

Chapter 2

Beyond Colonial Completion: Arendt, Settler Colonialism and the End of Politics

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Abstract As many have argued, the Western political theory tradition tends to justify settler colonialism and erase its ongoing effects. However, this chapter suggests that we can draw on resources from within that tradition to challenge problematic settler colonial dynamics, which can prevent us as settlers from engaging in genuine political dialogue with Indigenous peoples. As an example, I show how Arendt helps us rethink traditional settler visions of ‘decolonisation’, which are deeply entwined with the drive to colonial completion and the erasure of Indigenous political independence. While her overall body of work has a complex relationship to settler colonialism, she offers an important critique of political projects that paradoxically seek to end politics once and for all. Most importantly, she reinstates political action as a positive enduring condition, and offers an account of politics as the good life rather than as pathway to the good life. This allow us to move the political task facing Indigenous and settler relations from ‘fixing the problem’ Indigenous people pose for us and for the dominant state towards fostering a productive but uncomfortable political coexistence. However, she can only help us to see the need for deep encounter with Indigenous people and worlds. At this point a different and more deeply dialogic conversation must begin.

Keywords Settler colonialism • Indigenous critical theory • Hannah Arendt • Jacques Ranciere • Western political theory • Reconciliation

Thus our tradition of political philosophy, unhappily and fatefully, and from its very beginning, has deprived political affairs, that is, those activities concerning the common public realm that comes into being wherever men live together, of all dignity of their own. In Aristotelian terms, politics is a means to an end; it has no end in and by itself. More than that, the proper end of politics is in a way its opposite, namely, nonparticipation in political affairs (Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* 2005: 82–83).

Politics is the art of suppressing the political (Ranciere, *On the Shores of Politics* 1992: 11)

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As a political formation, settler colonialism constantly works to dissolve its own colonial status. At an abstract level, settlers imagine that the beginning of settler society coincides exactly with the end of Aboriginal society.¹ At the moment of arrival, one society gives way to another and we are relieved of the burden of being colonisers. On the ground, however, we have always acknowledged a more or less violent overlap. If colonialism itself is understood as the simultaneous occupation of a single land area by both Indigenous and settler political societies, then settlers have always known colonialism to be problematic. However, its existence is justified by its temporary status. Eventually, Indigenous societies will give way completely to settler societies, or else combine with them in ways that legitimise and complete settler sovereign institutions. Therefore, as Macoun and I have argued elsewhere (2012: 53), ‘the eventual legitimacy and stability of the settler-colonial project is always-already assumed. Through this a priori assumption, settler colonialism is able to entrench and sustain itself on the basis of its eventual demise’. This outcome is presented as constantly deferred and delayed, but ultimately unavoidable; there is no question that two political societies are unable to coexist in one place and that those concerned will seek an end to this coexistence. Settler colonialism assumes the inevitability of its own colonising actions in such a circumstance.

As an academic field, settler colonial studies tracks this drive towards colonial completion, but can also reproduce its assumptions (Snelgrove et al. 2015; Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Svirsky 2016). It tends to suggest that settlers by their very ‘settleness’ will seek possession of all land, and that the settler state—because of its liberal statehood—will seek to naturalise its claim to be the sole legitimate political authority in an area. Settlers will not ‘go home’, as in Algeria, nor can they ever achieve the task of ending colonialism through Indigenous dissolution. As Svirsky (2016) argues, settler colonialism only exists because Indigenous societies continue to resist and survive. Without this dynamic colonialism would have ended long ago. Therefore, foundational settler colonial studies scholar Lorenzo Veracini (2011: 211) observes that ‘the decolonisation of settler colonialism needs to be imagined before it is practised, and this has proved especially challenging’. There is no ending from within settler colonial and liberal logics—this political formation is trapped in its own tragic and permanent incompleteness. So how do we as settler scholars theorise the end of the settler colonial story? This chapter begins with this question, but moves beyond it to consider the problems with understanding this political relationship in the terms of one party to that relationship.

I suggest that settlers cannot and should not imagine decolonisation on our own. In fact, we cannot even imagine colonisation on our own: ‘indigenous people must be central to any theorisations of the conditions of postcoloniality, empire and

¹In the popular settler understanding, for example, the instant Captain James Cook claimed sovereignty and radical land title in 1788 all Aboriginal sovereignty was immediately extinguished (Reynolds 1992). Recent scholarship has shown that the actual legal and political assertion of sovereignty was much slower and more fragmented, following more closely the actual extension of settlement and the ability to enforce settler criminal jurisdiction (Ford 2011).

death-dealing regimes that arise out of indigenous lands' (Byrd 2011: xiv). This is an argument already articulated by a number of critical Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (Byrd 2011; Simpson 2014; Battell-Lowman and Barker 2015). Transformation must be imagined and acted together by both parties in the relationship, so we cannot form a blueprint in advance. Only as we begin to act beyond the logics of liberal settler colonialism can we start the process of imagining decolonisation; we as non-Indigenous societies cannot yet envisage this process and its endpoint because we have not yet had genuine political conversations with Indigenous societies. There may be no 'resolution' in the sense that non-Indigenous political actors long for—an ending to our problematic status, a dissolving of political difference, a securing of settler futures (Tuck and Yang 2012). As Australian Aboriginal scholar Lyndon Murphy articulated in response to constant student questions about the 'solution' to the 'problem', neither side knows what might emerge from a deep negotiation about political possibilities because this negotiation remains a long way off.

If the space of this conversation is a shared political space, then we as settlers regularly believe ourselves to be operating within it. But while official initiatives such as reconciliation, constitutional recognition and apology aim to be mechanisms of encounter and resolution, in many ways they are products of our own understandings of the political, which overlay this shared space. In this chapter I explore the notion of the political as a 'middle thing' that both parties reach for, yet as one that is currently overdetermined by the frameworks and needs of settler selves. That is, we imagine we are in conversation, but this conversation is held with an imagined other rather than with the 'Aboriginal polity that already exists' (Murphy 2000). As a polity, we see ourselves formulating transformative strategies, but these remain our solutions to our problems. We see ourselves engaging in profound political debates about possible ways forward, but these 'good colonist/bad colonist' debates remain circumscribed by liberal categories. The middle thing becomes suppressed, not by potentially incommensurate understandings of what is acceptable and politically possible, but by the dominance of one understanding, which preconfigures political possibilities. To truly enter into that shared space is to 'attend to what is irreconcilable within settler colonial relations' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 4) rather than to force reconciliations. It involves countenancing the exposure rather than the securing of our unsettled political and social identities in this place. Most challengingly, it is to begin a conversation without a clear idea of its direction, and to enter into a politics that is potentially without end.

In this first section of the chapter, I outline the settler dynamics that tend to condition our understanding of political transformation and can foreclose genuine conversations with Indigenous societies. Settler colonialism's ultimate preoccupation with its problematic colonial status (whether this status is acknowledged or denied) means that many political initiatives seek colonial completion. What even the most progressive settler state currently asks for and offers in an imagined settler-Indigenous exchange is the final (re)founding of settler sovereignty. Put another way, it offers inclusion *as* decolonisation, not a choice between inclusion *or* decolonisation as material and political redistribution (and certainly not inclusion *and* decolonisation). Therefore debates that do exist in the public space remain

largely between settler approaches rather than between settler and Indigenous peoples. There are clearly battles between conservatives and progressives over the reality of past violence, the need for social and cultural recognition and the status of the current nation-state. Yet these are ultimately different pathways to arriving at a similar point, and share common assumptions. I then consider the notion of politics as a ‘middle thing’ that is created by the presence of alternative orders and projects, but which is bypassed in favour of this ongoing settler conversation within our own frameworks.

In the second part of the chapter, I aim to use the work of Arendt to both deepen the analysis and to challenge these settler colonial dynamics. I draw from her work on the nature of the political to argue that this settler colonial drive towards colonial completion reflects a much longer political theoretical tradition. Since Plato, Arendt argues, politics has been seen as a means to an end and, since Marx, as existing in order to exhaust itself and leave us with the more desirable ‘administration of things’ (Engels quoted in Kohn 2005: ix). Instead, Arendt rearticulates political action as a good in itself, rather than as a pathway to the good. She locates us all in the field of the political, and as already responsible for violent, oppressive political structures we find ourselves within. We can and must make judgments, and take political action, but must do so in concert with others and hence in ways that cannot be determined in advance. The uncertainty of politics is the result of human freedom and plurality; this understanding of the promise of politics can help us to enter into settler-Indigenous political conversations without attempting to predetermine them.

In using Arendt in this way, I do not seek ‘solutions’ to our current problematic relationships from within the Western tradition. Instead, I raise the possibility of looking within this tradition to find counter-currents that push us towards a deeper encounter with Indigenous societies. Arendt on her own cannot do this. As others have shown, she herself argues for the legitimacy of settler colonialism in Zionist and other contexts. She does so both directly—framing it as the replacement of a non-political society by a political one—and indirectly (to the extent that she links full humanity and political participation) as the replacement of a less human society by a more human one. Her valorisation of the state is also problematic here. Nonetheless, she articulates and becomes part of a longer thread that contests Western understandings of politics as an instrumental process (Ranciere challenges and develops these ideas; see also Schaap 2011). An engagement with Arendt can be one part of a longer and more complicated process of finding the version of ourselves that is capable of entering into a deeper encounter and more meaningful dialogue.

The Settler Drive to Colonial Completion

Settler institutions are driven by a logic of elimination that targets Indigenous political difference. Patrick Wolfe argues that the logic of elimination works to replace Indigenous people on their land, and to naturalise this replacement (1999, 2006). In

some settler colonial contexts such as Israel, the work of replacing Indigenous people on their land continues street by street; questions of political legitimacy are important but in some ways secondary to this practical process. However, in the contemporary Anglophone liberal nation-state, with extensive physical dispossession already underway, the second half of this logic becomes more salient as the state seeks to legitimise its claim to full possession to both external and internal constituencies.² Historical colonial sovereignty may have established its imperatives incrementally and in practical ways; it is not necessarily the case that settler projects begin with a clear plan for absolute physical and political possession and work towards this in an intentional way (Ford 2011; Ford and Rowse 2012; see discussion in Veracini 2010). However, the contemporary formulation of liberal Western nation-state sovereignty emphasises the indivisibility, consent-based legitimacy and universal character of a territorial state. This leads to a contemporary settler colonial desire to establish absolute sovereignty and ingest or destroy Indigenous political difference. The enactment of settler state jurisdiction was historically partial and remains so, but the persistence of the modern unified sovereign imaginary continues to drive present political activities. Contemporary settler colonialism as a destructive force upon Indigenous lives operates precisely in this gap between the partial reality of settler sovereignty and the impossible and increasingly inadequate political imperative that this sovereignty must constitute and exhaust the political.

In seeking to naturalise their existence as the sole legitimate authority over a particular area, settler states mobilise different political strategies. These can include entering into highly sophisticated forms of political engagement with Indigenous people that recognise some kinds of land ownership, past colonial violence and Indigenous culture in exchange for an extinguishment of political difference and legitimisation of the status quo. For example, official reconciliation processes are underway (or stalled) in many settler colonial contexts such as Australia and Canada. While these may facilitate important grassroots conversations and opportunities for healing, in their current limited forms they remain driven by assumptions about 'moving on' from a colonial past to a post-colonial present. As Nehiyaw activist Erica Lee (2016) argues:

²While in the contemporary Anglophone world, the logic of elimination is less focused on the possession of land as physical resource, this dimension of the settler colonial encounter continues to manifest itself in the present, especially around struggles over land that was previously economically marginal (such as the 'northern regions' attached to many settler colonies—Alaska, the Australian Northern Territory, and Nunavut). Such land may not have previously been the object of comprehensive settler attempts at dispossession, but if new technologies or economies lead to it becoming more economically desirable then new strategies of economic and physical dispossession are mobilised. Such changing settler valuations of land can therefore create Indigenous estates recognised by the settler legal and political system that this system later seeks to dissolve. The settler colonial project may not necessarily seek to possess *all* land in this sense, although it may eventually calculate this to be in its interests and do so. But, once it takes the form of the contemporary liberal nation-state, the settler project will necessarily seek to dissolve substantive Indigenous political difference.

it seems that with any idea of reconciliation I've heard, there is an unspoken requirement of Indigenous forgiveness and Indigenous consent to continued occupation... The real task of reconciliation, however, is not in Canada waiting around to be forgiven for colonialism so business can carry on as usual; it is for Canadians to end the ongoing colonial violence that still suffocates Indigenous lives.

However, if non-Indigenous polities engage in a more direct conversation with these challenging Indigenous perspectives, then it is possible to reimagine 'reconciliation as the restoration of good relations. Restoring good relations requires fundamentally breaking with a vastly unjust world to a focus on how we relate to each other and the world around us... Reconciliation is the realization of worlds that should have been' (Lee 2016). This suggests that reconciliation processes are not inevitably colonising in and of themselves, but only to the extent they are driven by a limited, state focused agenda to 'resolve' colonial tensions without addressing colonial structures themselves (or to the extent they remain ideological rather than truly political; Schaap 2008).

To take another example, treaty is a long-standing tool of colonial regimes, and functions to recognise Indigenous political difference in the same moment that it absorbs that difference into the general pool of state sovereignty. Aboriginal sovereignty, in this formulation, is 'given up' and cannot be re-extracted, and thus the state is finally (re)founded once and for all. This is therefore a mechanism of extinguishment of political difference, and a means to colonial completion. McHugh (1997) argues that this understanding of treaties is not necessarily shared by all Indigenous parties, who might see them as mechanisms to facilitate ongoing negotiations to combine different sovereignties that continue to be held by each party. There are important spaces for renegotiation and political change created by these tools, but to the extent they remain driven and determined by the settler state they continue to seek to dissolve Indigenous political difference.

As Australian Aboriginal scholar Morrissey argues, this political difference is 'an embodied sovereignty which cannot be lost as long as Aboriginals assert it' (Morrissey 2007: 72; Moreton-Robinson 2015). It arises both from the alternative forms of political organisation practiced in Indigenous cultures—'the Aboriginal polity that already exists' (Murphy 2000)—and from the fact that these Indigenous jurisdictions were in place prior to the founding acts of the settler polity. As Veracini (2010) emphasises, sovereignty is brought with settlers rather than being constituted through genuine interaction with Indigenous people or local circumstances. It is therefore disrupted by and unable to account for political existences already in situ but must deny them while working to dissolve them, or else declare them to be immediately ended by the founding of the new polity, or else acknowledge them in order to immediately attempt to incorporate them (or all three together). And yet, precisely because of the absolute nature of contemporary state sovereignty claims, the settler polity is constantly prevented by independent Indigenous political existence from being fully itself. The flip side of colonisation being a structure rather than an event is that settler sovereignty is a performance claiming to be an essence.

This leads to the peculiar and complicated temporality of settler colonialism. At one level, it is a clear linear narrative of a movement from an (Indigenous) past to a more civilised, unified (settler) future. Once this future arrives, it is no longer only settler, but a universal shared future. However, at another level the temporal narrative constantly circles back on itself. It at once declares sovereignty to be already complete, posits an inevitable future of sovereign completion (implicitly acknowledging current incompleteness), and works in the present to bring about that future. This is a form of political fantasy, which does more than simply assert the convergence of political stories and political realities. If you confront the fantasy of completed settler sovereignty with the contradictory reality of Aboriginal sovereignty, this fantasy will not dissolve. Instead it will animate its agents to pursue the extinction of Aboriginal sovereignty with a renewed intensity. Misrecognition might be susceptible to a challenge from reality, but fantasy will use this challenge to more intensively pursue its desires.

This complicated manoeuvre is illustrated by Australian debates about constitutional recognition. Both major political parties support the move to recognition. In the second reading speeches given by then Prime Minister Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, both articulate a strange notion of colonialism as already complete, but needing to be completed. Our nation-state already exists as a unified thing, but must be made fully itself. For example: ‘among the 128 sections of the Constitution, there is no acknowledgement of Australia’s First Peoples... Or the unhealed wound that even now lies open at the heart of our national story’ (Gillard 2013). Or, ‘Until we acknowledge this we will be an incomplete nation and a torn people’ (Abbott 2013). But how can the territorially sovereign state be torn if it was never whole? At what moment was the wound created that now needs repair? Was there ever a moment in which the body politic existed without a wound? In a linear narrative, the body politic would be awaiting embodiment and its constitution as a unified subject. But in settler colonial temporalities, the settler state asserts its completion even as it seeks to enact it, declares that colonialism is past even as it seeks to end it, and denies Indigenous difference even as it confronts and seeks to manage it.

I suggest that this settler colonial dynamic is particularly powerful in suppressing a genuine political conversation with Indigenous peoples and political orders. It admits interaction only in the context of, and to the extent that it contributes to, the resolution of our problematic settler colonial status via the legitimisation of the current order. Because this resolution can involve inclusion and recognition of Indigenous people as well as exclusion, both progressive and conservative approaches are invested in this process of dissolving Indigenous political difference. The drive towards colonial completion thus easily becomes confused and conflated with a process of decolonisation. But while both colonial completion and decolonisation involve the ‘end’ of colonial relations, they do so for very different reasons and with very different effects. Most importantly for this chapter, the settler pursuit of the ‘vanishing endpoint’ of settler colonialism frames the Indigenous-settler political relationship as inherently temporary (Strakosch and Macoun 2012). It is a relationship that should be engaged and acknowledged to the extent that it allows us to ‘settle’ political differences and create a unified political order (that is, to the extent

that it dissolves the settler-Indigenous political relationship). But while we regularly deny that we are in a relationship with Indigenous people, or seek to end that relationship, it remains a constant feature of our world. In its conflictual and irresolvable character, it generates important political possibilities.

Settler Politics and Its Occupation of the Middle Ground

Every city has these two irreducible components, ever virtually at war, ever present and represented to each other through the names they adopt and the principles with which they identify themselves, which they make their own: liberty (*eleutheria*) for the mass of the poor, virtue (*arête*) for the small number of the rich. Thus do rich and poor constantly grasp the common thing, the middle thing, in the pincers ... of material interests and imaginary investments (Ranciere, *On the Shores of Politics*, 1992: 13).

I take this quote out of context. In its original setting, it refers to the divisions between rich and poor in Aristotle's imagined *polis*. The middle thing is the realm of moderate politics that becomes compressed between two irreconcilable forces. The categories cannot be erased or combined, as no magic can ever make someone rich and poor at the same time. It is in fact the presence of both which creates the space of the political, 'which is, in modern terms, the art of putting up with what cannot be reconciled, of tolerating the existence alongside the rich of the poor, who can no longer be thrown overboard' (Ranciere 1992: 14). However, Ranciere argues, Aristotle seeks to pacify and secure this centre by making it coincide with an ideal middle class able to operate beyond the desires of each extreme.

I reread this quote in the context of contemporary settler-Indigenous political relationships. In this context, it highlights how the space of the political is produced by the encounter of two different and hierarchically positioned parties. Both reach for the middle thing that is produced between them, in order to pursue different goals that are themselves constituted by the encounter. For settlers, the presence of Indigenous peoples we have clearly dispossessed, but who cannot be eliminated or expelled from the territory, exposes our own status and privilege. We seek to act in the middle space to demonstrate virtue and to cultivate honour—but these political goals constitute 'imaginary investments' in our own legitimised identities and in creating a world that no longer reflects back to us our conflict with the disenfranchised. Even the attempts to complete sovereignty, discussed above, are in the end 'imaginary investments' in political stories about the nature of our collective identities. Indigenous societies, on the other hand, seek material redress and liberation. Their struggle is a concrete one for actual freedom and change (decolonisation is not a metaphor; Coulthard 2014). So the middle thing is brought into being by the conflict, but becomes what either side seeks to grasp in order to articulate and transform this conflict in their own ways.

The quote highlights the often very different ways that each party reaches towards political transformation, and what they imagine this transformation to be. Read together with settler colonial theory, it illuminates the field within which non-Indigenous struggles for political change take place. It places us in relationship with Indigenous people, albeit in a highly unequal power relationship, and reveals our politics as a particular kind of politics that derives from our position. Our politics is not coincident with all political struggles in this place and is animated by a subjective investment in becoming natural. It suggests that our political tendencies will be towards:

- The metaphorical rather than the actual
- The ethical rather than the economic
- Our status rather than the distribution of statuses
- ‘Voluntarism’ or choice in engaging the political as an act of virtue (rather than, say, as inescapable or a necessity for survival)
- Being good rather than doing good (see Macoun, this volume).

To engage for virtue’s sake is to engage to the extent to which that virtue is recognised and enhanced. This cannot ground a politics of liberation that tears down hierarchies because it is conditioned by those hierarchies and by the politics of privilege itself (only in conditions of unjust privilege can virtue and public legitimacy become the ultimate political goals). It does not allow us to ‘cross over’ and become part of, or even to politically identify ourselves with, Indigenous struggles for material and cultural survival.³

But this quote does not thereby foreclose political possibility. It illuminates the necessary existence of a fragile but shared space that exists precisely because of this political difference, and which we as settlers cannot erase. The middle thing generated in our encounter is not so much the site of resolution, but the site where settler colonial conflict itself is understood, represented and contested. It is the political interface—brought into being by our shared history—rather than the outcome of that history (for example, the distributions of resources, land and institutional recognition). The goals of political action in this shared space are not themselves necessarily shared, and may indeed be incommensurable—but the encounter of these incommensurable frameworks will nonetheless continue to constitute this middle thing. It is, as I suggest later in this chapter, a site with the potential to facilitate new forms of action.

But while this space always exists, it is often misunderstood and suppressed. In the case of settler colonial interaction, it is suppressed by the dominance of one party’s understanding of the nature of the conflict. For unlike Aristotle’s rich, settlers have the privilege *and the numbers* to concrete over the middle thing with their political preoccupations—to occupy that space and claim to be resolving the

³That is, we as settlers may be involved in these struggles, but we cannot use this to ground our political identities or ‘opt out’ of our own political history and status. All too easily, this goal of transforming our own political identities becomes the most important part of our collaborations with Indigenous people.

conflict in the interests of both parties. What is significant is not that Western settlers have their own understanding of the issues and the appropriate resolution, it is that they (mis)take this for a shared understanding and so for the middle thing. Thus, for example, the liberal settler state becomes positioned not as a settler institution that is implicated as party to the conflict, but as neutral arbiter between settlers and Indigenous peoples, and as the necessary site of colonial resolution (Alfred 1999; 2005). From a settler colonial perspective, any interaction with Indigenous societies should take place within settler political frameworks because these are already assumed to be universal. To some extent this perspective may recognise the existence of a cultural interface (Nakata 2007), but cultural difference is separated from political difference; while the former can sometimes be engaged the latter is denied. Yet, as Alfred argues, this separation is a form of violence: ‘politics matters: the imposition of Western governance structures and the denial of indigenous ones continue to have profoundly harmful effects on indigenous people. Land, culture, and government are inseparable in traditional philosophies; each depends on the others’ (Alfred 1999: 2). The middle thing is thus the result of the ongoing coexistence of two political orders in one place, the very circumstance that Western political societies see as the most impossible and undesirable of conditions. The middle thing exists *despite* settler colonial claims that it cannot; it already exposes our political stories as partial and inadequate.⁴

The Political as a Site of Change

To speak about politics as the fragile shared space that creates genuine possibilities for new pathways is to fetishise it to a degree, or at least to frame it in a particular and limited way. In a deeper, more Foucauldian sense, politics is clearly all around us, and is central to our constitution of ourselves as settler colonial societies and subjects. To frame politics as a specific place that is not reducible to the social or the economic is to engage with a specifically Western vision of the political as a site of change. This is a conscious attempt to stretch as well as critique Western traditions, finding currents and gaps that prepare us to engage better with political difference in a settler colonial context. As I suggest below, working with this tradition allows us to challenge its dominant account of politics as secondary, collapsible and driven by external goals, which facilitates the drive to colonial completion.

Not just settler colonialism itself, but our current academic understandings of settler colonialism can also evacuate the space of productive politics and leave us with a sense of colonial fatalism. In certain registers, settler colonial theory presents

⁴In fact, settler colonialism itself is a politically impossible condition on its own terms, to the extent that it is the period of overlap of two political societies in one place, and therefore must dissolve itself to bring reality into line with liberal political logic. See discussion on fantasy and colonial completion above.

interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as already determined and negated by the deeper colonial structures that bind us. This can reduce *all* politics to a function of a structural colonialism, rather than just *settler* politics (seminal settler colonial theorist Patrick Wolfe has been labelled as ‘very much a structuralist stuck in a poststructuralist world’, see Cavanagh 2012: 19). When, for example, settler colonialism is presented as a primarily economic relationship with a political and cultural superstructure, then real change must come from transformations in this economic base. The problem, as Macoun and I have argued elsewhere, is that settler colonial analysis emphasises structural continuity. Unlike Marxism accounts of capitalism, it ‘does not give an account of... a transformed future, or of the conditions for settler colonialism’s demise’ (Macoun and Strakosch 2013: 435). The only political pathway forward in this context would be to show how structural transformation is ultimately inevitable (say through the intensification of conflictual dynamics) or to represent settlers as also structurally dispossessed by settler colonial regimes (so to reposition them as political subjects struggling alongside Indigenous people for liberation).

The problem of settler political possibilities is important. How and why can non-Indigenous people engage with Indigenous people and orders at the limits of our own frameworks that are partly constituted by our current relationships with them? It is the current arrangements that allow us to substitute our politics for a shared politics, and it is this substitution that prevents these arrangements from being rearranged. Are we not trapped in an endless circle? One important response would be to emphasise the role that personal affective relationships play in exposing our political frameworks as partisan, violent and inadequate and creating change (see Barker and Battell-Lowman, this volume). Acknowledging this as crucially important, however, I pursue a different pathway, by seeking to recuperate Western notions of the political as a site of freedom. I consider Arendt’s notion of the political as a space: firstly, where genuine political judgement and action is possible; and secondly, as a site of possible new beginnings that emerge out of the interaction between irreducible human plurality. In this sense, our political actions can never be fully reduced to our material conditions.

To emphasise the existence of a suppressed ‘middle thing’ is therefore to say (perhaps controversially) that Western settlers do not need to stop being ourselves in order to engage in genuine political interaction. We do not need to ‘become Indigenous’, or to transcend our own identities. I doubt whether this is possible, and the constant attempt to construct ourselves as neutral transcendent subjects is one of the ‘settler moves to innocence’ so persuasively identified by Tuck and Yang (2012) among others. Rather, we need to challenge the aspects of our own identities which prevent us from locating ourselves as particular (Western settler) subjects, and from understanding that we are always already in relationship with Indigenous peoples. Some may argue that the universal claims and possessive dimensions of Western identity are so central that they cannot be challenged without overthrowing these identities themselves (see, for example, Moreton-Robinson on the possessive logic of white patriarchal sovereignty 2015). That is, the Western settler self will never meet an Indigenous person as that person actually is, they will only ever deal

with a fantasy. This fantasy subject is in fact the settler subject in their own primitive past, and is capable of being dispossessed in order to ground the property regimes of the present white subject. This is a strong objection, and my response is grounded in optimism that if the political interface is genuinely engaged by recuperating the promise of the political in Western thinking, other aspects of Western identity can be called into question and transformed in the process of deep political engagement.

Arendt and Colonialism

She had no choice but to think apart from traditional categories—ohne Gelande (“without bannisters”), as she used to say—if she were to succeed in bringing to light an evil that was unknown and could not have been known within the tradition (Kohn 2005: xiii).

The writing of Hannah Arendt is not a natural place to look for decolonising resources. She is increasingly criticised for her particular validation of settler colonialism, as well as for her general endorsement of the universal value of the Western political tradition (Moses 2011, 2013; Lederman 2016). While Arendt challenges *imperialism* (which she understands to be the domination of one human society by another human society), she often endorses *colonialism* (which is framed as one human society’s occupation of space held by another, less than human society). This, of course, is a version of the long-term mainstream justification for colonialism; Arendt gives it a particular political inflection by defining humanness in terms of political action and judgment. For her, such action and judgment, which arise between human beings rather than in isolation, are enabled by a secure state that creates a vibrant public sphere. Where societies do not have this sort of state, Arendt believes, they do not have the possibility and habit of acting politically and thus in a fully human way. The extension of a state through colonialism could therefore be seen as a project of progress and improvement (again, in line with wider settler colonial narratives).

This argument about humanness and political action, it should be added, was turned against multiple groups. At points Arendt is critical of what she saw as the Jewish people’s failure to judge and act appropriately during the Holocaust, and linked this to their long history of being stateless (Arendt 1963). On the other hand, she is also critical of Israel’s behaviour as a state; for example, she argues that during the trial of Eichmann the Israeli state sought revenge rather than the exercise of appropriate public judgment. Nonetheless, as Lederman (2016) has recently pointed out, she does not contest the right of Israel to establish itself on Palestinian land, and uses a version of the common argument that Jews ‘made the desert bloom’ by mixing their labour effectively with it. She presents many societies, including Palestinian and African societies, as dominated by nature and therefore not fully human in their failure to create a human world. Whether Arendt’s position

on settler colonialism negates the possibility of working with other aspects of her thinking is debatable—and is not dissimilar to the deeper question of the value of working with the broader Western political theory tradition given its settler colonial effects.

Arendt is therefore an interesting figure in the Western political theoretical tradition to the extent that she is both within and outside it. She endorses the basic categories of Western political thought—especially notions of republicanism, judgment and freedom—and remains convinced of the value of the modern Western political project (Benhabib 2003). However, she offers a profound critique of this tradition, and its contemporary derailments. Writing in the wake of the Jewish Holocaust, she suggests that current ways of thinking are unable to explain this catastrophe, and in fact actively contributed to it. She therefore criticises and reconceptualises the elements of the Western tradition that have sustained violent political orders. This approach seems to me to resonate with our Anglophone settler colonial contexts, and with the feeling that our current political frameworks are not adequate. While appearing to function as sites of resistance and debate they fail to transform stubbornly persistent injustices. Her contribution is her insistence that we must rethink the Western tradition when in the presence of intolerable political realities rather than iron over these realities in its name.

Colonial Completion and the End of Politics

Arendt's writings on the status of politics arose out of her previous analysis of totalitarianism, which she felt had failed to account for latent totalitarianism of Marxist thought itself (Arendt 1951). Published posthumously as 'The Promise of Politics' (2005), this second work argues that Marxism pushed to its logical conclusion the contempt of politics inherent in previous Western thinking.

Plato initiated this contempt by seeking to place political arrangements in the service of higher philosophical truths. In his city-state ruled by philosopher kings, politics was tolerated to the extent that it was necessary to maintain life and facilitate the realm of philosophy (Arendt 2005: 5–39). However, it should always be subordinate to this realm, and structured according to philosophical principles rather than according to its own immanent logics:

Thus our tradition of political philosophy, unhappily and fatefully, and from its very beginning, has deprived political affairs, that is, those activities concerning the common public realm that comes into being wherever men live together, of all dignity of their own. In Aristotelian terms, politics is a means to an end; it has no end in and by itself. More than that, the proper end of politics is in a way its opposite, namely, nonparticipation in political affairs (Arendt 2005: 82–83).

The outlines of this attitude to politics have remained intact throughout the centuries because of the 'insulation shown by our tradition from its beginning against all political experiences that did not fit into its framework' (2005: 47). However, to

the extent that the proper aim of politics was to facilitate and reflect non-political philosophical truths, the post-Platonic tradition saw it as a contemptible but permanent feature of human life.

Arendt argues that Marx consummates this tradition by dispensing with politics altogether. Again, politics is put in the service of an ideal that lies beyond itself. However, in reaching this ideal the political will exhaust itself and release us into a post-political world where we can concern ourselves with “the administration of things” rather than the negotiation of our relationships. Politics is not just secondary, it is temporary and indicates the presence of an undesirable state. If there is politics, there is a problem; its presence means we have not reached our goals. In Marxism, ‘permanence [of the public realm] is seen as an obstacle by which the force of development, which in its most elementary form is the development of man’s productive capacities, is constantly arrested and hindered’ (2005: 89–90).

In the post-Marxist Western world, politics has been put in the service of apolitical ideals and is tolerated only to the extent that it drives us towards these ideals. By presenting politics as a means to an end, we justify all manner of violence and harm in our political present in the name of ending politics once and for all. This reduction of politics to an instrumental realm leads directly to totalitarianism and genocide. Significantly, it means we have also lost the space to challenge these violent political orders. In understanding politics as instrumental and as necessarily working towards predetermined goals, we evacuate the space of *true* politics—the only space where we can judge and resist totalitarianism. True politics occurs in the always unpredictable and spontaneous interaction between humans in their irreducible differences. It cannot know its ends in advance, or it is rendered apolitical and even antipolitical. True politics is not there to achieve human freedom, it *is* human freedom:

the only standards of judgment with any degree of dependability are in no sense handed down from above but emerge from human plurality, *the* condition of politics. Political judgment is not a matter of knowledge, pseudoknowledge, or speculative thought. It does not eliminate risk but affirms human freedom and the world that free people share with one another. Or rather, it establishes the *reality* of human freedom in a common world (Kohn 2005: xi)

Thus, we as Western subjects arrive in the present with a deep assumption that the end of politics is the end of politics. That is, the purpose of politics is to close itself down once and for all, to ground the polity definitively and release us finally into the ‘administration of things’.

These arguments are fascinating in themselves, and say a great deal that is relevant to our contemporary Western world where ‘politics’ is an increasingly negative word. However, I raise them here because they resonate in a particularly powerful way with our approach to settler-Indigenous issues in Australia and other settler colonial contexts. Resonating with Arendt’s account of Western politics, the goal of settler colonialism lies beyond itself—to progress, to improve, to possess. This has justified all kinds of violence, depredation and dispossession in the name of a higher goal. More significantly for this paper, the goal of contemporary settler

colonial *politics* also lies beyond itself, in the desire to close down political relations between Indigenous and settler selves once and for all. As Macoun and I argue elsewhere:

The transformative event is positioned as part of an inevitable and inescapable trajectory (although it may be consistently deferred or delayed). In this way, the eventual legitimacy and stability of the settler-colonial project is always-already assumed (2012).

At one level, we can see the Platonic distrust of politics in the Australian tendency to deal with settler-Indigenous issues in the policy register—we would rather ‘administer things’ than negotiate relationships. This tendency has been amplified in recent decades; ongoing policy failures have led to increasingly technical performance measurement frameworks such as Close the Gap and to constant criticism of the ways political imperatives derail ‘evidence based policy’ (Patridge 2013).

At a deeper level, settler colonial frameworks tend to imagine politics as at best a temporary necessity to achieve a settled, apolitical future. We can see our contemporary political debates in terms of two approaches to politics—both of which are laden with distrust. In his development of Arendt’s argument regarding the status of politics, French thinker Jacques Ranciere (1992) identifies these moves as ‘the promise’ and ‘the anti-promise’. In the progressive register, politics is seen as a necessary step towards resolving Indigenous-settler issues once and for all. This is the act of the promise: a declaration that we will pursue a higher ideal and for this reason only will launch ourselves into politics in the present. This promise is dangerous, ‘[f]or the paradox of the undertaking is that hauling politics onto the solid ground of knowledge and courage entails a return to the isles of refoundation; it means crossing the sea once more and surrendering the shepherds’ resurrected city to the whims of tides and mariners’ (Ranciere 1992: 2). In the name of a final (re)foundation, we undertake to venture into the waters of politics and trust our political leaders to carry us safely to the other side.

Progressive non-Indigenous perspectives, while embracing political processes such as reconciliation, apology or treaty, often implicitly do so in the name of ending politics and creating a unified political community. Our nation-state, they argue, was founded illegitimately and without recognition of Indigenous existence. This existence must now be recognised and ‘dealt with’ so that the foundation can be complete and we can move forward as an inclusive Australian nation. There is a sense here of an incomplete project—the political work of foundation was begun but never completed. We stopped the work of politics before it had truly completed itself and become unnecessary. Thus in Rudd’s 2007 apology to the Stolen Generations:

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future ... For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written ... We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

By apologising we enter into a completely new phase. We are released from a past that has captured us in the present and finally enter into a delayed and non-colonial

future ('excess is the essence of the promise', Ranciere 1992: 5). Thus the progressive promise endorses the vision of the proper role of politics as completing itself and erasing the need for ongoing political relationship.

The second mode has become more salient in the disillusioned 21st century world. This is the anti-promise, based on an assumption that 'the original evil was the promise itself: the gesture which propels the telos of community, whose splintered parts rain back down like murderous stones' (Ranciere 1992: 5). The anti-promise is the determination never to re-enter the political world and risk the fracturing of unity in the uncertainty and divisions of politics. This is reflected in the conservative position on settler-Indigenous conflict. From this position, such conflict has been resolved in the past, leading to a united nation and state that is already fully legitimated. Politics has done its work, and the reopening of political discussions can only *create* politics where there was none before. This unleashing of politics is undesirable. The Howard government, for example, in responding to the report of Reconciliation Australia (and effectively closing down the reconciliation process) argued that '[t]he Council's draft legislation would impose a potentially divisive, protracted (at least 12 years) and inconclusive process on the nation... rather than offering closure, pursuit of a treaty would be a recipe for ongoing disputation and litigation' (Commonwealth 2002: 19). Again, '[t]he Government's position on a treaty is that such a legally enforceable instrument, as between sovereign states, would be divisive, would undermine the concept of a single Australian nation, would create legal uncertainty and future disputation' (Commonwealth 2002: 23). Here politics creates indefinite uncertainty where there is already closure. We are already in the era of the administration of things and should remain there. At its worst, the return of politics brings the prospect of sovereign division, even the spectre of sovereign collapse. We see again how politics is positioned as a problematic state; this is reflected in the Howard government's constant labelling of ATSIC as 'politicised' and 'too little concerned with delivering real outcomes for indigenous people' (Howard and Vanstone 2004).

Conclusion

What possibilities are opened up if we join Arendt in recuperating the positive dimensions of politics? Arendt herself did not deny the difficulty of politics to the extent that it forces us to exercise our judgment as mature human beings. We cannot rely on preformed goals or authorities, for 'politics is not like the nursery' (1963). In a settler colonial context, this means deciding to live with our anxieties rather than seeking to resolve them through colonial completion. Only with a much more profound tolerance of (or even appreciation for) uncertainty can we truly enter upon a shared and truly political negotiation of pathways forward, that Arendt says must be grounded in human freedom, and the outcomes of which can never be known in advance.

However, in return for this tolerance we access a genuine site of change, to the extent that the “miracle” of political action is *ontologically* rooted in humankind, not as a unique species but as a plurality of unique beginnings’ (Kohn xxxiii). It is in the interaction between this plurality that new possibilities emerge, which we could never have imagined in isolation. Settler colonialism cannot imagine its own end, though it continually fantasises about it. We know then that its transformation can only come from beyond itself—we ourselves sense that we have exhausted the utility of unilateral, predetermined goals that will orient us in the ‘right’ direction. While it sounds truistic, settler colonialism cannot create post-settler colonial futures. Politics offers us a way to engage as ourselves, but beyond ourselves.

To seek to act in the shared space of politics (the middle thing) is not to *share* our politics. Such an engagement, it is worth emphasising once more, cannot presume commensurability between settler and Indigenous political frameworks, desires and goals. As Tuck and Yang (2012: 28–36) argue:

the opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common... The answers will not emerge from friendly understanding, and indeed require a dangerous understanding of uncommonality that un-coalesces coalition politics - moves that may feel very unfriendly. But we will find out the answers as we get there... The Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone - these are the unwritten possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability.

But to be part of this process of mutual imagination, we as settlers must first give up the fundamental desire to attach these futures to the project of legitimising our current privileges once and for all.

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