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Talking About the Voice: Everyday Political Talk About Indigenous Constitutional Recognition

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In 2023, Australians went to the polls to vote on a proposal to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national constitution through the creation of an advisory body called the Voice. The proposal was soundly defeated, raising questions about the possibility of reconciliation and Indigenous recognition. While there have been many attempts to explain the outcome, this article takes an interpersonal perspective focusing on voters' experiences of talking about the Voice. Our aim is to contribute to studies of everyday political talk in contexts of political disagreement, considering the affective dynamics of settler colonialism. We suggest that the ability to talk constructively about the ongoing impacts of colonization and Indigenous recognition, both of which are fundamental to the broader project of reconciliation and truth telling, will require attention to questions of everyday listening in the context of settler-Indigenous relationships.

Keywords: affect, political talk, settler-colonization, referendum

In 2023, Australians went to the polls to vote on a proposal to alter the constitution to recognize the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have sought self-determination and political recognition from the earliest days of colonization. The proposed Voice to Parliament, a constitutionally enshrined body with the power to make representations to government and parliament in relation to issues affecting First Nations people, can be located within this ongoing political struggle. As Emma Gavin explains, the body as outlined in the referendum sought to "give [Aboriginal] communities a Voice to Parliament and Government, where [they could] offer independent advice" (Gavin, 2023, p. 39). Through the establishment of a consultative process, the Voice would have provided a forum for the government to formally consider Indigenous perspectives and knowledges as part of its decision-making process. While the idea of a Voice suggests a politics of

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speech, it was more fundamentally a proposal to address First Nations' "endemic, generational and structural problem of *not being heard*" (Davis, 2023, p. 9; emphasis in original).

Despite early indications of support for the Voice, the proposal was ultimately rejected by the Australian people, with over 60% voting no and with all states and territories (except for Australian Capital Territory) recording a majority no vote. There has been much speculation as to why the Voice referendum failed and what it means for Indigenous politics. In this article, we take up just one small aspect of this discussion: Australians' "everyday" experiences of talking about the Voice. While there were many calls for "constructive" conversation during the referendum, this research confirms that for many, talking about the Voice was unproductive, bitter, and shallow (Reddan, 2023).

While such communicative failures are hardly unique to this democratic event, we consider here the ways in which the dynamics of settler-colonialism might be relevant to individuals' experiences. In doing so, we recognize existing work on the challenge of everyday talk about race and racism (Eliasoph, 1999; Gibson, 2022; Patel & Connelley, 2019; Walsh, 2007) and seek to build on this work in considering the conversations that sustain the settler-colonial project. We do not suggest the affective dynamics of settler-colonialism were the sole driver of individuals' experiences of talk during the Voice referendum, nor that they explain the referendum outcome. What we are suggesting, however, is that a better understanding of these affective dynamics will be important in fostering constructive conversations about the ongoing impacts of colonialism and, crucially, that the communicative experiences of Indigenous Australians are shaped by the need to manage them.

We begin with some background to the referendum and the Voice proposal before positioning this study with respect to contemporary explorations of everyday talk in the context of political division. We then consider the dynamics of settler-colonialism, highlighting the affective challenge of talk about Indigenous recognition in the Australian context. Responding to these dynamics, we highlight how "moves to innocence" shaped both the yes and no campaigns, with both invoking and navigating discourses of racism. We then consider the experiences of 27 people from the Hunter region of New South Wales. The main center of the region, the city of Newcastle, was a national outlier in its orientation toward yes in the referendum, and this has shaped our results, as we discuss further below. We nevertheless find there is much to be gained from an extended investigation of individuals' experiences of talk in this context. Critically, we aim to contribute to an understanding of "good white" subjectivities (Slater, 2019b). We close with a reflection on the implications of this research for possibilities of talking about Indigenous recognition.

Scene Setting: The Uluru Statement and the Australian Political System

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was first shared in 2017 at the National Constitutional Convention of 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By invoking *Makarrata: The Coming Together After a Struggle,* the statement had a purpose to pursue meaningful material acknowledgment of the contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to social and political life (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017). As such, the creation of a Voice to Parliament and constitutional

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recognition were intended as the first steps in a process toward creating an "enduring legacy . . . of institutional recognition" beyond symbolic acknowledgment (Vromen et al., 2025, p. 3).

The significance of a constitutionally mandated "voice" for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should not be understated. Embedding the provision for this body within the constitution sought to provide protection, as it ensures it is not easily overturned by a law in parliament. For a constitutional referendum to pass, it requires a double majority.[1] The high threshold associated with successful referendums ensures greater legitimacy for the decision, as it signals popular consent and guarantees the proposed amendments reflect the will of the people. Where First Nations recognition is concerned, historical precedents, including the abolishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission (ATSIC) in 2005, demonstrate the importance of representative safeguarding for meaningful action. In addition, the fragility of substantive bodies, such as ATSIC, coupled with Australia's slow and piecemeal progress on Indigenous rights recognition, illustrates the challenges associated with creating space for political conversations that center the substantive engagement of First Nations peoples (Stanford & Evans, 2024, p. 4).

Everyday Political Talk in Contexts of Disagreement

This study investigates everyday political talk, the "spontaneous, unstructured, face-to-face conversation between citizens that deals with political matters" (Conover & Miller, 2018, p. 379). Such talk has been understood to be incidental, ephemeral, and typically unintentional, but also deeply relational, motivated more by social than political ends. Political talk is widely seen as fundamental to democratic life, promoting tolerance and civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2002) and enabling political sensemaking; as a precursor to political agency (Walsh, 2004); and as an important part of the deliberative democratic system (Mansbridge, 1999). Although it has been relatively underresearched, attention has turned to how much we discuss politics (Settle & Carson, 2019), why, where, and with whom (Conover & Miller, 2018; Eveland et al., 2011; Morey & Yamamoto, 2019; Morey et al., 2012; Mutz, 2006), as well as the quality and impacts of political conversations for individuals and democracy (Conover & Searing, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Grill, 2020; Wells et al., 2017). A particular concern we take up here is the challenge of political talk in contexts of disagreement.

Set against a backdrop of political volatility and concerns about political polarization and social disintegration, there has been increased focus on everyday talk in contexts of disagreement. Given the democratic significance of talk, particularly cross-cutting talk (Mutz, 2006), understanding when and how individuals encounter political difference and how it is managed has become a key concern (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006; Wells et al., 2017). Studies focusing on the relationality of political talk in the context of intimate relationships highlight its complexity. While individuals may be less likely to encounter disagreement with close ties, there is also evidence to suggest intimates are more likely to be understanding and accepting (Conover et al., 2002). Further, individuals are less likely to seek to avoid political disagreement in the context of intimate relationships (Morey et al., 2012). Recent studies in the context of Brexit (Davies, 2021) highlight the need for close attention to context and the

[1] A referendum passes when there is a double majority. A double majority is present when more than half of voters from around Australia vote yes and when more than half of voters in at least four states vote yes.

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complex ways in which individuals leverage intimate knowledge to balance a need for political expression with relationship maintenance.

Approaching political talk as a social achievement, Coleman (2021) highlights the ways in which individuals are positioned within political conversations, feeling potentially "demeaned, constrained and insulted, or affirmed, engaged and buoyed by being positioned within a communicative order" (p. 91). Focusing on the imbrication of everyday talk and public discourse highlights the ways in which individuals navigate political and interpersonal orders, taking up, modifying, or rejecting publicly circulating scripts. In the context of morally charged debate, there is often the additional need to manage/resist stigmatized subject positions (Revers & Coleman, 2025). Wells et al. (2017) similarly highlight connections between public and intimate discourse, revealing how historic divisions and various aspects of identity can become salient in the context of specific political debate. While individuals draw on various techniques for managing difference, political alienation can result in a closing down of talk or even the disintegration of relationships.

The Voice referendum is also significant for touching on questions of race. Taboos on the discussion of race, and accusations of racism, have been well-documented (DiAngelo, 2018; Van Dijk, 1992; Walsh, 2007). As Eliasoph (1999) notes, silence on matters of race is something people work hard to achieve, which for those who wish to challenge racist talk can result in a "twisted" silence. Similarly, Walsh (2007) notes that discussions about race are particularly challenging where they center on the perpetuation of inequality. For members of racially marginalized groups, talk about race is not only challenging but also unproductive (Walsh, 2007, p. 74). Studies of talk about race have drawn attention to the ways in which speakers avoid or manage accusations of racism, including dismissing antiracist positions as elite, pernicious, and discriminatory (Augoustinos & Every, 2010). While accusations of racism remain rare, recent research suggests a willingness to adopt racist identities ironically, positioning the racist as the victim of dismissive elites who disregard the concerns of "ordinary" citizens (Gibson, 2022).

Referendums, as political events, have been shown to produce political identities, tapping into deep, but often veiled, feelings, values, and norms (Hobolt et al., 2021; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023). Where race and racism are pertinent, as in the 2016 Brexit referendum, carefully coded discourses have the potential to activate latent racialized structures of feeling (Virdee & McGeever, 2019). This study provides an opportunity to build on this research to consider how emotionally charged political issues like race intersect with the affective dynamics of a settler-colonial society.

The Affective Dynamics of Settler-Colonialism and the Voice Campaigns

We contextualize our analysis of everyday talk about the Voice by considering the affective logic of settler-colonization, understood as an ongoing process of eliminating Indigenous peoples (Wolf, 2006). As Moreton-Robinson (2015) has argued, settler-colonialism has a possessive logic in which the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples provides a foundation for White possession. It is a logic that must be constantly maintained, not least through the emotional investments of settlers. Settler-colonialism, as Slater (2019b) has argued, is "a training of the heart," a process of learning to manage collective feelings of guilt, fear, and vulnerability particularly in the face of Indigenous claims to sovereignty (p. 818; see also Macoun, 2016; Maddison, 2011; Slater, 2020). While a primary colonial impulse is collective denial or ignorance, the

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past 30 years in Australia have seen some reckoning with histories of colonial violence that have mobilized affect in the context of national politics.

The affective dynamics of settler-colonialism are stirred by Indigenous demands for recognition. In the face of feelings of unease and illegitimacy, settlers adopt "strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all," described as "moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). It is possible to trace such moves across both progressive and conservative political campaigns. Johnston (2022) considers politically conservative moves to innocence in the context of debates about the celebration of Australia's national day on January 26 (the date marking British invasion). For conservatives, recommitment to national unity, a celebration of Western values, and positioning Aboriginal peoples as the grateful beneficiaries of White achievement are evident. This positioning taps into deeply held notions about Indigenous "authenticity," which is threatened by "inauthentic" (city-dwelling) Aboriginal "elites."

From a progressive perspective, moves to innocence can take the form of excessive worrying about Indigenous issues. Slater (2019a, 2019b) traces the emergence of a form of settler subjectivity characterized by the acknowledgment of historic injustice, goodwill toward Indigenous peoples, and "a broad sentiment of concern that is almost mainstream" (Slater, 2019a, p. 8). "Good" White people, she argues, care deeply about colonial injustice and seek to improve things for Indigenous peoples. In reckoning with colonial injustice, they have learned to worry about Indigenous peoples, embracing a virtuous anxiety. They imagine themselves (ourselves) to be "mobilising the goodwill of other non-Indigenous people," sharing knowledge, making allies, and atoning for historic injustice (Macoun, 2016, p. 85). Good White people conceive of racism as a characteristic of "bad white people" (often socioeconomically marginalized) who "with their racist views and thoughtlessness . . . continue to perpetuate racism and injustice in 'our' progressive society" (Slater, 2019a, p. 269).

These affective dynamics shaped the yes and no campaigns in the Voice referendum. Both campaigns were addressed to settler Australians (97% of registered voters),[2] reinforcing settler authority through competing visions of national unity (Tout et al., 2024). The no campaign centered on fantasies of post-racial national unity. Its most powerful campaign slogan, "Vote No to the Voice of Division," positioned the Voice as a move to divide the country by race, a proposal at odds with national ideals of equality. Of course, it is a unity that reinforces settler sovereignty and authority, challenging (inauthentic, urban) Aboriginals' moves to take Australia from its citizens. It was a vision that appealed to many voters who cited concern about racial division as a motivation for voting no (Biddle et al., 2023).

While accusing the yes campaign of racism, the no campaign sought to position no voters as victims of the yes side's relentless allegations of racism. Discursively, this move leverages the stigma of racism for communicative gain (Chouliaraki, 2024), leaving the no campaign free to make and counter accusations of racism that the yes campaign was unable to address (Morris, 2024, p. 119). Further, claims about the riskiness of the yes position—that it would open the door to Indigenous advantage and settler

[2] Australia operates under a compulsory preferential voting system. However, it is the responsibility of individuals to enroll to vote when they turn 18; it is not automatic.

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dispossession—widely circulated, and yet, in its imagery, the no campaign appealed to notions of "authentic" Indigeneity that to visually exclude urban ("non-authentic") Aboriginal peoples from the national story (Elder, 2007, p. 163). Such images deflect charges of racism, appealing to notions of "fairness" while reinforcing a positive national self-image.

The no campaign also appealed to settler ignorance. The slogan "If you don't know, vote No," which was impactful (Carson et al., 2024, p. 55), sanctioned disengagement and "not knowing" as a move to innocence (Slater, 2020). While much less present in the media (Carson et al., 2024), the progressive no campaign made the case that the Voice was symbolic and would not lead to meaningful change.

The yes campaign similarly sought to navigate settler discomfort, balancing an appeal to past injustice without evoking feelings of guilt (Morris, 2024, p. 191). Situating the Voice with reference to historic struggles for justice, yes messaging presented the referendum as a significant moment in Australia's history. Where the no campaign positioned the Voice as a threat to national unity, yes presented unity as emerging through the Voice (Tout et al., 2024). Yes centered voter emotions, harnessing feelings of hope (Morris, 2024, p. 212) and presenting yes as a grassroots campaign (Carson et al., 2024, p. 24). "Walk for Yes" rallies brought an eventfulness to the campaign as well as the potential for collective feeling.

Everyday conversations played a key role in the yes campaign, with various groups publishing conversation guides, which of itself indicates the extent to which uncomfortable conversations were anticipated (see GetUp, 2023; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, 2023; Reconciliation Australia, 2023). Supporters were urged to "spark thousands of conversations," to "bring as many Australians as possible with us" (Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition, 2023, p. 2). They were encouraged to "speak from the heart," sharing their personal stories and making emotional connections. Conversations "can sometimes be challenging, but they can also be surprising, respectful, and affirming" (Reconciliation Australia, 2023, p. 1). Leaning into the difficulty, listening and acknowledging others' values, was presented as a means by which to achieve national unity. In other words, everyday conversations were presented within the context of the yes campaign as key to national transformation; creating an "open space for people to reflect, ask questions and air their concerns will mean that we're making this journey positive and unifying, which is exactly how it will feel when Australia votes Yes" (Reconciliation Australia, 2023, p. 1). However, for many, the reality was more complex.

Talking About the Voice

To gain some insight into the experiences of everyday political talk about the Voice, we spoke to 27 voters in the NSW Hunter region, primarily in the city of Newcastle. It is worth noting that Newcastle was the only nonmetropolitan city to return a yes vote in the referendum (53.5% yes). However, surrounding rural electorates returned a clear no vote. With a strong trades union history and a sympathetic media, Newcastle has long been active in Indigenous rights. Historian John Maynard reveals that non-Indigenous residents of Newcastle from the 1920s onward had a great deal of contact with and knowledge of the circumstances of Aboriginal peoples due to shared experiences of town camps during the Great Depression (Maynard, 2007, pp. 124–125). This history and its legacy make the Hunter region an instructive place to situate a case study about the Voice. Differences between the urban and regional votes and between

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the national result and the result in the city of Newcastle provide a distinctive backdrop for studying talk during the referendum. Local opinion climates in the context of a highly emotive national debate raise questions about complex silencing effects, particularly in the context of intimate and family relationships (Matthes et al., 2018).

Interviewees were recruited through several channels including social media, e-mail networks, and word of mouth. Twenty-seven long-form semistructured interviews were conducted during, and in the weeks following, the referendum. While it was our intention to capture diverse experiences, we make no claims that our sample is representative. We interviewed 17 women and 10 men, the majority of whom were university-educated, with five having worked with Indigenous communities. Two interviewees identified as having a migrant background, and six identified as First Nations peoples. Most of our interviewees voted yes (n = 23), and indeed we would suggest they were strongly in support of the yes position. Our results must necessarily be taken as suggestive and be understood as the beginning of an exploration into the dynamics of conversation about Indigenous recognition, not an end point. Given our interest in settler-colonial dynamics of affect, an oversampling of yes voters provides an opportunity to contribute to understanding progressive settler responses to Indigenous claims for recognition (Slater, 2019b). Note that pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Confirming existing research (Reddan, 2023), the contributors to our study felt the quality of public conversation about the Voice was poor. In describing cross-cutting conversations, they used terms like "shallow," "bitter," "simplistic," "disparaging," "confrontational," "frustrating," and "destructive." On both sides, there was a sense of risk attached to talking about the Voice—"It's too volatile to have those conversations" (yes voter), "I feel like the Voice was taboo . . . it was almost like I had to go underground to find where it was safe" (no voter). Politicians and the media were seen as setting a tone:

> There's a lot of vitriol, and the way people were talking to each other was actually more destructive, I think, than the question being asked . . . I started to witness in society, or just in the spaces where I was, people feeling they had a green light to say some nasty things. (yes voter)

Misinformation and the challenge of heightened emotions were themes for interviewees on both sides: "I didn't feel safe talking about it, and I believe the news made that so . . . Our news can be very biased. I hate it with a passion" (yes voter).

Yes and No Identities: Values and the Stigma of Racism

Our research confirms the potential for referendums, as affectively charged political events, to produce political identities. As Scott (30s, designer) put it, "It's easy not to care about politics day to day . . . Someone voting Liberal at the last election wouldn't have been accused of being a racist for doing so." In contrast, the Voice "says more than other things we normally vote on." Interviewees strongly identified with their yes/no positions, articulating their identity with reference to their biography and values. Scott described himself as "extremely passionate" about human rights and as having "strong feelings" about the Voice. For him, advocating for yes was critical: "I still feel like yes is the moral ground . . . [and] talking

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about it is the moral thing to do." For Jeremy (30s, IT worker), the referendum was a political turning point. Having had very negative feelings about formal politics—"They just berate and bully each other, and I fucking hate it," he described the referendum as a "momentous chance for actual positive change." He keenly wanted to live in a country "that I could call my own where its past isn't shame, and shame fucking sucks." Jeremy's optimism for a future free of shame was linked to his personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. The experience of shame and a desire to move beyond it in his family and, by extension, in the nation made talking about the Voice imperative for Jeremy.

Tanya (30s, administrator) emphasized her rural identity, which is reflected in notions of political authenticity and proximity to Indigenous people. Having grown up in a "tight knit" community where there was no "them and us," she felt well-placed to understand what Aboriginal people wanted in relation to the Voice. Distinguishing her position from the "awful lot of 'nos' that voted based on a disregard for Indigenous people," she emphasized her conversations with Aboriginal people, concluding that she "respected that it [the Voice] was going to affect them, and they didn't want the vote to happen." Kath (40s, teacher), an Indigenous woman, described her no stance in spiritual terms: "My spirit is like, no, that's just not meant for me in this lifetime. So for me, it's spiritual." At the same time, she was conscious of her political marginalization and experience of stigmatization during the pandemic when she refused vaccination. Nathan (forties, local government), an Indigenous no campaigner, described himself as a "reluctant politician" who will "jump on the soap box" if no one else will. Describing himself as right-leaning politically, he seeks to represent a perspective that he sees as marginalized.

These examples point to just some of the connections among values, identities, and yes/no positions. Also relevant were things like religious affiliation, childhood experiences, migrant identities, political investments, and relationships. In positioning themselves, many interviewees—mostly those on the yes side—focused on the moral divide between yes and conservative no positions. Ramesh (70s, engineer), a migrant from Sri Lanka, feels a connection with Indigenous peoples through a shared experience of oppression. While he is generally politically active, he enjoyed supporting the yes campaign because "I'm not doing it for [a] party anymore; I'm doing it for an idea." However, he found the campaign emotionally challenging, surfacing Australians' failure to empathize with Aboriginal people. In attempting to speak with no-voting friends and colleagues, he found "some anti-Aboriginal feeling is there in the community, which . . . I find it very difficult to relate to." Claire (50s, librarian) felt incredibly strongly about the Voice, to the point where she "did notice [she] had this really awful tendency to look at people in the street and categorize them as yes or no voters." Claire was particularly confronted by an initial interaction with her husband:

> I was watching the news with my husband, and he immediately came out with a fairly typical comment, which I actually can't remember what it was, but I remembered that it shut me down. I didn't feel like I had enough information to be able to contradict what he said and actually put a case for why I would be voting yes . . . but not wanting to discuss it out loud with my husband in case we disagreed on something that's so important. It just feels like a fundamental human [sic], and how can you not vote for that?

Claire's certainty and strength of feeling about the Voice, which contrast with her more usual equivocation on political matters, were common themes among interviewees. However, despite Claire's

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certainty, feelings of doubt and the inability to justify her position loomed large. Her commitment to the yes position prevented her from engaging with information, particularly the official yes campaign materials. Fearing that "the yes case was not strong . . . I avoided it completely. I've just, I've made up my mind. Don't confuse me with facts. I'm as bad as other people."

In a similar vein, Sarah (60s, full-time carer) felt unusually certain about her yes position. She described herself as "very much a yes person" who joined yes groups and "never shut up" during the referendum. While she is generally politically engaged and active online (as a full-time carer, she is housebound), she can feel overwhelmed by political complexity. She contrasted her certainty about the Voice with her lack of certainty about the conflict in Gaza. While in relation to the latter conflict, "it's possible for two things to be true at once," she felt certain on the Voice, even though she is conscious of having relatively little connection with Aboriginal people and of feeling "strongly about something that really has not a lot to do with me."

Also striking were interviewees' reflections on the mood of the referendum. Political mood states can play a key role in shaping individual experience and social reality (Coleman, 2022). For many of those supporting yes, there was a mood of optimism, a feeling that this was the moment when justice could be realized. For Jason (70s, architect), the morality of the yes position was bound up with a mood of optimism. Feeling "immense rage" at the injustices of colonization, he felt that people were "waking up to Australia's history." Originally intending to vote no, Jason was convinced by a conversation with a friend to change his vote. What persuaded him was not an argument, but "the vibe" of the yes vote, the feeling "that most of Australia wanted a change, the beat feeling that something is right . . . the feeling that saying yes was far more powerful than saying no." In line with the ambition of the yes campaign, Deborah (40s, academic), who is normally not politically engaged, but who has a close affinity with Indigenous people and issues, described the yes position as a "movement" that she was very keen to be a part of. She "was wearing the badges and the sticker on the car and the sign out the front of the house," feeling passionate about the movement: "I was glass half full and overflowing, this is all going to create change."

For those on the no side, in contrast, there was an awareness of stigma, a sense of being judged as "racist." Nathan (40s, local government), an Indigenous no campaigner, was very conscious of being judged as a "bad person, not enlightened," and he "felt the pressure of being out there for the no." When campaigning,

> I put the shirt on and within 10 seconds I've got someone screaming abuse at me . . . and it wasn't anything meaningful; it was just "you're a dickhead, you're a racist, you're stupid," but there was no substance to the argument at all.

Similarly, Tanya (30s, administrator), a no voter, reflected,

> God forbid if I'd walked around with a no shirt on. Everyone was going around with yes badges and yes shirts and their signs and everything. But if I did that, I felt like I'd have someone come up and tear it off me.

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Tanya felt barraged by yes advertising in Newcastle, where she worked, and on social media, and she heard little advocacy for the no position. As she puts it, "It felt wrong to be no."

Kath, who felt aligned with no, was also aware of the opprobrium attached to that position. She was very conscious of the moral dynamics, particularly when "the lefty woke mob fall into that self-righteous indignation . . . that binary of yes/no—yes is good; no is bad. Yes is morally right; no is racist and morally wrong." She rejects the binary and argues there are "a bundle of possibilities as to why someone might vote a certain way." However, she also sees the "woke" yes vote as disingenuous and annoying, a move to deny racism and an attempt to co-opt her voice: "How can you speak on behalf of me and my country when you don't know that relationship?" Although Kath was conscious of the shame around the no position, she positioned herself outside that dynamic. As she put it, "What are you going to do? Say to my face that I'm a racist?" In spite of a degree of confidence to express her view, particularly among supportive colleagues, she still experiences doing so as a challenge: "My body reacts, so even though my head was going 'It's okay to speak in front of these people,' my heart pounds, I feel like I'm going to faint and get sweaty and shaky."

As these examples illustrate, yes and no positions were taken up as identities tied to individuals' political and social positionings. These identities were less about information and political argument and more about values, feelings, and biography. Importantly, we see evidence of a moral binary, with both sides navigating claims and feelings relating to racism, authenticity, shame, and justice. Most described the campaign as highly emotional, and four interviewees cried while recalling the period. Our data suggest that affective investments in the referendum played a role in shaping individuals' information gathering and engagement. While the strength and certainty of contributors' views are clearly not representative (indeed, 42.0% of those indicating in January 2023 they would have voted yes ended up voting no; Biddle et al., 2023), they provide an opportunity to explore how these political investments shape everyday political talk.

On (Not) Talking Across the Divide

Echoing existing research (Reddan, 2023), many contributors to this study described themselves as occupying (or, in some cases, seeking out) a political "bubble" during the referendum. Faye (40s, arts administrator) felt sure that nobody she knew or felt close to would have voted no, with the exception of some members of her family. Everybody she spoke to was part of "the bubble, my bubble" of unequivocal yes voters. Sarah was similarly conscious of her political bubble, but as something she actively sought out. Her "positive bubble" felt affirming, and she was conscious she does not "gain anything by going out of those spaces." She noted, as did several others, that "people who agree with me are very vocal about agreeing with me, but people who disagree with me don't say anything at all."

In addition to homogenous networks, interviewees identified several barriers to effective talk about the Voice. For Jodie (60s, social worker), an Aboriginal woman and member of the stolen generations, the need to manage the "white fragility that exists in this country" was "bloody exhausting." Highly active during the referendum, Jodie repeatedly encountered non-Indigenous people who actively sought to avoid talk. As Jodie put it, "They don't know what to say, and so they remain silent." Katrina (20s, student) reflected on the translational challenge of communication with non-Aboriginal Australians: "Dad always said that if you talk to Munanga (White people) you should be polite. If they don't understand,

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make them understand. I can't do it, although I really try." Katrina reflects "that it is really difficult to explain the cultural side to white people." Although they try to listen, "they just don't understand." Kath similarly reflected on the translational challenge:

> I'm in this reality, and people are interacting with me, but I know everything I say has to push through the glass, and by the time it gets on the other side, it's warped, and they receive it differently. It's probably the same when they speak to me.

For some interviewees, a lack of connection to Indigenous people, and fear of saying the wrong thing, was a barrier to communication. Kylie (40s, officer worker) was unsure which way she would vote. While she thought she would probably vote yes, she had many questions about the no position and why it was being supported by some Indigenous groups. Although she knows a small number of Indigenous people, she did not feel able to initiate a conversation. She was very conscious of saying the wrong thing, "just doing lip service or whitesplaining," or "I can say something which is offensive and racist and not realize." Craig (thirties, student) has several Aboriginal friends, but was still unable to ask one friend about his support for no. While he, like Kylie, wanted to understand, he did not reach out. Reflecting on this conversation that he wished he had had, he described Indigenous issues as particularly difficult to discuss because it is "culturally so sensitive that it sits, it's almost like it sits separate to other issues that are, I guess, just as weighted, but maybe more approachable." But he was also conscious, from his friend's social media posts, that many Aboriginal people were feeling drained and tired of being asked to explain their position to settlers.

While only occurring once in the data, it is worth noting Faye's reflections on her defensiveness as a barrier to listening. Attending a rally, she encountered an Aboriginal speaker advocating for the no case. The speaker was "super fired up" about the need for a treaty before the Voice. Faye could feel "my little white nonconfrontational self feeling 'oh that's a bit aggressive.' There's a part of me that goes 'Oh, ooh, you are really angry.' And I know this is just my whiteness, right?" Faye's response was to reflect on her discomfort and its implications for communication, particularly her need to "soften" the conversation: "How do we do it [have conversations] in a way that is nonconfrontational to white fellas?"

Several interviewees reflected on the nature of talk about the Voice and the dynamics that closed conversations. Tanya felt "shamed" and "disrespected" for her views. She resented folks who are "stubborn in their way and want to force feed an opinion on you." She compared a conversation with a yes voter to "when a vegan wants to tell you they're vegan or this whole new wave of mum shaming . . . all these people really want to tell you is how you are wrong." Yes voters were, in Tanya's view, inclined toward "vomiting something [they've] been told to push." While she tried to explain her position, she was "shut down real quick," criticized for her lack of education. She felt belittled and insulted, responding by "dig[ging] in . . . The more you tell me I have to do this, the more I'm not going to do it." Tanya was engaged during the referendum and felt well-informed, and yet, in the tone and style of her conversations about the Voice, she felt judged and disrespected by the way she was positioned within the political/communicative hierarchy.

In contrast, Jenni (40s, early childhood worker), a yes voter, felt a need to initiate a communicative breakdown in the face of an uncivil exchange that raised profound moral challenges. She reflected on a

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conversation with two acquaintances during a long car trip. In opening a general conversation—"How are we voting?"—she was taken aback by the strength of their response. She described "feeling" their anger: "They were ready with their nos; they were ready." Her response was to "shut that shit [the conversation] down." She did not want to give the women's ideas airtime, "probably because I don't want to be impacted by them, I don't want to be influenced by them, and I don't want to give them [the ideas] space to grow," but also "it hurts my head . . . the idea of having those ideas shared with me and then making space for those ideas to be unpacked, I find really uncomfortable." For Jenni, the racism of the women's responses was painful, and the strength of their anger shocked her; she felt a strong challenge to her moral position, and that manifested in her judgment of the women. At the same time, she felt unprepared to respond: "I had nothing to counter what was said." Jenni had initiated what she had hoped would be a "thoughtful reflective conversation," but encountered a "debate" for which she felt ill-prepared and morally vulnerable.

Families represent a key, albeit potentially risky, context for political talk, and our research confirms individuals' careful management of conversations within the familial sphere. Additionally, this study is suggestive in relation to the challenge presented by political talk that is strongly coded morally. Several interviewees reported avoiding conversation with family members because, as Claire put it, "it's like, if they [her brothers] disagree with me, what does that mean?" Where existing research (Davies, 2021) highlights the social value of avoiding political disagreement, our study suggests the imagined shame and humiliation associated with discovering racism within one's family can similarly be a barrier to talk. Craig reflected he would be "mortified" if a family member was voting no since "that's where a lot of your initial beliefs and values come from." Participating in this research prompted him to ask his dad (via text) about his voting intentions. His father indicated equivocal support for yes while mentioning, "I also understand the confusion that people are experiencing." While Craig wanted to better understand his dad's position, he was fearful of what he might find and "just left it."

For Scott, in contrast, there was a strong desire to be understood by his family. As he put it, "I've spent my entire adult life fighting my family on politics and trying to have them see my point of view." Scott is driven by his vision of what it means to be a "decent human being," which included taking up the yes campaign call to talk as a moral imperative. While he had many conversations, it was talk with his dad, whom he knew to be voting no, that was personally challenging. Given historic acrimoniousness around matters of politics and Scott's concern that no supporters would be reluctant to talk for "fear of being labeled a racist," he sought to find a more productive way to talk, "detaching my own ego from them and thinking that this is much bigger than me."

Scott's experience is one of communicative tension between wanting to "listen to what he [his father] has to say . . . not with any sort of ulterior motive, purely just to try and understand" and also seeking ways to talk him out of his position "by just asking the right questions." After one long and particularly memorable conversation, his father eventually said of colonization that "it was unfortunate, but a fact of history that 'it's not their land anymore.'" On the one hand, Scott was "humbled" that his father felt comfortable enough to speak in these terms—"he hadn't really said anything like that before"—but he found it "pretty shocking." The conversation ended "very respectfully and civilly," but there is a clear sense that surfacing his father's "disgusting" and "gross" views was confronting, exemplifying "entrenched and systematic racism" that is impervious to rational conversation.

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Speaking of Colonization

The Voice highlights the complexities that attend conversations about Indigenous recognition and the historic and contemporary impacts of colonization. On the one hand, the failure of Australians to talk constructively about the proposal might be understood as a manifestation of the difficulties that have been well-described in other studies of political talk—misinformation, polarized political processes, and communicative environments. All these factors are undoubtedly relevant to the referendum outcome and to the experiences of those who contributed to this study. However, we argue that also relevant are the affective investments that accompany the settler-colonial project of securing legitimacy and belonging. If settler identities and affective investments are central to the ongoing process of colonization, to what extent is dialogue possible?

This study is suggestive of some of the challenges inherent in speaking of colonization. The participants in this study wanted to have better, less confrontational conversations about the Voice. They wanted dialogue, not debate; they wanted politicians and the media to be less polarized, and in the words of one contributor, they wanted to "disagree well." They had a vision of "good" political conversation that was respectful, open, and nonjudgmental. There was a desire to better understand and be understood, and to genuinely explore a range of ideas, and yet there was a sense from most that they had not been able to do this during the referendum. As Faye put it, "I feel like I didn't do my bit, that I didn't have the right conversations, that I didn't know how to talk about it."

How might this communicative failure be shaped by the affective logic of settler-colonization? While our response to this question is necessarily speculative, we see several potential avenues for further investigation. These include the relationship between the affective dynamics of settler-colonization and the stigma of racism. There is a growing recognition of the importance of stigmatized identities and the management of stigma in political communication (Revers & Coleman, 2025). The stigma of racism shaped conversations, with self-censorship serving as a means of face saving and conflict avoidance. We also note fear of moral contagion and a reluctance to speak about the Voice for fear of being somehow vulnerable to "racist" ideas. Insofar as conversations are avoided, settler innocence and ignorance are maintained, as is the political status quo.

Analysis of the Voice campaigns indicates the ongoing political relevance of settler affective investments. While there is recognition that circulating political scripts shape everyday political talk (Coleman, 2021), we suggest that their associated affective logic also shapes political conversation. Interviewees' strength of feeling about the Voice and, for some, the imperative to give voice to their position might be explained, at least in part, by the need to manage feelings of settler anxiety. Given the two models for managing these feelings provided by the two Voice campaigns, the mobilization of settler affect has the potential to contribute to issue polarization. We posit that this mobilization also contributed to the mood of the referendum, most notably for those aligned with the yes campaign. As Coleman (2022) has noted, political mood is an ineffable, but nevertheless important, shaper of social realities (p. 484). For some, the referendum felt like the right time for Indigenous recognition. A possible explanation is the strength of feeling mobilized by the available moves to innocence.

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Finally, we note the ways in which vocal hierarchies played out in interpersonal communication. Colonial patterns of (in)attention, perhaps predictably, feature in the experiences of all the Aboriginal people who contributed to this research, regardless of their position on the Voice. Listening as a political act is uncomfortable, requiring humility and vulnerability rather than certainty and authority (Dreher & de Souza, 2018). As a political practice, listening requires engagement with relations of inequality and a commitment to understanding the world from others' perspectives (Bassel, 2017). Aaron (forties, religious leader) noticed his Aboriginal friends "becoming quieter" during the referendum. What he felt is that "we weren't doing it right; we weren't taking enough time to sit and listen." Ultimately, "our Anglo-Australian Westminster way of making a big decision was incongruous with the ones who were asking for the decision to be made." There was a lack of recognition in politics writ large and in everyday conversations about the Voice.

There is something to gain, we propose, with further exploration of the affective dynamics of everyday talk about Indigenous recognition. The possibility of treaty and truth telling, the other pillars of the Uluru Statement, ultimately depends on the ability of Australians to speak and listen honestly about historic and contemporary injustices. There is much to be learned from Aboriginal ways of talking and listening well, but for this to happen, there is a need for greater understanding and intimacy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. As Aaron put it, "My lesson from this is it's not about what happens in the public discourse; it's about those day-to-day relationship-building conversations that I can genuinely have. And public policy's not going to change our relationship with human beings."

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