>2</sup> Blanco, ‘Throwing Mud [To the Editor]’, *Northern Territory Times*, 29 September 1905, 3.

law abiding’, paying taxes and ‘in every other respect conform[ing] to general & local laws’.<sup>3</sup>

Chinese people had committed their lives to the Northern Territory, and the imposition of legal restrictions represented, they insisted, a grave injustice.

These regulations were, as they had identified, imposed as part of a calculated governmental strategy to make Chinese life in the north unviable; a strategy that provoked contestation and dispute. Their protests focused attention on the bans preventing ‘Asiatic’ people from lawfully employing ‘blacks’, and restraining Aboriginal people from entering Chinatowns in Darwin and Pine Creek. Notes and correspondence on these arguments are contained in what was then a Department of External Affairs file, and is now a file held by the National Archives of Australia, titled ‘Chinese in Northern Territory. Disabilities under which they are working’. This title registered these ‘disabilities’ as an ongoing subject of government, reminding us that the hardships Chinese people endured were systematic.

In this article I take this bureaucratic recognition as a prompt to understand both the nature of this institution of ‘disabilities’ into Chinese lives and to map the contours of Chinese responses. The centrality of Aboriginal people in these arguments is striking. I will explore here the way debates over relationships with Aboriginal people provided non-Indigenous people in 1905 and in 1910–12 with ways of telling stories of how the Chinese community came to be at home in northern Australia, and how they might be excluded. Sophie Loy-Wilson has noted that ‘Australians have long woven historical narratives around Chinese others and it is this storytelling, this weaving, which can tell us much about the kind

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<sup>3</sup> Ah Chong, Yee Loong, Wing Wah Loong, Man Fong Lau, C Yam Yan, and Wong Sang Tong to Mr Justice Mitchell, 22 March 1911, NAA: A1, 1912/10547, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA). It was merchants largely originating in Guangdong, who coalesced in Darwin’s Wah On Society, who prosecuted their case against these restrictions. Julia Martínez, ‘Chinese Politics in Darwin: Interconnections between the Wah On Society and the Kuo Min Tang’ in *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, eds Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 243–6.

of society we want to create'.<sup>4</sup> As she describes, Chinese people have woven such histories as well, revealing the ways they imagined their place in Australia. In this article, I seek to illustrate the centrality of Aboriginal people to these stories. In the two debates examined here, Indigeneity appears for non-Indigenous people as a conduit through which white and Chinese settlers transit, in different ways, to become at home in Australia.<sup>5</sup> We can, then, read Aboriginal presence as central to the story of governing and imagining the north. Put simply, practices of governing Aboriginal people were key to making and distinguishing different kinds of settlers.

This article traces arguments about Chinese settlers in the Northern Territory through intertwined questions of race, labour, and sovereignty. Other historians have described the ways race and racialisation suffused discussions of work in the tropics, particularly in early twentieth century Darwin.<sup>6</sup> Here, we find a grammar of race that emerged as a way of alternately speaking about and obscuring sovereignty. First, a language of race provided a way of representing the production of (settler) sovereignty, as many administrators sought to fabricate the homogeneous white population they believed would be the basis of a sovereign community. And second, it was a way of speaking about Aboriginal people that occluded questions of Indigenous sovereignty. Darwin was the home for many Aboriginal peoples who lived on Larrakia country but were able, there, to articulate themselves as sovereign communities with laws and customs of their own. In arguing about labour, settlers

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<sup>4</sup> Sophie Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2.

<sup>5</sup> On transit, see Jodi A Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005); Fiona Paisley, 'Race Hysteria, Darwin, 1938', *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 34 (2001): 43–59.

instrumentalised a language of race to reduce those Aboriginal peoples to crowds of ‘blacks’, to subjects of a plural society rather than members of another sovereign community.

A racialised plural society represents a fraught way of bringing together histories of different settlers with histories of different Indigenous communities in place. Some twenty years ago, Ann Curthoys described the ‘uneasy conversation’ between discussions of the ‘multicultural and the indigenous’, arguing that Indigenous and migration histories ‘cannot be conceptualised together nor maintained as fully distinct’.<sup>7</sup> In the archive engaged in this article, however, these histories emerge as fundamentally intertwined. How can Indigeneity and migration be considered in relation, retaining a sense of unease rather than seeking out comfortable conclusions? How might we amplify archival voices while taking care not to reproduce contemporary preoccupations with the perils of multiculturalism?

Historians of northern Australia have tried in a number of ways to bring these fields together, through histories of convergence and what Regina Ganter has termed ‘mixed relations’, or of Julia Martínez’s ‘polyethnic community’ characterised by relationships that postcolonial theorists would tell us disrupt the fixity of unambiguous categorisation.<sup>8</sup> These are emblematic of recent approaches to the history of the Australian north that have sought to distinguish it from the settler colonial south and describe it instead as akin to a Southeast Asian city, characterised by racial pluralism rather than white settler colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Attending

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Curthoys, ‘An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous’ in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds John Docker and Gerhardt Fisher (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Regina Ganter, ‘Turning the Map Upside Down’, *Griffith Review* 9 (2005): 169, 173–4; Julia Martínez, ‘Ethnic Policy and Practice in Darwin’, in *Mixed Relations: Asian–Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, ed. Regina Ganter, (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006), 122, 132. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Julia Martínez, ‘Plural Australia: Aboriginal and Union Labour in Tropical White Australia, Darwin 1911–1940’, (PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2000), 5; Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn:*

to this regional specificity has helped historians to narrate histories of diversity and ‘mixture’ and their planned erasure under the White Australia Policy in the decades following Federation. This represents northern history, then, as a story of efforts to replace that northern pluralism with south-eastern Australian settler colonial relations.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than stressing those geographical distinctions and emphasising the community made possible by northern pluralism, I want instead to emphasise the way race structures that difference. I understand race here as a process of bringing colonising relations to bear on social groups by anchoring supposed cognitive, cultural, and moral characteristics to apparent physical ones. It is a kind of translation; a way of rendering difference legible through a somatic register.<sup>11</sup> Rather than celebrating racial difference or diversity, then, we might seek to understand some of the ways its production and instrumentalisation have served to obfuscate different historical experiences. In this way we might bring histories of migration and Indigeneity together through what Dean Saranillio terms ‘relational analyses of settler colonialism’.<sup>12</sup>

Claire Lowrie has shown some of the ways difference was mobilised and spoken of in Darwin, examining the way bans on Chinese employment of Aboriginal people rested on the discursive figure of the corrupting and degrading Chinese master, a figure counterposed to

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*The Untold Story of Australia's North* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), ix; Ganter, *Mixed Relations*; Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous–Asian Story* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007); Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 5; Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Rowse argues similarly that the story of Australian Federation can be told as the colonisation of the North by the South, with the intention of incorporating the former into the ‘Australian Settlement’. Tim Rowse, *Indigenous and other Australians since 1901* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2018), 5–9.

<sup>11</sup> See Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Dean Itsuji Saranillio, ‘The Obscenity of Settler Colonialism’, *Verge* 5, no. 1 (2019): 32–3.

the white mistress who uplifted her Aboriginal servants. By excluding the Chinese, Lowrie argues, the ban thus demarcated the racialised bounds of the legitimate colonist.<sup>13</sup> This article builds on this work, including some of the ways Chinese people have rendered themselves at home, crafting themselves as settler subjects through their relations with Indigenous peoples. Victoria Haskins has carried out similar research, examining parallel archives in Western Australia. Examining a Chinese family's campaign for 'the privilege of employing natives' in Derby, she describes them as presenting an argument for Chinese legitimacy in Australia: 'being allowed to employ Aboriginal labour', she argues, 'actually defined Australian citizenship'. But Haskins suggests that the archive does not disclose Chinese employers' 'opinions on the individuals they employed, or about the Aboriginal community more generally'.<sup>14</sup> In this article, I instead read the terms of these racialised labour disputes as revealing the ways protagonists framed relations between peoples, finding that the process of claiming rights facilitated affinities with a settler sovereignty through which individual relations were refracted.<sup>15</sup>

Loy-Wilson has characterised the theme of Chinese history in Australia as predominantly that of '*arriving in* or being *excluded from*' the nation.<sup>16</sup> More recently, the

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<sup>13</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 170–3.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Haskins, "'The Privilege of Employing Natives': the Quan Sing Affair and Chinese-Aboriginal Employment in Western Australia, 1889–1934", *Aboriginal History* 35 (2011): 146, 157.

<sup>15</sup> This kind of co-optation was not inevitable. One might find contemporary instances elsewhere of migrants citing Indigenous sovereignty in order to critique settler sovereignty and claim rights against it, or of migrants more recently seeking belonging through Aboriginal rather than settler laws. See Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 168–78; Joseph Pugliese, 'Geopolitics of Aboriginal Sovereignty: Colonial Law as "a Species of Excess of Its Own Authority"', *Aboriginal Passport Ceremonies and Asylum Seekers*, *Law Text Culture* 19 (2015): 86–95.

<sup>16</sup> Loy-Wilson, 2. See, eg, Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1923); Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian*

field of Chinese history in Australia has largely turned away from these problems of exclusion to instead focus on lives enriched by mobilities and connections, political participation and agency, or fabricating community through making Australia home.<sup>17</sup> In turning to study the imposition of restrictions, this article departs from a focus on exclusion to instead explore some of the ways Chinese people have been *included* in contingent and precarious ways. This was an inclusion structured by the promise, though not necessarily the fulfilment, of exclusion; by what Iyko Day has described as a governmental technology of ‘disposability’.<sup>18</sup> It traces this process by turning away from Victoria and New South Wales, the typical focus of Chinese Australian histories, and telling a northern story. Several historians of northern Australia have noted that Chinese migrants ought to be understood as

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*Immigration to Australasia and North America, 1919–1978* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995); John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007). Other work has examined some of the ways Chinese migrants and settlers navigated boundaries of exclusion. See, eg, Kate Bagnall, ‘Across the Threshold: White Women and Chinese Hawkers in the White Colonial Imaginary’, *Hecate* 28, no. 2 (2002); Mei-fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia: Urban Elites. Newspapers and the Formation of Chinese–Australian Identity, 1892–1912* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Mark Finnane, ‘Law as Politics: Chinese Litigants in Australian Colonial Courts’, *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 9 (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Lake, ‘Chinese Colonists Assert Their “Common Human Rights”’: Cosmopolitanism as Subject and Method of History’, *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010); Regina Ganter, ‘Mixed Relations: Towards Reconfiguring Australian History’, in *Lost in the Whitewash: Aboriginal-Asian Encounters in Australia, 1901–2001*, eds Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfang (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, ANU, 2003); Sophie Couchman, “‘Reconsidering Race’: How Far has Barry McGowan’s “Refreshing SeaBreeze” Blown?”, *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 8 (2019): 236–48.

<sup>18</sup> Alison Bashford, ‘Immigration Restriction: Rethinking Period and Place from Settler Colonies to Postcolonial Nations’, *Journal of Global History* 9, no. 1 (2014): 31; Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 33. See also David C Atkinson, *The Burden of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 50.

settlers.<sup>19</sup> But the ways the mostly male north Australian Chinese merchants represented themselves as respectable, bourgeois settlers, and the specific ways they articulated their relationships with white people, with Indigenous people, and with the land, have not yet been the subject of detailed study.

This article traces two arguments about relationships between white and Chinese settlers that were transacted through Indigeneity, asking how, under what circumstances, and to what effect were languages of race operationalised to render difference legible. It first provides a short history of the ways practices of racialisation shaped social relations and the politics of labour in Darwin. In particular, it traces the continuing concern expressed by southern white authorities for the viability of permanent white settlement in Australia's north. The article then turns to examine the argument that was staged in 1905 after Mitchell publicly impugned the contributions of Chinese people to the settlement of the Northern Territory. It reads this argument as a contest over labour, in which Mitchell and others derided Chinese labour as destructive – of Aboriginal people and of the land – in order to argue for their removal and replacement by productive white workers. White workers, they argued, would produce more than merely economic value; they would also comprise a homogeneous white settler population that could enact and bear settler sovereignty. The next section examines the second argument, which took place in 1910–12 and centred on the right of Chinese settlers to relate to and employ Aboriginal workers. It traces the way administrators justified restrictions on the basis of Chinese contamination of Aboriginal people, while Chinese employers contested them by claiming to be both benevolent employers of 'blacks' and integral to the northern settler colonial formation. The final section examines racialised representations of Aboriginal people in these debates. Here, I focus on the ways the terms of disagreement

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<sup>19</sup> Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfang, 'Something More', in *Lost in the Whitewash: Aboriginal-Asian Encounters in Australia, 1901–2001*, 7; Stephenson, 68.

included Aboriginal people as racialised labouring subjects, as a Black supplement to the settler population.

### **Labour in plural Darwin**

The Northern Territory has long been a space of coexistence and contestation. It is a home for Aboriginal people, part of interconnected southeast Asian worlds, and a site of white hopes for opportunity, possession, and dominance. It was annexed by South Australia in 1864 and in 1869 a capital was established at Palmerston, on Larrakia country. Larrakia people worked in the growing town clearing land, labouring on building sites, and in domestic roles. The first Chinese settlers arrived from Singapore in 1874 as indentured labourers bound for the goldfields, most remaining to continue prospecting for gold at the end of their two-year bonded period.<sup>20</sup> Others were recruited to work on the telegraph line or other public works, as well as on pastoral stations, while mostly Malay pearlers were recruited in Kupang and Makassar. From the late 1870s, thousands of Chinese migrants arrived from southern China (mostly Hong Kong and Guangdong) to seek gold, subsequently working their own mines, establishing market gardens, and working as merchants and minor industrialists. By 1879, there were just over 3000 Chinese people in the Northern Territory, roughly 800 of whom lived in Palmerston mostly labouring as manual or domestic workers.<sup>21</sup>

Many more Chinese miners arrived in the early 1880s, and in the following years contracted workers were recruited from Hong Kong to build the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway. The Chinese population peaked in 1888 at just over 6,000, outnumbering European

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<sup>20</sup> Timothy G. Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, revised edn, 1997), 5–9.

<sup>21</sup> Mickey Dewar, 'The Orient in the Outback: Europeans and Chinese in the Northern Territory' in *Sweet and Sour: Experiences of Chinese Families in the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 1997), 10; Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, 27.

residents six to one. In that year, South Australia imposed new restrictions on Chinese people entering the Northern Territory which, combined with the economic depression of the 1890s and a growing national campaign for a white Australia, led many to depart.<sup>22</sup> This decade was a time of changing social relations: there is also evidence of growing Aboriginal dissatisfaction with the conditions of their employment and presence in Palmerston. Larrakia people had often been attracted to work in town by the availability of valued European or Chinese commodities and the possibility of developing allies who supported both their presence there and their position in disputes with other Aboriginal peoples. But by the 1890s, many were increasingly dissatisfied by the absence of wages and called for pay and increasing provisions, at times threatening to strike.<sup>23</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century, then, Palmerston was shaped by a complex web of interdependent social relations. Aboriginal people who lived in town often resided alongside Chinese settlers and the two communities were, to some extent, enmeshed through relationships of intimacy and labour.<sup>24</sup> Many Chinese men and Aboriginal women lived in long-term intimate relationships, having and raising children who were increasingly becoming the subjects of white governmental concern. But while Palmerston was the site of social and symbolic connections between Chinese and Aboriginal people, Chinese settlers were also integral to the project of crafting a settlement that would exclude Indigeneity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 21; Dewar, 13; Timothy G. Jones, *Pegging the Northern Territory: The History of Mining in the Northern Territory of Australia* (Darwin: Northern Territory Government Printer, 1987), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Wells, *Saltwater People: Larrakia Stories from around Darwin* (Darwin: Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, 2001), 13–15.

<sup>24</sup> Ganter, 'Turning the Map Upside Down', 169, 173–4; Martínez, 'Ethnic Policy and Practice in Darwin', 122, 132.

<sup>25</sup> They were not, though, defined exclusively by this context, also understanding themselves within a broader network of Chinese belonging across the region. Diane Giese, *Beyond Chinatown: Changing*

Larrakia, as well as Wagaitj and Berringen peoples, tended to move in and out of the settler economy around the town. The small settler population meant that much of Larrakia country remained their own, accessible for food production and ceremonial practice. But the beginning of the twentieth century was crucially a time of transition, as settler expansion rendered many Aboriginal people in Darwin dependent on the work into which settlers sought to induce them. In the early twentieth century, specifically Indigenous labour became a concern of settlement. Elsie Masson, an *au pair* in the Administrator of the Northern Territory John Gilruth's house in Darwin in 1913–14, wrote of a domestic servant abruptly going back to his 'country' and leaving his work for 'four moons'. In response, the 'Missis wisely decides to employ only Larakia blacks whose country is Darwin'.<sup>26</sup> This expressed the ethnological view that there was value in putting Aboriginal people to work in their own land. And as Larrakia people took these opportunities they worked to maintain an urban presence, continuing to engage with their country and rendering Darwin a Larrakia town.

In the face of these overlapping and often competing articulations of race and belonging, white Australian governments and administrators, whether in Adelaide or Darwin, considered a white north elusive. Throughout the 1890s, the South Australian government very publicly explored different futures in response to their continued inability to achieve

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*Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995), 12; Henry Yu, 'The Intermittent Rhythms of the Cantonese Pacific' in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, eds Donna R Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Michael Williams, *Returning Home with Glory: Chinese Villagers around the Pacific, 1849 to 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Elsie R Masson, *An Untamed Territory: The Northern Territory of Australia* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1915), 47–8. On Masson's relationships with domestic workers in Darwin, see Jane Lydon, *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 77–80, 82–9; Julia Martínez, Claire Lowrie, Frances Steel, and Victoria Haskins, *Colonialism and Male Domestic Service Across the Asia Pacific* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 114–17.

northern prosperity, suggesting the possibility of developing the Territory through a chartered company that would import indentured labourers from India.<sup>27</sup> This was a prospect that threatened the national commitment to a White Australia that characterised the Federation movements of the 1890s. The severe restrictions on immigration that were legislated in the first year of the new Commonwealth Parliament in 1901 were intended, Henry Reynolds has argued, to ‘legislatively choke’ the ‘existing, dynamic and successful multi-racial society in the northern towns’ to ‘death’.<sup>28</sup> Chinese residents of the Northern Territory found themselves in a new nation where they were understood by politicians to be encroaching on whiteness, where the labour movement considered them to be undercutting white labour, and where most white capitalists believed they had outlasted their usefulness. But some of this latter group in Darwin, as will be discussed below, experienced themselves as part of a common class with respectable Chinese merchants, believing them to relate similarly to Chinese and Aboriginal servants. And some of these white settlers saw a benefit in the exploitation of what they termed ‘coolie labour’ in the enervating tropical heat, and their desire for the temporary presence of workers who may have been British subjects but were not classified as ‘white’ was at the centre of debates over the future of the Northern Territory.

In the 1909 Parliamentary debates on nationalising the Territory, the Prime Minister Alfred Deakin and others argued that the still looming possibility of company rule compelled the Commonwealth to take responsibility. The ‘threat’ of company colonialism was a way of speaking about the kind of population that would occupy the north, a question that was

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<sup>27</sup> Cynthia M Atherton, *The Northern Territory—South Australian ‘White Elephant’/Commonwealth Prize: Perception and Reality in the Federation Era* (Darwin: State Library of the Northern Territory, Occasional Paper No 22, 1991), 11, 13–14.

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, xi; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 137–65.

considered through the problem of labour and who would do it: would it be so-called ‘coolies’ employed under company colonialism, would it be Aboriginal people, or could it be white men? For Commonwealth politicians and administrators, white labour was prized as the way of incorporating the tropical and plural north into a white nation.<sup>29</sup> In Parliament, Liberal politician Sydney Sampson was to describe the Northern Territory as ‘[e]mpirically ... a white man’s country’. This, he declared, meant a commitment to ‘white labour’, excluding both Chinese and Aboriginal workers from the north Australian future.<sup>30</sup>

This aspiration for a national whiteness spanning the entire continent did not have universal appeal among white people in either Australia or Britain. Some preferred to think of the north as a different kind of white Australia: a white man’s country where white men were rulers, not labourers. These were the commentators most likely to ally with white industrialists in calling for the importation of ‘coloured labour’. But most Australian politicians and commentators criticised as defeatist the idea that ‘whites’ in the north could only ‘superintend ... units of dark-skinned races’. They saw this as representing a northern Australian future as one of those ‘tropical dependencies’ where the ‘white man is ... a controller of a plantation, the overseer of labour, and the administrative official, representing an almost negligible superstratum on the great mass of native life’. They dreamt rather of transforming the north into a proper part of the ‘huge’ Australian ‘experiment where the white settler is not in a position of lord of a native race, but is simply a working man, carrying out every occupation from the most laborious tasks to the higher grades of mental

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<sup>29</sup> On Chinese ‘coolies’ in Australia, see Sophie Loy-Wilson, ‘Coolie Alibis: Seizing Gold from Chinese Miners in New South Wales’, *International Labor and Working Class History* 91 (2017).

<sup>30</sup> Sydney Sampson, Adjournment Debate, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 14 June 1917, 72.

effort'.<sup>31</sup> As Mitchell was to declare, there 'was no difficulty whatever in a white population living there, and white men carrying out the labouring work in the Territory'.<sup>32</sup> This meant, he and others suggested, that Chinese labour was superfluous.

The shifting composition of the settler population was thus a key subject of northern government. 3,784 Chinese people had resided in the Northern Territory in 1891, but only 1,339, just 111 of whom were women, remained by the time the Commonwealth took over in 1911. That year was, the Commonwealth Annual Yearbook recorded, 'the first in which the population was dominated by the European race'.<sup>33</sup> Both the numerical register of the Yearbook and the many Chinese voices staking their claim to be at 'home' articulated the northern population as heterogeneous. But this was framed as a problem to be solved by the imposition of 'disabilities' on Chinese settlers. They were to be excluded from lawful participation in the fishing and mining industries through laws that limited the grant of fishing licences only to 'natural born or naturalised British subject[s]' and banned the issuing of new mining leases to 'Asiatic alien[s]'. Chinese people's ability to find legal employment was also restricted through the stipulation that, in inviting tenders for government contracts, for instance for wharf labour, all work must be performed by Europeans.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 'The Northern Territory Problem', *The Pastoral Review*, 15 April 1914, 341; Henry Turley, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 13 February 1917, 10428; R.W. Cilento, *The White Man in The Tropics: With Especial Reference to Australia and its Dependencies* (Melbourne: Division of Tropical Hygiene of the Commonwealth Department of Health, 1925), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel James Mitchell, 15 August 1905, Address-in-reply to the Governor's Speech in *Debates in the House of Assembly during the First Session of the Eighteenth Parliament of South Australia* (Adelaide: W K Thomas & Co, 1905), 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1911), vol. II, 904; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Melbourne: Government Printer, No. 14 of 1921), 988.

<sup>34</sup> Wing Cheong Sing, Sun Hing Ku, Man Fong Law, Lu Sing, Wing Wah Loong, Cheong Wo, C Yam Yan, Fong Cheong Loong, Chin Kim Kee, Wing Sang Tong, George Lu, and Yet Loong to

They may have been marginalised, but Chinese people were understood to comprise a segment of the settler population in a way the over 40,000 Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory did not. The 1911 Darwin census, for instance, enumerated ‘Aborigines full blood’ separately to others in the town, including ‘½ caste aborigines’ alongside Europeans, Chinese, Filipinos, and so on.<sup>35</sup> But while Aboriginal people categorised as ‘full blood’ were not counted as part of the population, their exclusion was not, as can be seen from practices of counting them, total. Instead, Aboriginal people were understood by northern settlers to be an indispensable part of Darwin, if not members of its population. The population as a governmental object was categorically non-Indigenous, the basis for a sovereign community. A white population and white male labour would, as is discussed in the next section, secure settler sovereignty.

### **Building northern futures**

In July 1905, having recently returned to Adelaide from a visit to his Northern Territory electorate, Mitchell was quoted in the *Sydney Bulletin* pronouncing on the problems caused by the Chinese in the north. And a month later, when he rose in the South Australian Legislative Assembly to deliver his address-in-reply, he once again, and this time at great length, proclaimed his ‘disgust’ at the presence of so many Chinese people he had either met or discussed on his trip to the Territory. He bemoaned the failure of the South Australian government to develop its valuable northern asset. In the north, he declared, white labour

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Josiah Thomas, 7 May 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/10547; Ah Chong et al to Mr Justice Mitchell, 22 March 1911, NAA: A1, 1912/10547. See *Fisheries Act Amendment Act 1909* (SA), s 13; *Northern Territory Mining Act 1903* (SA), s 50; *Naturalization Act 1903* (Cth), s 5.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Census Figures for Darwin (5 mile radius)’, 1911, NAA: A1, 1911/16191. See also D.E. Kelsey, *The Shackle: A Story of the Far North Australian Bush*, ed. Ira Nesdale (Adelaide: Lynton Publications, 1975), 30.

could, if encouraged, provide the basis of successful agricultural enterprise. In his analysis, the genius of whiteness would prevail: 'Take rice, for instance. Surely the Anglo-Saxon race, with its intelligence, adaptability, and inventive genius for using machinery, could compete with such countries as China in the production of that cereal'. White success was primarily obstructed, according to Mitchell, by the deleterious effect of Chinese presence. To support his point he turned to an examination of mining, describing Chinese methods that left 'the mines in such a state that it made it ten times harder for the Europeans to find the gold after the Chinamen had left'.<sup>36</sup>

The *Bulletin's* mining-focused 'Wild Cat Column' had quoted with some glee Mitchell's claims that Chinese methods of mining were fundamentally damaging to the cause of white settlement:

They work in such a way that no white man following them can do any good at all. They pick the eyes out of the country, scratch the surface here and there, and leave it without any definite lead for legitimate white miners to follow.

Chinese miners had not, Mitchell argued, erected a single piece of machinery or infrastructure. Instead, they 'come to the country, live on almost nothing, spend little, work out all patches of auriferous ground that can be worked without skilled labor, and then depart for China with all the wealth they have got together'. Mitchell recounted this exploitation in traumatising detail, describing Chinese people as not just unproductive but further as contaminating the Northern Territory and hampering the cause of white settlement. This contamination could be witnessed, Mitchell declared in Parliament, in the effect of the 'opium nuisance', one 'entirely due to the presence of the Chinaman', in transforming

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<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, Address-in-reply, 69–70. On the force of Anglo-Saxonism in Australia in the decades prior to the First World War, see Marilyn Lake, 'British World or New World? Anglo-Saxonism and Australian Engagement with America', *History Australia* 10, no. 3 (2013).

Aboriginal people from a 'fine set of men and most useful' into a 'menace' to white settlers 'in the outlying places'.<sup>37</sup>

While Mitchell's comments were reprinted verbatim in the *Northern Territory Times*, the *Times* also editorialised to complain that, as an elected representative of the Northern Territory, he was:

belittl[ing] this already much slandered Territory, by indulging in crudely bold assertions which, whilst they may contain some elements of truth, are in other aspects most damaging and misleading. Are there not enough already, only too eager to seize upon every opportunity to spatter the unfortunate White Elephant with mud? <sup>38</sup>

The Chinese merchants who wrote to concur with this assessment described Mitchell as 'very ignorant of ... [Northern Territory] history', and noted that 'in the remarks attributed to him [he] has abundantly displayed his ignorance'. They were 'not surprised at this ignorance, for Mr. Mitchell is in no sense a Territorian, has never resided here, and cannot be expected from two short visits to understand the problems which are met with in this Territory'. He 'fails to see that in the truest sense we are more Territorians than he, despite our nationality'. They had become Territorians, they argued, through their productive investments and labour. By investing capital to create successful mines, and by owning, erecting, and working mining equipment, they sought to reconfigure themselves as legitimate settlers. They were lawfully and industriously working and employing, earning and spending, producing and consuming. They articulated themselves as bourgeois subjects, as taxpayers and employers, as men who had made the Northern Territory 'home'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 'The Wild Cat Column', *The Bulletin*, 13 July 1905, 13; Mitchell, Address-in-reply, 71–2.

<sup>38</sup> 'Throwing Mud', *Northern Territory Times*, 18 August 1905, 2; 'Our Members at Work', *Northern Territory Times*, 22 September 1905, 2.

<sup>39</sup> C. Yam Yan et al, 'Throwing Mud [To the Editor]', *Northern Territory Times*, 22 September 1905, p. 2.

Such Chinese assertions of belonging in Australia's north were viscerally contested, just as white settler claims to possess the territory were in turn challenged by sovereign Aboriginal peoples. It is important to note that challenges to Chinese belonging so often centred on depictions of Chinese presence in the Northern Territory as harmful to Aboriginal people. In one such instance, a white settler writing under the pseudonym 'Blanco' suggested that it was 'laughable' that Chinese settlers had made the Northern Territory their home. Instead, he alleged that Chinese camps in the mining districts were filled with 'direful' opium-addicted 'aboriginals' as well as evidence of '[o]ther nauseating subjects, never mentioned in polite society'. Such scenes of degradation were, as Tracey Banivanua Mar noted in a different northern context, flavoured with a menace that derived from their potential to contaminate and dilute white settlement. In this case, that damage would be caused by Chinese labour: for 'Blanco', 'there is no gainsaying the fact that Chinese are driving white men from the country'. This was a process, he alleged, of both economic and physical contamination, the

Chinese one and only ambition is to get as much out of this country as he can and scoot back to the "Flowery Land." They spend nothing amongst us but that which is absolutely imperative, and enrich a few at the expense of many. Wherever they go they carry disease ... in their tracks.<sup>40</sup>

These allusions to illicit sexualities as degrading and disease-ridden were symptomatic of an understanding of plural sociabilities as sites of future threat. In a language of pathology that lent itself to governmental intervention in the name of population health, they expressed racialised preoccupations with Aboriginal women's and Chinese men's sexualities. Pairing allegations of extraction with those of infection, these kinds of statements were representative of a broader discourse that worried about the permanent mark left by a Chinese presence that

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<sup>40</sup> Blanco, 'Throwing Mud [To the Editor]', *Northern Territory Times*, 29 September 1905, 3; Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian–Pacific Indentured Labour Trade* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 89.

was cast as temporary and pernicious. They represented race through a register of contagion which buttressed a politics of segregation, rendering proximity itself a problem.<sup>41</sup>

This discourse of contamination, of the spread of disease from Chinese people to Aboriginal people to white people, was the subject of official knowledge. For Baldwin, the first Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, '[n]othing is more patent than the rapid degeneration of the native in contact with Chinese'. In Spencer's epidemiological imagination, these 'natives' would then 'disseminate' disease among white men.<sup>42</sup> And these supposed pernicious effects on the health of the population were mirrored by the argument that Chinese workers –when not directed by white managers at least – degraded the territory, not only robbing white settlers of the potential wealth of the land but rendering the land itself unproductive.<sup>43</sup> Whereas white labour was represented as imprinting marks of settler sovereignty on the country by improving the land and drawing out all it could yield, Chinese labour was instead understood as harmful, both to people and place.<sup>44</sup> Figuring the Chinese

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<sup>41</sup> See generally Maynard Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900–1909', *Journal of African History* 18, no. 3 (1977); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 46–8; Sophie Loy-Wilson, 'Peanuts and Publicists: "Letting Australian Friends know the Chinese Side of the Story" in Interwar Sydney', *History Australia* 6, no. 1 (2009): 06.4; Ben Silverstein, "'Possibly they did not know themselves": the Ambivalent Government of Sex and Work in the Northern Territory Aborigines Ordinance 1918', *History Australia* 14, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>42</sup> W. Baldwin Spencer, 'Preliminary Report on the Aborigines of the Northern Territory', *Bulletin of the Northern Territory* 7 (1913): 16, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere Chinese workers were often represented through racialised discourses of super-productivity. See, eg, Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1928), Vol II, 630; Gabriella Haynes, 'Shifting Foundations: A Short History of Subversive Spaces on the Pioneer River', *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 4 (2017): 539–40.

<sup>44</sup> For Mitchell, Chinese dominance over the northern goldfields resulted in 'the production of gold ... steadily decreasing'. This passage from Hansard was quoted, and criticised, in a letter from a white settler to the *Northern Territory Times*. Fairplay, 'Our Members in Parliament [To the Editor]', *Northern Territory Times*, 6 October 1905, 3.

settler as predacious male, degrading land and people by compromising their (re)productivity, this was a form of ‘gendered territorialising’. It recapitulated the imperial trope linking conquest of land with conquest of the sexual and labour power of colonised women to inscribe Chinese men as defective settlers.<sup>45</sup>

These racialised descriptions of labour were a way for white administrators to discuss the composition of a sustainable northern settler population. Ensuring there were white men to do the manual work of development would secure a settled white population that was the source, white politicians argued, of sovereignty and the right to self-determination. In 1906 Deakin had written of the importance of finding Australia’s place on the right side of the colour line. ‘The British empire’, he declared,

though united in the whole, is, nevertheless divided broadly into two parts, one occupied wholly or mainly by a white ruling race, the other principally occupied by coloured races who are ruled. Australia and New Zealand are determined to keep their place in the first class.<sup>46</sup>

The southern obsession with white labour, then, shaded into an interest in creating the conditions for settler self-government: the aspiration for a homogeneous white settler

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<sup>45</sup> Patrick Wolfe, ‘Nation and Miscegenation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era’, *Social Analysis* 35 (1994): 95; McClintock, 3. On relationships between discourses of Aboriginal women’s sexual availability and territorial possession, see Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 68–94; Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1998), 14–18; Ann McGrath, *Illicit Love: Interracial Sex and Marriage in the United States and Australia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Morning Post*, 28 May 1906, quoted in Marilyn Lake, ‘Colonial Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region’ in *Cambridge Companion to Australian History*, eds Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 559; Ben Silverstein, ‘Reading Sovereignties in the Shadow of Settler Colonialism: Chinese Employment of Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory of Australia’, *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 1 (2020): 52. ‘The population question thus became the sovereignty question’, wrote Alison Bashford of interwar international discussions of this nature. See Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 138.

population represented these twin goals. This fixation on homogeneity reflected the associations of both so-called ‘coloured labour’ with the erosion of the dignity of labour and, on the other hand, racial homogeneity with the possibility of democracy.<sup>47</sup> Mitchell’s support for the White Australia policy in the Northern Territory was shorthand for these arguments. His claim articulated a biopolitics that sought not just white domination but white homogeneity. This was a southern aspiration, one that ran into northern resistance and resilience, and northern realities, generating a tense dynamic of Chinese inclusion and exclusion.

### **Claiming the right to employ Aboriginal workers**

As was discussed above, in the years after Federation the Commonwealth government worked in the Northern Territory to establish for the Chinese, as well as for others classified as being of ‘Asiatic race’, what might today be called a hostile environment. These restrictions were protested in letters and petitions sent to the Government Resident, the Minister for External Affairs, and to the Protector of Aboriginals. A deputation of Chinese residents also voiced their opposition in a meeting with Josiah Thomas, the new Commonwealth Minister for External Affairs responsible for the government of Australia’s Territories, when he toured the Northern Territory in May 1912 to mark the commencement of his political authority. But it was the restrictions on Chinese relationships with Aboriginal people that were the focus of the greatest opposition.<sup>48</sup> The Chinese deputation to the Minister first protested a declaration that had prohibited unregulated Aboriginal access to the

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<sup>47</sup> Phil Griffiths, ‘The “Necessity” of a Socially Homogeneous Population: The Ruling Class Embraces Racial Exclusion’, *Labour History* 108 (2015): 132.

<sup>48</sup> This focus perhaps reflects the class composition of those Chinese settlers who most prominently opposed the imposed ‘disabilities’ in letters and deputations. Working-class Chinese men may have been more concerned by the bans on their own labour.

town districts of Darwin and Pine Creek. And, second, they criticised the introduction of a law declaring that no licence to employ Aboriginal people could be granted to a person of ‘Asiatic race’.<sup>49</sup> ‘This provision’, the deputation declared,

imposes great hardships on many Chinese. For example at Pine Creek a Chinese who carried on a butchering business for years and who employed blackboys to tend to his stock will be compelled to close his business as a result of this provision.<sup>50</sup>

They portrayed Chinese settlers as employers carrying on businesses that were both essential to the northern economy, and were reliant on Black labour to function.

Natalie Fong has usefully contextualised these actions within a tradition of diasporic Guangdong protest culture.<sup>51</sup> Here I consider the way the deputies positioned themselves most crucially as northern settlers. Expressing themselves as bourgeois settlers, they described employing Aboriginal people under contractual arrangements in which labour was exchanged for wages rather than in a customary and coerced or informal manner. They described themselves as law-abiding investors and taxpayers, articulating a financialised basis for their stake in the colony, alluding to the capacity to account precisely for their contribution to settler colonialism. And theirs was an argument with which good number of white men living in Darwin agreed; around 30 ‘European’ residents signed a petition arguing against the racialised exclusion of members of their northern community. They endorsed the system of licenses to employ Aboriginal people but wrote that it should be extended to all ‘fit persons’, regardless of race. ‘It is indisputable’, they claimed, ‘that some Asiatics are fit

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<sup>49</sup> *Northern Territory Aboriginals Act* 1910 (SA), s 24(4).

<sup>50</sup> Wing Cheong Sing et al to Josiah Thomas, 7 May 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/10547.

<sup>51</sup> Natalie Fong, “‘Your Petitioners Will Ever Pray’: Chinese Merchants and Organised Protest in the Northern Territory, 1880–1920”, *Limina* 22.2 (2017): 39–41.

persons to be licensed to employ aboriginals'.<sup>52</sup> The *Northern Territory Times* similarly editorialised that the clause was

perhaps too stringent, as many of the Chinese merchants in Darwin alone are married men of unblemished character and naturalised British subjects, from whom the blacks receive nothing but kindness and to whom the degradation of drink or opium is an unknown vice.<sup>53</sup>

Thus refuting claims of sexual or narcotic predation, they endorsed and included at least some Chinese merchants as 'fit' settlers for the Australian North.

J.J. Symes, a lawyer for three leading Chinese merchants of Darwin, Ah Cheong, Man Fong Lau, and Wing Wah Loong, wrote to Spencer arguing for the repeal of the ban, claiming that 'there are a great many Chinese accustomed to employ natives who do not ill-treat them, but on the contrary show them more than ordinary consideration'. On this point Spencer conceded, writing to the Administrator that '[t]here are a few Asiatic employers in Darwin and Pine Creek to whom it might be possible to grant licenses to employ Aborigines'. The problem, he wrote, was that 'their number is very small' and they all lived in localities which, given what he considered to be the dangers of contact between Chinese and Aboriginal people, must be declared 'prohibited areas' from which Aboriginal people were to be excluded.<sup>54</sup> Relaxing the prohibition was, in this context, impossible for him to countenance.

This contested right to employ Aboriginal people was an emblematic issue, and Spencer's concession that some Chinese employers were, in fact, honourable and reputable did not vitiate his determination to fabricate a white population. Chinese delegates wrote

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<sup>52</sup> Ah Chong et al to Mr Justice Mitchell, 22 March 1911, NAA: A1, 1912/10547; Petition to the Honorable Josiah Thomas, Minister of State for External Affairs, n.d., NAA: A1, 1912/6611.

<sup>53</sup> 'Our Natives', *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 16 February 1912, 2.

<sup>54</sup> J.J. Symes to W. Baldwin Spencer, 14 February 1912 and Spencer to Mr Justice Mitchell, 6 March 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/6611.

complaining that '[h]ad much of the legislation that has been passed recently (apart from the Immigration Act) been in existence years ago most of us would not have settled here'. The deputation to the Minister similarly

point[ed] out that many Chinese of good character have spent the greater part of their lives and whatever money they had in the Territory. Had they contemplated the restrictions now imposed they would not have spent their lives and all their capital here.<sup>55</sup>

But when the Minister responded by refusing to make any adjustment to the law on the basis that to do so would 'violat[e] the "White Australia" policy', he was concerned, primarily, with fabricating a homogeneous population that could practice settler sovereignty.<sup>56</sup> Spencer echoed this concern.

The ban was, as noted, part of a suite of measures whose effect was to police the population by securing racialised boundaries that denoted legitimate and illegitimate parts of the population: those favoured who could live in this place, and those scheduled for exclusion who should not. To make these boundaries effective the Commonwealth sought to make Chinese life in the Northern Territory unviable, exacerbating the endemic conditions under which they lived. The Chinese deputation recognised this, setting out the consequences of the restrictions now imposed upon them. 'There are', they said,

many Chinese in destitute circumstances with no prospect of improving their condition. All we ask is that we may be allowed the right to live, and unless we are, there is no alternative but starvation; because a great many Chinese have no money wherewith to take passage to China.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ah Chong et al to Mr Justice Mitchell, 22 March 1911 and Wing Cheong Sing et al to Josiah Thomas, 7 May 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/10547.

<sup>56</sup> Notes of Deputation from Chinese Residents of Darwin Which Waited Upon the Minister for External Affairs (Hon. Josiah Thomas) at that Place on 6th May, 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/10547. The restriction was, in fact, removed from the brief text of the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911* (Cth), which otherwise largely duplicated a simplified version of the 1910 South Australian legislation governing the administration of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. The clause was reinserted into the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918* (Cth), s 23(5).

<sup>57</sup> Wing Cheong Sing et al to Josiah Thomas, 7 May 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/10547.

The twin options of departure or starvation were, then, the ends of white settler policies towards Chinese settlers in Australia's north. Yet northern protests that validated Chinese belonging in the territory challenged the racial order of White Australia in a tropical north that was, as discussed above, only marginally white. And in doing so, they ran up against the very reason for the Commonwealth taking over government of the Northern Territory: to make it a part of a sovereign white Australia.

### **Racing sovereignty**

Politicians could dream of 'whitening' the Northern Territory, but they were confronted by the indispensability of Aboriginal workers to the northern colonial situation, both as domestic labour across the Northern Territory and pastoral labour in its rural areas. Many settlers, whether white or Chinese, believed that life in the tropical north could not be sustained without access to Black labour in the form of manual labourers, stock workers, boatmen, and servants, particularly when, as Chinese people left the north, Aboriginal workers were increasingly relied upon as domestic workers.<sup>58</sup> In towns like Darwin, then, Aboriginal people performed the work that made white domestic life possible, that enabled permanent white settlement in the tropical north. In 1911, the Inspector of Aborigines J.T. Beckett reported that he had 'failed to meet one employer of aboriginal labor who was not anxious to retain the services of the blacks employed by him or her'.<sup>59</sup> And from the assumption of

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<sup>58</sup> Julia Martínez and Claire Lowrie, 'Colonial Constructions of Masculinity: Transforming Aboriginal Australian Men into "Houseboys"', *Gender and History* 21, no 2 (2009); Claire Lowrie, 'White Mistresses and Chinese "Houseboys": Domestic Politics in Singapore and Darwin from the 1910s to the 1930s', in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (New York: Routledge, 2015), 219.

<sup>59</sup> Beckett to Basedow, 29 July 1911, NAA: A1, 1912/10964.

Commonwealth authority over the Northern Territory, Aboriginal policy was refracted through this labour question.

I have argued that the biopolitics of white Australia, which worked towards a homogeneous white population in the north, was articulated to produce settler sovereignty. We need also to read the settler politics of race, population, and labour as working to stifle Indigenous sovereignties; to clear away the ground upon which a settler sovereignty could be built. This emerges in debates over Aboriginal labour in Darwin in part through practices of representing Larrakia (or Wagaitj, or Berringen, or Gurindji) people as ‘blacks’ and thereby enacting a racial regime that obscured the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Discussing the establishment of the Kahlin Compound, an Aboriginal labour camp adjacent to Darwin, Spencer represented Aboriginal people as no longer ‘attached to a particular country’, as having lost their ‘tribal’ belonging and now simply part of a ‘crowd’ of ‘blackfellows’.<sup>60</sup> In telling a story of Indigenous loss of what we might term sovereignty, Spencer deployed a grammar of race as linguistic replacement.

Such claims were contested. In 1936 ‘King Ichuagarrabilluk’, or ‘King George ... of the once great tribe of the Larrakeyah’, protested plans to move his people away from Kahlin Compound at Myilly Point overlooking Mindil Beach, then in the process of being swamped by the growing town of Darwin. ‘The Larrakeyah people are a salt water tribe and would not be prepared to live away from the sea’, he declared. ‘This is all the country we have left, and the Government should leave us on it’.<sup>61</sup> In this moment, and many others, the Larrakia faced a settler colonialism that refused to recognise them in the terms of their own making. Masson’s description of the instrumentalisation of Indigeneity discussed above was anomalous in Darwin: when other non-Indigenous people, whether white or Chinese, argued

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<sup>60</sup> Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, Vol II, 612.

<sup>61</sup> ‘The Larrakeyah Tribe’, *Northern Standard*, 24 March 1936, 6.

over the right to employ Aboriginal people in Darwin, they tended to speak of their desired workers not as Larrakia or any other tribal or sovereign people, but as ‘natives’ or ‘blacks’ or ‘blackboys’.<sup>62</sup> Aboriginal people were usually represented as available for labour in Darwin not as original owners of the land or as members of sovereign peoples but as racialised bodies, a discursive practice that naturalised the dispossession that was prior to their availability for labour; awareness of which was deferred by the terms of debate.

## **Conclusion**

In these arguments, Aboriginal nations were domesticated, their sovereignties subsumed. This domestication was a condition of possibility for their enlistment as Black workers; as a supplement to the settler population. We can track here a process of exclusion from the population as Larrakia, for instance – as a sovereign people – and inclusion in the colonial social formation as racialised workers – as individuated black supplements to the population. And this was not only the work of white administrators. Whatever the individual relationships between Chinese and Aboriginal people – and there were many intimate or familial relationships that continued well beyond this moment – the Chinese deputies framed their employment of Aboriginal people just as white settlers did, participating collectively in the project of obscuring Indigenous sovereignties. As Yu-ting Huang has argued, across the

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<sup>62</sup> J.J. Symes to Baldwin Spencer, 14 February 1912, NAA: A1, 1912/6611; Wing Cheong Sing et al to Josiah Thomas, 7 May 1912 and Ah Chong et al to Mr Justice Mitchell, 22 March 1911, NAA: A1, 1912/10547; Alfred Searcy, *In Australian Tropics* (London: George Robertson & Co, 1909), 364; Baldwin Spencer, *Native Tribes of Northern Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 152, 251.

Pacific world one finds that ‘Asian authors inevitably comment on indigenous sovereignty whether they neglect or acknowledge it’.<sup>63</sup>

In examining these processes through debates over labour and Chinese belonging – with their ‘Anglo-Saxon’, ‘Asiatic’, and ‘black’ characters – we have seen the ways a language of race provided ways of both speaking about and obscuring questions of sovereignty. These were arguments over rights in which the composition of a settler society was in contention. A commitment to pluralism did not necessarily indicate a practice of antiracism. Speaking in terms of race, of ‘blacks’ rather than Larrakia and Wagaitj for instance, rather signalled the deployment of Indigeneity as a settler formation. It indicated an approach to Aboriginal people framed by specific histories of settler colonialism in which racialisation was deployed as a discursive means of territorial dispossession. Claims of monetary investment, both in private infrastructure and the public good through taxpaying, capitalised on colonial perceptions of ‘native’ incapacity to understand money. And claims of productivity, of the proper management of labour, were similarly enlivened by notions of Aboriginal waste.

Rather than an emergent pluralism, then, we find here that articulations of the self as settler were dependent on the negation of Aboriginality. Struggles against the imposition of ‘disabilities’ drew on Aboriginal dispossession, and arguments for belonging transited through racialised relations with Aboriginal peoples. Both intimacies and antagonisms were framed by race as a means of making sense of these relations in ways that muddied questions of settler colonialism and sovereignty, splattering them with layers of abstraction and mystification. Clearing this language away requires us to move beyond registering racial

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<sup>63</sup> Yu-ting Huang, ‘Writing Settlement: Locating Asian–Indigenous Relations in the Pacific’, *Verge* 4, no. 2 (2018): 28.

plurality and instead engage in a relational analysis to trace conditional and contingent practices of exclusion and inclusion, dependence and disposability.

Ben Silverstein

Australian National University

Email: [ben.silverstein@anu.edu.au](mailto:ben.silverstein@anu.edu.au)