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Foundations for Belonging 2023:

Exploring refugees' understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and histories

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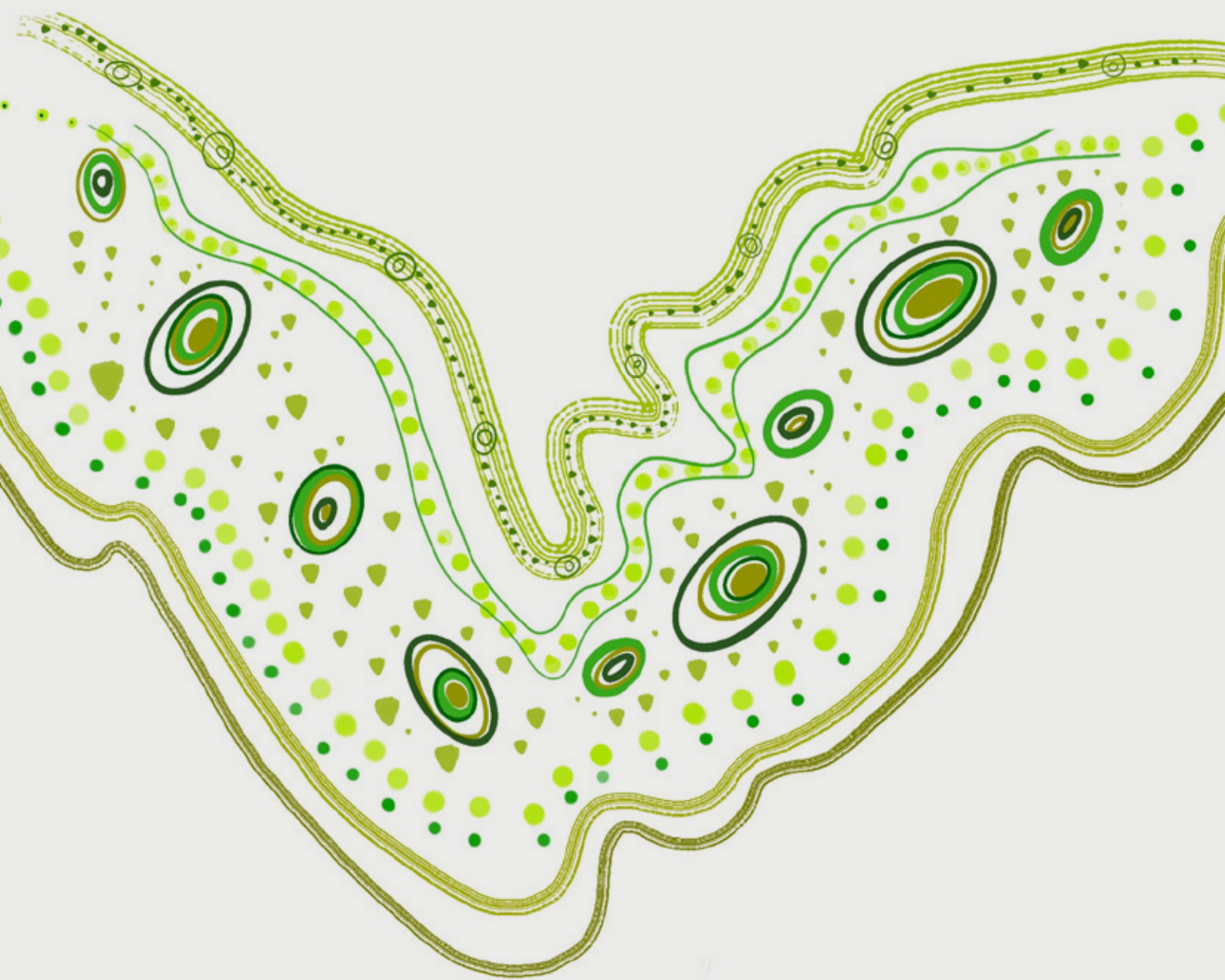
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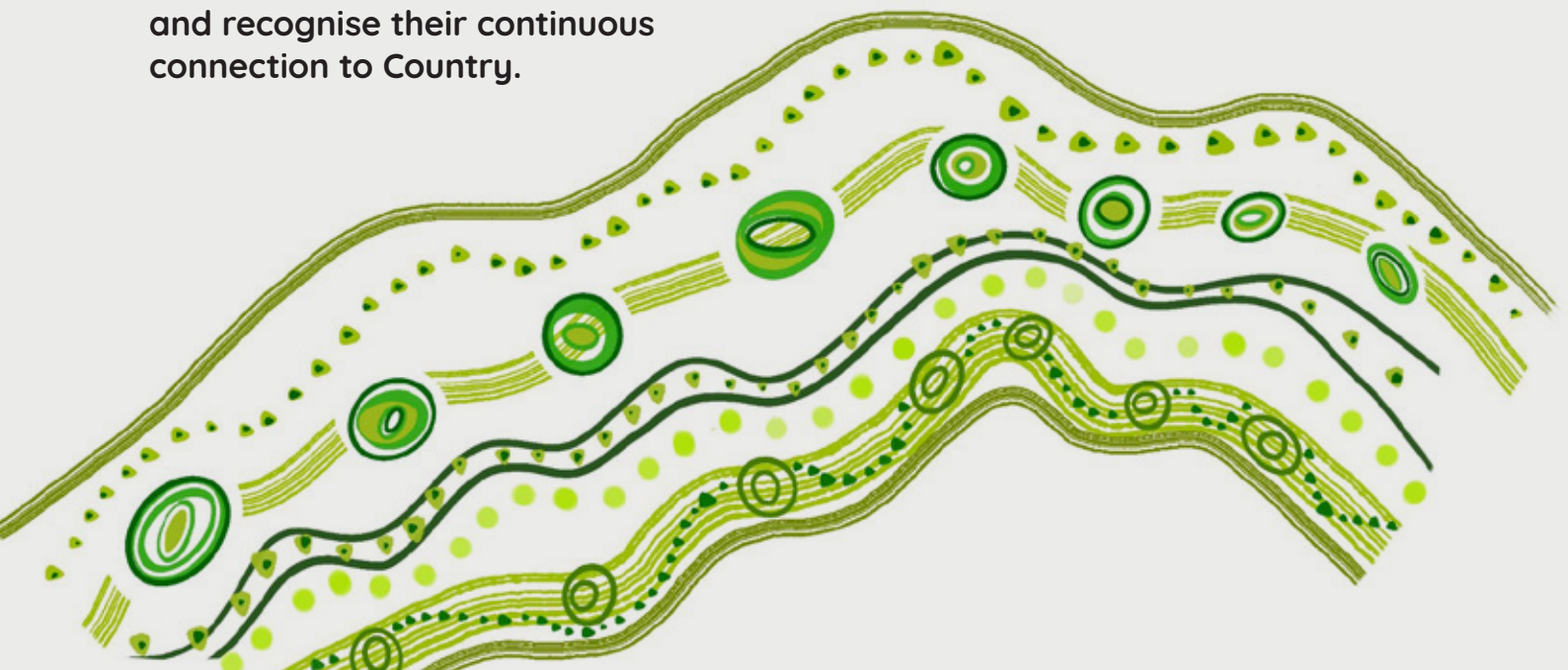
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SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.



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Contents

- 5** Executive Summary
 - 11** Background
 - 23** Research Aims
 - 24** First Nations
Research Approach
 - 31** Findings and Discussion
 - 54** Conclusion
 - 56** References
-

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Executive Summary



Background

Foundations for Belonging aims to extend the understanding of settlement through research, gathering the perspectives of refugees and their everyday sense of belonging as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. This current research builds on three earlier phases of *Foundations for Belonging* published from 2020 to 2022. In this report, we present findings from exploratory research conducted in early 2023 focused on refugees' understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and histories in Australia.

Previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging* had limited scope to explore how refugees relate to First Nations histories and issues in any depth. In fact, in general, there is little research on how refugees relate to First Nations histories and issues in Australia (or indeed elsewhere). The current research aims to address this research gap, as we approach a referendum that will be put to voters on whether to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia and establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

First Nations' peoples globally experience a connectedness with their natural environment, and for Australian First Nations this is often expressed as a connection to Country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' histories of the land are determined not by colonising definitions, but by an acknowledgment of continuous connection and custodianship for over 60,000 years.

The few existing studies that focus on refugee–First Nations relations often underscore the shared histories of colonialism, displacement, racialisation, and allyship against oppression. While studies on refugees' perspectives on First Nations' histories and issues are scarce, studies on intercultural collaborations and connections between migrants and First Nations peoples are beginning to emerge. Movements in civil society have increasingly paid attention to the role of migrant communities in standing with First Nations communities in reconciliation efforts. Reports on this work, however, are still anecdotal and tend to be anchored in advocacy rather than in research. The literature on belonging is also distinct between First Nations studies and migrant/refugee studies. The latter focuses on the contrast between home and settlement, while the former focuses on cultural, natural and spiritual aspects of land and political aspects of colonialism. Both, however, share a common focus on the meanings and politics of belonging.

Approach to research

As this project specifically involved Australian First Nations' histories, knowledges and practices, it was critical to ensure that it was culturally led by an Australian First Nations researcher. This research incorporated an interface methodology that blended First Nations knowledges and Western research methodologies. First Nations-led yarning opportunities were used to engage refugee participants in the research with Aboriginal knowledges and practices over three consecutive stages: in-person workshops conducted on Country, utilisation of a mobile phone app, and online focus group discussions.

The first stage, led at sites chosen by the First Nations lead researcher, involved YarnCountry workshops that introduce refugee participants to Country. Part of the workshop also included the introduction of a mobile app, YarnCountry, that enabled participants to record thoughts, emotions and images of Country. The third stage involved 90-minute online focus groups with refugees who took part in the YarnCountry workshops.

Refugee participants were recruited by SSI using snowballing through programs delivered at locations in regional and metropolitan New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Recruitment focused on refugees who had been resident in Australia for more than four years, to maximise the opportunity to engage with refugees who might already be Australian citizens and therefore likely to be more engaged in civil society and political issues, including having the right to vote.

Similarities and differences between First Nations' histories, and refugees' histories ... allow refugees to share aspects of their cultural insecurity and vulnerability



Key findings

The research found the following main intersecting themes:

- While refugees have limited prior exposure to or engagement with First Nations histories and issues, they are interested in learning more about First Nations' cultural practices and traditions and having opportunities for meeting and cultural exchange with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Place-based knowledges, enhanced by First Nations-led experiential learning on Country such as the YarnCountry workshops and reflections of Country using the YarnCountry app, may be useful tools to build engagement and mutual respect for the land as an emerging action towards First Nations reconciliation among refugees.
- Communication exchanges founded on the sharing of different cultural knowledges and practices can build culturally respectful, reciprocal relationships between refugees and First Nations peoples.
- Refugees' engagement with First Nations histories and connections to Country helps uncover similarities between First Nations cultures and their own – creating a sense of unity – which is likely to contribute to refugees' sense of belonging as they build a new chapter of their lives in Australia.
- Similarities and differences between First Nations' histories, and refugees' histories, including experiences of suffering and connections to homeland and the land on which they resettled, allow refugees to share aspects of their cultural insecurity and vulnerability, particularly when First Nations' histories are shared from a strengths-based approach highlighting Aboriginal ways of being, by a First Nations Australian.
- Refugees' knowledge of the continuity and endurance of Australia's First Nations peoples and cultures can imbue refugees, and their future generations, with a sense of cultural safety and continuity of their cultural traditions in the face of dominant Western 'settler' narratives in Australia.

This research advocates for a decolonising ethos to inform future institutional and systemic efforts to develop closer ties between First Nations and refugee communities, in order to truly build stronger foundations for belonging and reconciliation in Australia.



Significance of land-based education

The findings of this study suggest that building stronger relationships with local First Nations peoples and their lands entails understanding their view of land and Country. Land-based education emphasises the importance of the natural world and our connection to it. Incorporating this approach into the ways that refugees can learn about and engage with First Nations histories and issues can help to develop respect and appreciation for the lands and Country that we live on and share. It's crucial to recognise that First Nations peoples see land as spiritually, socially, culturally and economically significant, not as something to be owned. Likewise, refugees can draw on their own cultures to appreciate land beyond its material value and consider the deeper connections between peoples and Country.

Recommendations

Government and policymakers

- As part of a suite of approaches to strengthen refugee integration, settlement policy in relation to key onshore programs, such as the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and the Settlement, Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program, should embed and strengthen knowledge and understanding among refugees of First Nations histories and issues.
- Settlement policy and programs at all levels of government should expand and incentivise community engagement, particularly at the local level and with a renewed focus on opportunities for refugees and First Nations peoples to engage on Country.

Settlement service providers

- Develop more systematic engagement activities between First Nations peoples and refugees across the major onshore settlement programs — the HSP, AMEP and SETS — throughout the settlement journey from initial orientation through to English language learning and broader community-based activities. These activities should focus on experiential learning and exchange of cultural practices and knowledges at the local level.

- Expand the development and implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) within settlement service providers to strengthen reconciliation initiatives between refugees/migrants and Australia's First Nations.

Migrant and refugee peak bodies

- Use existing research as groundwork to build future action research and advocacy, to uncover migrants' and refugees' understandings of Truth, Treaty and Voice as proposed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.
- Develop more opportunities for dialogue with peak bodies and communities that recognise the shared, yet different, experiences of exclusion between newcomers and First Nations peoples to better inform advocacy and policy towards Truth, Treaty and Voice.

Reconciliation groups (place-based)

- Facilitate opportunities for refugees and other newcomers at the local level to learn about and engage with reconciliation and allyship.
- Create ongoing, place-based engagement opportunities between refugees and First Nations communities, for experiential learning and engagement.



Background

Australia has a long tradition of providing protection and resettlement to refugees under the United Nations Refugee Convention, ratified after the end of World War II. Since that time, research, policy and the practice of refugee settlement have changed significantly. *Foundations for Belonging* aims to extend the understanding of settlement through research, gathering the perspectives of refugees and their everyday sense of welcome and belonging as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia.

This current research builds on the findings of three earlier phases of *Foundations for Belonging* published from 2020 to 2022 (Culos et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). In this report, *Foundations for Belonging 2023*, we present findings from exploratory research conducted in early 2023 focused on refugees' understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and histories in Australia.

Each phase of *Foundations for Belonging*, conducted by SSI in partnership with Western Sydney University, is guided by overarching research questions on the social and civic dimensions of settlement and integration that build on previous findings while also addressing research gaps. For example, the first phase of the research indicated gender differences (Culos et al., 2020), which were explored in more depth in the next phase of the research (Culos et al., 2021). Likewise, the acceleration towards digital modes of education, employment and access to essential services necessitated by COVID-19 resulted in the second phase taking a closer look at digital inclusion among newly arrived refugees (Culos et al., 2021). In a similar vein,

border restrictions related to the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021 prompted a focus in the third phase of the research on impacts of family separation and family reunion on newly arrived refugees (Culos et al., 2022).

Previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging* have documented a range of relationships between various indicators on refugees' sense of belonging in Australia (Culos et al., 2022). Importantly, across the three previous phases of this research, gender and age emerged as strong predictors of differences in social and civic participation measures (Culos et al., 2022) that contribute to refugees' sense of belonging.

A conceptual understanding of integration, including the influential Framework of Integration (UK Home Office, 2019), provided a theoretical basis for previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging*. The framework emphasises the multidimensional and multidirectional nature of integration; a shared responsibility for integration that includes refugees, receiving communities and government at all levels (Morley, 2001; UK Home Office, 2019); and foregrounds access to rights, security and equality and the need to contribute and fulfil responsibilities to strengthen belonging (Strang and Ager, 2010). The next frontier of thinking on integration seeks to extend and draw attention to the role of the receiving communities in shaping refugee integration and notions of belonging (Phillimore, 2020). However, there is little in terms of how First Nations peoples in a settler society like Australia are encapsulated in this term of 'receiving' communities.

Across all three phases of *Foundations for Belonging*, refugees overwhelmingly reported a strong feeling of being part of the Australian community. Over two-thirds of refugees reported having some understanding of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of Australia, though there may have been limitations in refugee respondents' understanding of the survey question. In response to another question, in two prior phases of this research, refugees were overwhelmingly committed to acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the Traditional Owners of Australia. This indicates a commitment to understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and processes of reconciliation.

However, past phases of *Foundations for Belonging* had limited scope to explore how refugees relate to First Nations histories, peoples and issues in any depth. In addition, the limited research exploring refugees, migrants and First Nations connections has tended to focus on Anglo newcomers from a colonial-settler perspective. Studies of non-Anglo newcomers and refugees often emphasise ethnic marginalisation, integration and contribution to the nation, and are often framed within a static notion of ethnicity in terms of push and pull factors, or temporal journeys of non-citizen to citizen, or arrival to settlement to integration. This means

that most research on First Nations-settler relations in Australia has focused on White or European migrants, with research only now emerging on historical and contemporary relations between First Nations and non-White newcomers. However, there is little empirical work at this stage on refugee communities and how they relate to First Nations histories and issues.

The current research aims to address this research gap, as we approach a referendum that will be put to voters on whether to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Understanding more about refugee engagement with First Nations peoples and cultures can act as an entry point into the different ways that refugee and First Nations communities form, articulate and present their own perceptions about colonialism and its effects in a settler society like Australia. It helps to map the multiple 'routes' that refugees engage with as they learn from and embrace the diversity of First Nations communities, and locate themselves in relation to people's struggle for justice (Piperoglou and Simic, 2022). It can also offer insights for policies and practices that enable more meaningful connections between refugees and First Nations communities.



Intersections between refugees, migrants and First Nations communities

First Nations and ‘migrant’ advocacy: An ‘uneasy conversation’

Ann Curthoys has characterised Australian discourse about First Nations and migrant communities as involving two related but distinct debates, both marked in relation to a broader mainstream White Australian society. Despite shared experiences of displacement, dispossession and disadvantage in Australia, these two debates have historically been engaged in an ‘uneasy’ conversation with the other, as First Nations and migrant advocates and scholars seek to prosecute distinct sets of claims (Curthoys, 2000, p. 21). This uneasiness is underpinned by separate fields of scholarship — First Nations and migrant studies for example — as much as different understandings in the political and policy landscape.

Curthoys (2000) refers to the complexity between First Nations’ claims deriving from the history of colonisation, and newcomers’ (refugees and migrants) challenges in integration, as the ‘uneasy relations’ (p. 21). The issues can be seen from two lines of argument put forward by those that support Curthoys’s claim. First, Curthoys suggests that as multicultural discourse became more prominent in Australia in the 1980s, with parallels between First Nations and multicultural issues drawn in policy, scholarly and public arenas, the concerns and demands of First Nations and non-Anglo newcomers were brought together by the ideal of cultural diversity, to be

advocated through multicultural advocacy and education. The refugee and immigrant perspective of land is presented simply as an issue of arriving in a new land, finding a place to call home, and putting down roots in a country far from familial histories and ancestral birthrights. The synergy of the newcomer and the First Nations person is their becoming almost one — the ‘excluded other’ — brought about through analogies of the ‘outsiders’ or the ‘marginalised’. The processes of displacement, dispossession and disadvantage are wrapped within the same fold of cultural diversity devoid of very different histories.

Yet Curthoys also notes that many First Nations people “protested against being incorporated within the ‘multicultural’” (p. 30), an agenda that fails to acknowledge the specificity of history and the uniqueness of their identities. Such uneasiness has been attributed to the problematic positioning of Indigeneity within newcomer-focused concepts of multiculturalism and its associated policies in a settler society. In Curthoys’s analysis, the ‘uneasiness’ results from this mix of common demands and dissimilar histories, both uniting and differentiating community aims and political struggle.

More recently, Bauder (2011) has referred to this combination of relatedness and distinctness between First Nations and ‘migrant’ advocacy as constituting a ‘parallax gap’ despite the fact ‘the Aboriginal and migrants’ narratives in settler societies like Canada are factually closely related’ (p. 517). Whilst his discussion is specific to North America, Australia’s political and policy landscapes appear to also disregard

that refugee and First Nations peoples both experience physical, social, emotional, economic, cultural and political detriment from invasion, dispossession, displacement and separation from their homelands and communities.

This parallelism is echoed in the different frames of reference within policy settings. Australian policies relating to people seeking asylum and, to a lesser extent, refugees, are underscored by issues of ‘unauthorised arrivals’ (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023). The public debate tends to focus on simplistic information to help explain reasons people become refugees, the different ways they flee persecution and how that might impact on their treatment in Australia. Rights of refugees to enter a country are discussed or critiqued in terms of legal frameworks and Australia’s role as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea of accepting refugees is often presented as Australia’s response to a ‘refugee crisis’, reflecting its citizens’ compassion and generosity. At the same time, the strategic focus of First Nations-specific policies in Australia is often framed by the disparities that are experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across many aspects of contemporary Australian society. These aspects include care and protection of minors (O’Donnell et al., 2019), vocation and employment (Guenther et al., 2019), education (Brown, 2019), adult and juvenile criminal justice (McCausland and Baldry, 2023) and health and wellbeing (Fisher et al., 2016). Whilst it is apparent across the First Nations-specific policy landscape that reducing and eliminating these disparities,

inequities and ‘gaps’ is a priority, First Nations communities continue to be prevented from meaningful involvement in policy design necessary for them to realise their self-determination and sovereign cultural and spiritual rights, which are specific to their holistic wellbeing (Shakespeare, 2021).

Specific to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the detriment imposed by the extensive legacies of colonial invasion. As Australia’s system of governance is modelled on a European separation of powers, ongoing failure to recognise Australia’s First Peoples at a constitutional level is arguably fundamental in perpetuating bias, racism and discrimination. Specific detriment ensues because of colonisation and these additional factors impact negatively on the outcomes of Australian First Nations peoples. Despite the significant, well-informed scholarly direction that supports policy, legislative and constitutional reform (Appleby et al., 2023), and years of extensive First Nations community consultations that endorse the realisation of the rights of First Nations peoples to self-determination globally (United Nations, 2007) through self-governance, there continues to be an absence of constitutional recognition in Australia.

Despite extensive differences in spiritual knowledges and cultural practices amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from refugee backgrounds, shared experiences of disadvantage negatively impact upon social, educational, justice and other outcomes. Ultimately, these negative social determinants substantially undermine refugees’ and First Peoples’ physical and

mental health (Mwanri et al., 2023). Stories of newcomers in relation to First Peoples are largely untold and can be articulated without needing to collapse the histories and experiences of colonisation of First Nations under the banner of multiculturalism. Future conversations between communities as well as between scholars and advocates need not be ‘uneasy’.

Emerging research on First Nations–migrant connections

Through a nationwide survey of First Nations’ attitudes towards multiculturalism and cultural diversity, Dunn et al. (2010) found that, despite perceived concerns with multiculturalism, First Nations peoples are supportive of cultural diversity. Their attitudes on cultural diversity and views on racism are similar to those of other Australians. Responding to the ‘uneasy conversations’ are calls for stronger vernaculars and theorisations that will better equip scholars, policymakers, institutions and the general public to illuminate the diverse historical experiences of multiculturalism and diversity in Australia’s past — a past in which First Nations and immigrants share common, albeit distinct, historical experiences in the broader saga of Australian settler colonialism. Similar critiques of multiculturalism and how First Peoples have shaped their future outside of multiculturalism have emerged in the Canadian context (Srikanth, 2012).

Studies suggest parallels as well as differences in the experiences of home, belonging, continuity, cultural traditions, and displacement and marginalisation that shape the contemporary experience of migrants

and First Peoples. These commonalities and differences must be carefully examined. For example, Mitra (2011) found common and disparate histories and intergenerational traumas of colonisation experienced by South Asian and First Nations communities. The importance of researching non-Anglo migrant–Aboriginal relations and the need to illuminate the ways in which both Aboriginal and non-White migrant communities influence each other has led to several studies on ‘migrant’ attitudes to Aboriginal people. Akhmetova (2019), in her work in the Canadian context, argues that meaningful reconciliation should involve newcomer education about First Nations peoples, and discussions of how immigrants have a choice in deciding whether they comply (or not) with ongoing settler colonialism. Awareness and acknowledgement of colonial relationships are important to disrupt the reproduction and enforcement of colonialism (Akhmetova, 2019; Gehl, 2012). Akhmetova (2019) further suggests from the Canadian context that newcomers have a responsibility to learn about laws and policies relating to First Nations issues, such as treaties, and how to support and uphold them because they are fundamental to the rights and responsibilities inherent in integration. As allies of First Nations peoples, newcomers should recognise their own privileges, the colonial structure they support, and their own responsibilities towards decolonisation.

At the same time, cultural diversity is put forward as a tool for negotiating the uneasy conversations through examples of cross-cultural collaboration. Sengmany (2006), in an investigation of collaborations between Chinese diasporic artist Zhou Xiaoping and

Aboriginal artist Jimmy Pike, situated their relationship within broader debates on the representation of difference in Australian art, and the possibility for art to be a platform for cultural exchange. Stephenson's (2001) report of the Lost and Found project, a collaboration between the Immigration Museum and the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne, explored the dislocation from ancestral lands and the practising of cultural expressions in a new world — a common theme for both First Nations and newcomer Australians. Both Stephenson (2001) and Sengmany (2006) locate this specific instance of cross-cultural dialogue within a historical context and note other examples of these connections (Bianco, 2018; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020) or partnerships in recent literary production to argue for the potential of new relationships between First Nations and culturally diverse Australians.

These studies of First Nations–migrant collaborations highlight that migrant communities are culturally and linguistically diverse, and there is no singular 'migrant' position on First Nations matters. Non-Anglo migrants' making meaning in a 'new land' is tied to their own learning of colonialism, both 'on the ground' and as a 'concept' through interpersonal interactions with First Nations peoples and other forms of communication through media, film and art. Studying migrant perspectives on First Nations history and culture should not try to homogenise and simplify; rather, it is important to identify the myriad ways that migrants and First Nations peoples engage with each other. We can then ask how intersections and entanglements of hardship, suffering and tragedy shared between migrants and First Nations peoples can inform migrants'

desire for and role in forging stronger ties with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Emerging public discourse of refugee–First Nations connections

Research on refugee–First Nations connections is particularly scarce. Studies that focus on refugee–First Nations relations often underscore the shared histories of colonialism (Mwanri et al., 2023), ongoing displacement, racialisation, and allyship against oppression (Bauder, 2011, 2020a, 2020b; Bauder and Mueller, 2021; Bhatia, 2018; Chatterjee, 2019). These include the regulation of their mobility through national borders, reserves, residential schools, incarceration, and non-membership in the imagined and legal settler-colonial community (Government of Canada, 2018; Carter, 1999), as well as basic striving for survival and adapting to the dominant, and often exclusionary, culture (Lawrence and Dua, 2005). Moreover, the perpetuation of racism and discrimination through colonial legacies has also impacted on First Nations' and refugees' health (Ziersch et al., 2020). Yet there are few studies that consider this impact on the holistic wellbeing outcomes of refugees who are themselves Indigenous Peoples in their homeland and First Nations Australians (Shakespeare, 2021).

There are emerging intersections between First Nations peoples and refugees at the civil society level. For example, Eureka Street published a piece for Refugee Week (2012) on Aboriginal solidarity with refugees, noting the "powerful coming-together of the First Peoples and the people who have recently come to Australia seeking refuge" (Falzon,

2012). Drawing on the shared experience and struggle for justice, the publication posted a statement from Ray Jackson, President of the First Nations Social Justice Association, who also symbolically issued passports on behalf of Australia's First Peoples to two Tamil men in immigration detention. In a blog posted on the SSI website, SSI's CEO notes the synergies between the First Nations and refugee experiences (SSI, 2022) with the sense of connection to their land of birth important to those forced to leave their homelands.



Place-based knowledge and connections

First Nations connections to the land

First Nations peoples globally experience a connectedness with their natural environment (Redvers et al., 2022), and for Australian First Nations peoples this relationality is often expressed as a connection to 'Country'.¹ Continuous physical and spiritual connection with Country across generations of diverse, yet communally lived experiences construe Australian First Nations' existence through a whole-of-life world view (Milroy et al., 2014). International law specifies nationhood as the right of inherent sovereignty, underscoring claims of sovereignty by Australia's First Peoples, who have been known to occupy specific territories that have shared a common language, a means of subsistence, forms of governance, legal systems, and means of deciding citizenship.

Place-based politics may bring people together on the basis not only of various shared concerns, but also of 'recognition of a common destiny at the local level' (Dirlik and Prazniak, 2001, p. 10) and an accompanying desire to resolve issues democratically. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' histories of the land are determined not by colonising definitions, but by an acknowledgment that there is more to this land than being 'settlers' on it. This also means that there are deeper, older

¹ A capital 'C' signifies an Australian First Nations' perception of the English word 'country' that involves ontologies and axiologies specific to Australia's First Peoples. Accordingly, this more expansive interpretation transforms this word from a common noun into a proper noun, as it realises this interpretation (MacLean, Ritte, Thorpe, Ewen, & Arabena, 2017).

stories and knowledge connected to the very landscapes around us. To acknowledge that we all share the same land and question the inequitable and unjust terms on which that land is occupied is to become aware of histories inscribed into the land that far predate European incursions on this continent.

In connecting refugees/migrants and First Nations communities through a place-based episteme (or place-based knowledge), it is necessary to pay attention to the contemporary political, social and economic realities of First Nations peoples, and the ways in which refugee/migrant claims may be premised on a colonising social formation and settlement on First Nations lands, which influence their attitudes towards Aboriginal communities and how they support or resist colonisation. Place-based knowledge could offer grassroots and meaningful engagement between First Nations and refugee communities. This is because it manifests an understanding of how First Nations actualise nationhood and belonging, and reconceptualises refugee identity and experiences differently from the ways they have been constituted in colonial discourses. As Dirlik and Prazniak (2001) argue, the notion of 'place' is grounded and porous, and there is no contradiction between transnational politics (intended to cover the rights and claims of refugees and migrants) and place-based politics (intended to cover the rights and claims for Australia's First Peoples). As articulated by First Nations and non-First Nations scholars, intellectuals and activists, place-based thinking and politics allow for ways to remember, acknowledge and address historical tensions and injustices

among peoples, while also enabling an imagination of a just and peaceful coexistence and a different relationship to land.

Fostering intercultural relations and interactions

Kinew (2015) argues that "reconciliation is realised when two people come together and understand that what they share unites them and that what is different between them needs to be respected" (p. 155). This coming together has been described in the Canadian context as being potentially 'unsettling' when settlers seek reconciliation with First Peoples (Mollie et al, 2019). The interactions and relationship building between newcomers and Australia's First Nations are considered 'reconciliation' actions when they aim to encourage newcomers' capacity to listen, accept, talk, learn, and work together, irrespective of their cultural differences or shared understandings and traditions. It is place-based and shaped according to the priorities of the local First Nations stakeholders; it also addresses the needs of the non-First Nations people who have committed to improve their relations with First Peoples. Gehl (2012) calls relationship building with First Nations communities a form of allyship with First Nations, developed through: continuous learning and unlearning; being aware of one's privileges, complicity and responsibilities; and acting with the consent of First Nations peoples. Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) understand allyship with First Nations peoples as building relationships that are respectful not only with First Nations communities but also with the land on which we live. Understanding of how our life choices impact First Nations

could allow people of different backgrounds to integrate different forms of place-based knowledge into strategies to achieve positive change at the individual and community level.

At the individual newcomer level, examples of relationship building include attendance at facilitated events for newcomers to meet and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, or participation in community events that bring First Nations and non-First Nations peoples together. These can enrich their understanding of First Nations cultures, enable them to learn about how reconciliation can take place, and translate the knowledge they have gained into action. Newcomers could also invite local reconciliation organisations to hold in-house training at their place of work, or education to help counter racist or stereotypical attitudes; initiate a conversation with a friend about a First Nations issue in the news; and consider their position as a settler in Australia and how their practices might contribute to the marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

There is also a great need to recognise the important role that organisations that serve migrant and refugee communities can have on newcomers' understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders through projects, events and activities that build bridges with First Nations communities. An example of this is SSI's Welcome Project, an initiative that aims to start conversations with elders and members of First Nations communities in the local areas around First Nations histories. Feedback from SSI staff involved in these activities aligns with scholarly research that shows that willingness and a sense of responsibility for reconciliation

are often place-based. Anecdotally, where local Aboriginal communities have a good understanding of SSI's work with refugees and migrants, they also understand and connect with stories of settlement, and are supportive of newcomers.

Refugees' responsibility and willingness to engage with First Nations issues

There are many refugee stories told through the media that focus on issues of "successful integration and gratefulness towards the nation-state, or socioeconomic and affective precarity" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 123). Against this narrative, many refugees may yearn for belonging and therefore accept assimilation to achieve this. Nguyen (2019, p. 111) suggests that 'refugeeness' may be "a catalyst for thinking, feeling, and doing with others — for imagining justice". Speaking from the context of Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen's hope is that "refugee subjects can make crucial linkages between themselves and others who have undergone and are undergoing similar experiences within the national order of things', including migrant, undocumented, racialised, and First Nations groups" (Nguyen, 2019, 123-24).

However, newcomers may be particularly vulnerable to adopting stereotypical attitudes towards First Nations peoples as they may receive little First Nations education and orientation, as Akhmetova (2019) has noted in the Canadian context. Without accurate knowledge it is easy to adopt negative stereotypes, especially when a newcomer gathers such views from more established non-First Nations friends, family members and media. Such limited understanding



of First Nations histories poses obstacles to understanding and engaging with First Nations issues and forging new respectful relationships. The meaningful commonalities and parallels in the experiences of displacement, dispossession and disadvantage of First Nations peoples and refugees mean that there are grounds for a politics of solidarity between them. Yet, even if refugees acknowledged their own colonial or postcolonial experiences in their countries of origin and experiences of exclusion and racism in the diaspora, it does not mean that they would necessarily identify with efforts towards reconciliation. The realisation of one's complicity in colonisation and the need to reconcile and educate oneself are not intuitive. When it comes to responsibility for reconciliation, Akhmetova (2019) found in Canada that locality (historic and spatial) influences the ways non-First Nations people conceive of what taking responsibility is and who bears that responsibility. A study by Fortier (2015), also in Canada, noted the view of some Indigenous participants that the responsibility for reconciliation primarily rests with non-Indigenous peoples and recent newcomers. They suggested that some Indigenous peoples can play a role in supporting and guiding these reconciliation efforts. Therefore, careful consideration and planning must go into any individual and collective attempts to build relationships with First Nations peoples and solidarity with First Nations activists.

Yuval-Davis (2011) argues that, within refugee research, belonging has powerful associations with notions of 'home', which requires an analysis of refugees' identities alongside various socio-political contexts

of their lived experience of settlement. Numerous studies within the migration literature establish how notions of home are meaningfully created and sustained transnationally (Baldassar et al., 2007; Bhimji, 2008; Gifford and Wilding, 2013; Robertson et al., 2016; Unger, 2012), through political, cultural and financial forms of exchange and various communication technologies, social media, remittance flows, travel and access to web-based information (Horst, 2006; Kleist, 2008).

Yet media representations, political commentaries and professional practice discourses generate dominant understandings of refugees, often through stories of adversity. Similar portrayals of disadvantage are also seen in narratives of Aboriginal communities typically made by those who are not First Nations themselves. The ‘refugee experience’ and the ‘First Nations experience’ are often characterised as deficient, singular and sensationalised. Even when these narratives are positive, they are typically framed through the lens of a heroic individual, ignoring the systemic and structural forces of communities that make individual success possible. These representations often escape critical examination precisely because they often permeate discourse through ‘official’ media channels. The refugee and the First Nations person are frequently featured in ‘good’ or ‘bad’ news stories – the passive object of the camera or reporter’s microphone, rather than speaking as an authoritative subject. Such stories are established within a frame of media authority that masks prejudice with the appearance of routine and ordinary factual reporting. Too often, refugees and

First Nations peoples have been subjects of a settler-colonial ‘gaze’, requiring an intermediary to speak on their behalf.

Such representations can condition negative perceptions and attitudes that refugees, migrants and First Nations peoples have internalised, limiting opportunities for interaction or association. As Carter-Black (2007, p. 32) said: “How stories are told, by whom, to whom, under what circumstances, and for what specific purpose – vary according to sociocultural prescriptions”. As Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) also notes, how people judge their and others’ belonging depends on people’s recognition of their social locations, which is afforded through people’s own identification and how they are represented in society. What is often lost in such representations are the voices and knowledge bases of refugees and First Nations peoples themselves; this calls for opportunities to shift such representations.



Conclusion

Studies on refugees' perspectives, attitudes and engagement with First Nations peoples are scarce. But studies on intercultural collaborations and connections between migrants and First Nations peoples are beginning to emerge, preparing the ground for more work in this area. Movements in civil society and professional practice have increasingly paid attention to the role of migrant and refugee communities in standing with First Nations communities in reconciliation, and to how First Nations peoples are positioned to support refugees. Reports on this work, however, are still anecdotal and tend to be anchored in advocacy rather than in evidence-based research. The literature on belonging is also distinct between First Nations studies and migration studies. The latter focuses on the contrast between homelands and settlement, while the former focuses on cultural, natural and spiritual aspects of land and political aspects of colonialism. Both, however, do share a common focus on the meanings and politics of belonging.

Given the gaps and fragmentation in studies of migrant/refugee–First Nations relations, there are numerous entry points for further research, such as:

- migrants' and refugees' relations to homelands and lands of settlement, and how these relations to land might shape their sense of belonging in resettlement
 - newcomers' understandings of land and First Nations histories and how such understanding shapes their attitude towards and engagement with people's struggle for justice
 - opportunities and challenges in fostering relationships and interactions between First Nations peoples and migrant/refugee communities and their implications for individuals, organisations and policy.
-

A woman with a shaved head and glasses is wearing a traditional necklace made of dark, cylindrical beads with red and yellow accents. She is pointing her right hand towards the camera. The background consists of large green leaves and a tree trunk.

Research Aims

As this project specifically involved Australian First Nations histories, knowledge and practices, it was critical to ensure that it was culturally led by an Australian First Nations researcher. This research involved research methods that incorporated an interface methodology that brings together “First Nations knowledges and methodologies with Western research methodologies, to fundamentally improve understanding in both knowledge systems” (Durie, 2005 [cited in Ryder et al., 2020]).

The aims of this research are:

- to gauge refugees’ perceptions of settlement in Australia in the contexts of First Nations Australia
- to understand refugee interest in and knowledge of Australia’s First Nations histories
- to connect refugees with Country and First Nations cultural practices through a range of qualitative First Nations methods that include yarning.

Ethics approval for this study was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Western Sydney University (Approval number H15307).

First Nations Research Approach



First Nation-led yarning opportunities were used to engage refugee participants with Aboriginal knowledges and practices in this research.

Yarning and relationships are inherently interconnected; accordingly, yarning serves as a means of establishing social connections, boundaries, expectations, accountability and social conditions (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Dean, 2010). As Ryder et al. (2020) have argued, yarning as a research method can establish research environments that prioritise First Nations epistemologies and promote cultural safety in collecting qualitative and quantitative data.

The process of yarning can illuminate how different cultures interpret, construe, realise and order knowledge hierarchies. It is a valuable research method that may detail different cultural epistemologies and also create culturally safe contexts through which participants can share experiences (see, for example, Coombes and Ryder, 2019; Priest et al., 2017). Yarning on Country as an approach aims to overcome dominant colonial-settler didactic practice and facilitate dialogical narratives between First Peoples and others, in this case refugees, that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' knowledges and practices.

As a qualitative exploratory method, yarning was implemented in this research to deepen engagement between the cultural lead researcher and refugee participants. This developed reciprocity between the First Nations research lead and refugee participants, and evoked communication exchanges premised on cultural reciprocity through which refugee perspectives about First Nations Australia emerged.

The lead researcher also worked collaboratively with a videographer/photographer in designing two creative audio-visual film clips of the YarnCountry workshops (described below). This helped to ensure that visual content, interviews and narrated context elucidated the cultural interactions that occurred across the five YarnCountry workshops.

Stages of research

The research consisted of three consecutive stages: in-person workshops conducted on Country, utilisation of a mobile phone app, and online focus-group discussions.

Participants were recruited by SSI using snowballing through programs delivered at locations in regional and metropolitan New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. These programs are delivered to refugees from diverse backgrounds. Recruitment focused on refugees who had been resident in Australia for more than four years, to maximise the opportunity to engage with participants who might already be Australian citizens and therefore likely to be more engaged in civil society and political issues, including having the right to vote.

SSI employs Multicultural Support Officers (MSOs) – formerly known as Bilingual Guides – who were integral to the recruitment of participants and, in some cases, provided in-language support during workshops and focus group discussions. SSI's MSOs are themselves often from refugee backgrounds, and consequently have a 'peer-like' relationship with refugee participants.



Stage 1: YarnCountry Workshops

The first stage, led at each site by the First Nations lead researcher, involved half-day workshops that aimed to introduce refugee participants to Country at sites chosen by the First Nations lead researcher.

Prior to the workshops, the First Nations researcher produced a video introducing herself to SSI MSOs, who facilitated translation and cultural understanding, and supported participants in installing and using the YarnCountry app as part of the workshop (discussed below). These introductions helped to develop MSOs' understanding of the workshop and their roles. Where possible, the researcher also liaised with local Traditional Owners and Elders, who in one case also attended and supported the workshop. A First Nations videographer recorded the workshops, with participants' written informed consent, and excluded images of participants who did not provide consent to be filmed.



Over a period of five weeks, 44 participants were engaged in five workshops at the following places:

- **Yugambah and Yagara Country** (now called Logan, Queensland) with participants from mixed refugee community backgrounds
- **Kamilaroi and Anaiwan Country** (now called Armidale, NSW) with Ezidi refugees with in-language support
- **Gadigal and Dharug Country** (two workshops, now called Bankstown, NSW) with Arabic-speaking and Assyrian-background refugees, both with in-language support
- **Boon Wurrung and Woiwurrung Country** (now called Melbourne) with participants from mixed refugee community backgrounds.

Three of the workshops were offered with in-language support provided by SSI MSOs in Arabic, Assyrian languages and Kurdish-Kurmanji.

The workshops began with a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country. The main activities revolved around yarning about the local site's ecology and history; demonstrations of the use of local food, grasses and trees; and discussion of the birds and wildlife. These were all carried out by the First Nations researcher. Through these discussions, participants asked questions about First Nations customs and relationship to Country, and spoke of their experiences of their home country. Though the focus was on experiencing the local environment, conversations also broadened to larger themes of settlement, belonging, colonisation, cultural connections and language use.

Stage 2: YarnCountry App

Part of the workshop also included the introduction of a mobile app, YarnCountry, that enabled participants to record thoughts, emotions and photos of Country. The Mapimo YarnCountry app is a digital emotion-mapping space that was co-designed prior to and independent of this research, by the First Nations researcher and project cultural lead Madison Shakespeare. The app allows people to post entries that reflect their emotional responses to their locations. These posts include 'tagging' a place with up to three emotion labels, and options for adding textual commentary and photos or images. All posts were submitted through a common anonymised account, so that individuals could not be identified.

The app offered a digital emotion-mapping space designed around knowing, doing and being and offered continuity between the YarnCountry workshops and the follow-up online focus groups. By asking participants to think about their emotional response to place, it connected with concepts of place-based knowledge, connection and belonging that were central to the YarnCountry workshops.

The list of emotions in the YarnCountry app is in the form of a controlled vocabulary aimed at encompassing a wide spectrum of emotional responses, developed and tested in earlier versions of the app (Deitz et al., 2018) and adapted from Circles of Emotion initiative (James et al., n.d.), part of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions. The list of emotions includes: 'Empowered', 'Excited', 'Proud', 'Happy', 'Surprised', 'Content', 'Thoughtful', 'Reflective', 'Frustrated', 'Safe', 'Overwhelmed', 'Anxious', 'Uneasy', 'Fearful', 'Depressed', 'Angry' and 'Displaced'. Selecting up to three emotions allows participants to express nuanced and sometimes conflicting emotional responses elicited by a specific place.

Participants were encouraged to upload their posts on the app, both during the workshop and over a subsequent four-week period. Over a three-month period (late January to early April), 140 posts were recorded. The images, texts and emotions shared in the posts contribute to recognising the continuity of place-based concepts found in the focus group discussions.

Stage 3: Focus Group Discussions

The third stage involved 90-minute online focus groups with each of the five groups who took part in the workshops, and a single follow-up focus group gathering the perspectives of SSI MSOs from refugee backgrounds. In the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss experiences of the workshop and their use of the YarnCountry app, and to share wider reflections on questions of Country, culture and belonging.

The focus groups were led by the First Nations researcher, mixing conventional focus group questions with yarning to determine refugee participants' perspectives. As described earlier, yarning, a traditional way of communicating across Australian First Nations communities, is a valuable research method that has the potential to establish culturally safer research environments that facilitate the collection of data. Yarning is commonly seen as a more informal approach to information exchange, where participants convey their responses and feedback through personal stories that hold contextual significance.

The focus group discussions centred on four key areas:

1. How do refugees connect with First Nations issues?
2. How can workshops with Custodians, such as the YarnCountry workshop participants took part in through this study and the use of the YarnCountry app; and other resources and opportunities assist in developing refugees' interest in, and long-term engagement with, First Nations issues?
3. What are common lines and shared knowledges of thinking and connecting to ideas of land, Country and belonging between First Nations peoples and refugees?
4. How can place-based learning be used to develop a stronger sense of belonging among refugees?

These were translated into the following seven questions that guided the discussions:

1. What are some of the things you have learnt or the feelings that you have had about Country and Aboriginal cultures from the YarnCountry workshop and using the app?
2. When you first arrived in Australia, what opportunities did you have to learn about Country and Aboriginal cultures? What do you think would help refugees coming to Australia to hear about or engage with Country and Aboriginal cultures?
3. Has this affected, in any way, your sense of belonging in Australia?

4. Has your engagement with your local environment/suburb changed as a result of learning about Country? (If so, how?)
5. What aspects of your own history, culture and settlement journey have helped you to understand First Nations histories and cultures?
6. What would help you to continue learning and engaging with First Peoples and cultures? For example, education, meeting and talking with local Aboriginal communities or Elders in community events, sharing stories. Would you have the time and interest to engage in these activities?
7. What are some of the things you and your community can do to support or engage with issues affecting First Peoples in Australia? (e.g., reconciliation? the Voice?)

The First Nations researcher used yarning touchstones to encourage more circular conversations about participants' experiences of the YarnCountry workshops and more generally their life experiences, cultural knowledges and practices. The seven focus group questions were used as a basis for the seven touchstones of yarning (Fig 1). Two of the other researchers attended each focus group along with the First Nations research lead and participated in the group facilitation so each discussion tended to progress in different ways.

Figure 1:
Yarning touchstones used in focus group discussions



Focus group participants

Thirty-two participants took part in six focus groups. The focus groups varied in terms of the number of participants — four in one case, and ten in another, with most involving between five and 10. After the second focus group was held, a decision was made to convene an additional focus group involving the SSI MSOs, due to their own lived experience of being refugees and the valuable cultural insights they acquired in their roles in recruitment and providing in-language support. In particular they were able to reflect upon questions that emerged in translating concepts yarning about in the YarnCountry workshops and the subsequent focus group discussions.

Data coding and analysis

Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and translated, and then coded and analysed thematically. The analysis led to the identification of four key themes, discussed in Findings and Discussion below. These can be regarded as four interconnected themes through which refugee communities develop an understanding and sense of belonging to Australia, guided by First Nations' histories and practices.

Limitations

The research had limitations that affect generalisability and robustness. As the focus groups were the major source of data, limitations relating to these are itemised here. These limitations are common to many forms of online, group-based research. While they mean conclusions may not generalise to other refugee groups, nonetheless our findings show consistency of responses across participant groups, different locations, language groups and countries of origin.

1. Focus group discussions were held online, and in one (the Ezidi focus group) there were significant technology issues that impacted on the discussion.
2. In many cases, the researchers relied upon MSOs to provide in-language support of questions and responses. In an online focus-group discussion, this can lead to delays or overlapping conversations that limits the amount and quality of data that can be gathered.
3. Online group discussions can also be challenging environments in which to ensure all participants are given adequate time to respond to questions. In some discussions, a few participants were more 'vocal', which may either shape responses of other participants, or make it difficult for them to speak. Where feasible, and where this didn't make participants uncomfortable, facilitators directed questions to specific individuals, to counter this form of bias.
4. Participants self-nominated to participate in the YarnCountry workshops (Stage 1), use of the YarnCountry app (Stage 2) and participate in focus group discussions (Stage 3). Both self-nomination and subsequent participation likely meant the research recruited participants with strong predispositions towards the workshop materials and general learning about First Nations issues and histories. While there is no reason to expect their responses would differ from other refugees, it may be difficult to generalise to the wider population of refugees in Australia for this reason.
5. Transcription and, where needed, translation of focus group recordings, for reasons of time and cost, were conducted using an (offline) automated system (OpenAI's Whisper model). Transcripts were spot-checked by the research team for accuracy; however, minor errors may have occurred due to the quality of online recording.



6. Coding and thematic analysis were conducted by the research team using a recognised iterative approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As with all qualitative research, identification and application of codes and themes involves subjective interpretation. Two of the research team members compared and cross-checked their analyses of focus group data, to reduce the likelihood of systemic interpretive bias.
7. Finally, as the focus groups were preceded by a YarnCountry workshop on Country, this may have introduced bias among participants in relation to findings around place-based knowledge and preferences for experiential learning.



Findings and Discussion

Focus group discussions

The culturally engaged yarning research practice in the focus groups generated valuable perspectives from participants. There was considerable fluidity across the research stages and subsequent themes, and this should be noted in any future action research that aims to facilitate refugee engagement with First Nations issues and histories.

Four key themes emerged from coding and analysis. These themes are: Engaging with Community; Future Connections; Belonging through Country; and Sharing Cultures. The remainder of this section organises focus group findings by these four themes and sub-themes.

Many participants showed interest in learning about Aboriginal cultures, but they also talked about their limited opportunity to acquire that knowledge.

Theme 1: Engaging with Community Learning, engaging, and enacting interest in first nations communities and issues

Through the YarnCountry workshops participants had an opportunity to engage with, and learn about, First Nations peoples and issues. The workshops, which were delivered in-person and on Country, enhanced participants' interest in learning more about Aboriginal traditions and cultural and political issues, and participants emphasised how these kinds of opportunities of engagement were limited, and hence their own prior knowledge was also limited.

1.1 Prior learning and engaging with First Nations communities

There were common experiences across participants in their limited opportunities to learn about First Nations communities when they first came to Australia and during their settlement journey to date.

When those opportunities existed, it was typically through educational institutions, such as English language learning providers (e.g., TAFE or Navitas) in the Adult Migrant English Program funded by the Australian government, where they acquired some initial ideas about Aboriginal communities. At times, this was through direct learning, where some participants remembered learning to some extent about Aboriginal cultures as part of the curriculum. In other instances, it was through Aboriginal friends they met in these educational settings.

Some participants also recalled learning about Aboriginal peoples through SSI when they first came to Australia. SSI provides information on First Nations as part of its orientation for refugees, delivered as part of the on-arrival support through the Humanitarian Settlement Program funded by the Australian government. Through this, participants gain some basic information about First Nations peoples in Australia, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and Aboriginal languages.

Participants in the SSI MSO focus group who have direct working experience with refugees seem to recognise more than others the value of settlement organisations as a provider of information about First Nations peoples to newcomers. For some, their on-the-job experience enabled them to learn about Aboriginal issues.

“The other day, I was translating for a family [of] new arrivals and there was an orientation training with the First Nations section. The lady from SSI talked to us about First Nations people and I learn a bit.” MSO Focus Group (FG)

Many participants showed interest in learning about Aboriginal cultures, but they also talked about their limited opportunity to acquire that knowledge. Some participants gained some knowledge about First Nations peoples, rather than cultural practices, from their learning required to pass Australian citizenship tests. As a result, their understanding of First Nations issues seems to be based on the concept of citizenship. This observation is consistent with the literature, which suggests that information

about Aboriginal peoples often falls under the purview of sovereignty and citizenship from a Westphalian nation-state perspective (Bauder, 2011).

“Now that we did our citizenship we learned about indigenous Australians, especially with the citizenship courses, there was a specific section on this. The information was also provided to us by SSI workshops when we first arrived, so we know who indigenous Australians were.” MSO FG

In addition, some participants talked about workshops and meetings organised by SSI to introduce them to Country, although these are offered as community engagement initiatives and are not part of on-arrival settlement support for refugees when they first arrive in Australia.

“Some of these workshops included Aboriginal culture and mentioned that Aboriginal people are the first owners of Australia.” Logan FG

One person who arrived in Australia at a young age recalled their first involvement with Australian Aboriginal culture was at primary school. They had very limited exposure during secondary school, although there were more opportunities to learn about First Nations knowledges and practices at university.

“In high school, they just want you to be done and go to university and get out of there. At university, we have a lot of consideration for Aboriginal people and culture, and our tutors and lecturers make a habit of stating and working with Aboriginal culture and people.” Assyrian FG

Participants exhibited varying degrees of knowledge about First Nations communities, which appeared to be influenced by the duration of residence in Australia. Those who had recently arrived seemed to have less awareness of First Nations issues, while those who had been in Australia for a longer time had more opportunities to learn and engage with Aboriginal communities, particularly through formal learning programs that they had participated in. Nevertheless, participants expressed a desire to learn more about Aboriginal cultures, and some hoped to do so through their children's attendance at schools in Australia.

“I have been here for three years, so I haven't got much knowledge about Aboriginal history from the English language. My nephew is studying at school, so every time he comes home, I ask him ‘What did you study about Aboriginals today? I want to hear from you.’ He has to teach me as well.” Assyrian FG

1.2 Interest in First Nations' cultures and traditions

Participants' interest in learning about First Nations' cultures and traditions was evident throughout their settlement journey. A participant shared a story of a friend's presentation on Aboriginal culture, which they found enlightening. Although this exposure to learning about First Nations' Australia was limited, it nonetheless sparked their curiosity and eagerness to learn more. Like others, they found few opportunities to pursue their interest, which underscores the importance of offering opportunities for learning throughout the settlement journey. Some

participants are unaware that Aboriginal people were living in Australia prior to the British invading and colonising in 1788, while others outlined a basic understanding of Australia as a First Nations' country that still is enriched by the knowledges and cultures of First Peoples. In addition, participants consistently stated they had limited meaningful contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with whom they could develop informed perspectives on First Nations Australia.

Participants' observations of previous learning opportunities tend to emphasise a lack of knowledge about cultural learning. For most participants, the YarnCountry workshop, centred on cultural practices and Country, was their first meaningful encounter with Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

When reflecting on their past experiences of learning about First Nations issues, participants frequently highlighted the importance of cultural elements. These included knowledge-sharing about the land and cultural practices, and place-based histories of locations where participants are settled.

“You know, sometimes there was a very amazing Aboriginal man who will just look at the sky and he'll tell you it's going to rain. I find it very, very interesting to see them knowing what's coming and what's new about the world.” Logan FG

Some participants acquired knowledge about Aboriginal issues through their own curiosity and eagerness to learn. One person recounted going to the local rural Aboriginal community and receiving a recommendation

to enrol in TAFE courses or visit the library to read books and learn more about Aboriginal communities. This person's desire to learn stemmed from a desire to better understand what life may involve living in a rural area, and to gain an informed perspective on the cultural practices and traditions of the First Nations peoples of the country in which they were settled.

“When I went to TAFE my teacher asked us to make a program about any topics that are really interesting. I just picked up the topic of Aboriginal people. I learned something about Aboriginals and their beliefs and traditions.” Logan FG

Some participants discovered information on cultural practices through less formal means, such as watching videos on YouTube or TV shows about First Nations issues, or through visiting museums and viewing cultural artefacts.

1.3 Interest in First Nations issues

Because refugees have had limited opportunities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and learn directly from Traditional Owners about cultural knowledges and practices, participants' self-reported understanding of Aboriginal political issues was limited. Those who had prior knowledge tended to focus on the political aspects of representation. They expressed disappointment with deficit narratives and misrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in films shown in TAFE, schools and in the media which they contrasted with their participation in the YarnCountry workshop.

“Before, the idea that we had in our mind wasn't clear and wasn't positive. It was not negative either, just not clear. During the workshop, things changed in our mind. What we learn in the workshop has corrected our mind.” Assyrian FG

In the quote below, a participant shares their experience and motivation in learning about First Nations issues after attending the screening of a European-made documentary on the topic of Australia Day. During one of their classes, the participant spoke about their feeling of sadness after watching the film, and a sense of perceived injustice, especially since the topic was also applicable to their own community's story.

“What inspired me to learn about the Aboriginal community is one of the movies that they showed on Australian Day in my class. It was a sad movie. It was injustice in my opinion. The British occupied and they [Aboriginal people] suffered a lot. One of my classmates fell from the chair because the story was absolutely her own story. The film was about young girls being abused by the British. I see in my eyes what happened on that day. From that, I wanted to learn more because that movie related to my community story as well. So that's inspiring me to learn [about] the Indigenous community, the story and what they've been through with all the abuse.” Arabic FG

The above sentiment suggests that a sense of shared suffering creates a connection with First Peoples. At the same time, most participants did not have prior

knowledge about reconciliation or the upcoming Voice referendum and seemed to be more interested in cultural practices and meeting with Aboriginal people, rather than discussing political issues. This could have also been triggered by the fact that the workshop focused on cultural practices and was the first time many of them engaged with First Nations issues in any depth.

Theme 2: Future Connections

Shifting representation and future learnings

Participants expressed a desire to learn more about Aboriginal cultures and people, and a corresponding wish for opportunities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. Those with greater prior exposure to First Nations issues tended to reflect on that knowledge, and associated feelings of sadness in relation to the destruction of First Nations cultures and traditions through colonisation. As a result of participating in the workshop and using the app, these participants spoke about understanding First Nations ways of relating to Country and culture in a more positive light. They expressed wanting to continue learning and engaging with Aboriginal issues positively, and to do so by learning about cultural practices and direct interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In this regard, participants indicated they wished for more face-to-face engagements — facilitated and led by First Nations people — and suggested these

learning opportunities should be offered in different languages to facilitate sharing and connecting in more depth with First Nations cultures and practices.

2.1 Learnings from YarnCountry workshop

Participants' reflections of their experience of the workshop suggest positive emotions relating to learning about cultural practices and the natural environment. Comments highlight the challenges faced by refugees when adapting to a new cultural reality and underscore the significance of learning about First Nations' cultural practices — such as the importance of specific trees, their uses in survival, and their roles in the local natural environment.

“I did learn about survival skills, you know, the trees that you showed me, it's very helpful. I do know a lot of the forest and the trees or the environment in the bush or the jungle. But that one is for my new chapter [of knowledge] for me to have. And now any time that I go into the bush, I try to find that tree so that I can pass the message on to my family, the next generation.” Logan FG

Learning about cultural practices, according to another participant, brings the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to life. Below a participant recalls a healing practice which made Aboriginal people and their culture more real and tangible, as opposed to simply learning about them in a theoretical sense. They appreciated the YarnCountry workshop because it gave them experiential insights and knowledge.

“I just remember that they put a nut or something into the water for three months. Yeah, and that was an amazing thing to actually heal themselves and help with their health. These things make Aboriginal people more alive in my imagination, make them very real. It was very valuable and very nice because that’s what I haven’t heard from anyone and haven’t read anywhere actually.”
Melbourne FG

Similarly, another person noted that the workshop was a different way of looking at Aboriginal people which did not focus only on issues such as poverty or lack of access to the justice system. Instead of adopting a deficit approach, the workshop focused more on the positive aspects of First Nations’ knowledges, everyday practices and cultures. This participant appreciated this strengths-based approach and positive outlook on Aboriginal ways of being, shared directly by a First Nations Australian which led to different forms of learning, compared to those they had previously received.

“I think to myself that this [workshop] is a different way of looking at Aboriginal people which doesn’t say Aboriginal people are poor, or don’t have access to the justice system, or that they take too much of public money. They don’t quite do that. It was a different way of just focusing on how they were living, just the culture, not including those we are struggling with. It’s not that we don’t want to hear about Aboriginal suffering but it’s about the positivity that you brought to us. That’s my first time actually in such a workshop that

only focused on the positive part of Aboriginal people.” Melbourne FG

The refugees’ yearning for positivity might stem from their own past experiences of suffering — or simply reflect a desire to hear more about First Nations ways of understanding and relating to the natural environment that they too now inhabit, helping to build a sense of belonging to Country.

Likewise, the excerpt below expresses appreciation for the way the workshop was conducted, particularly the experiential, immersive aspects of it which allowed the participants to feel included in the experience of the natural environment.

“The way you were touching the trees, the way you were telling us about the birds flying, that was really interesting. And it tells us we felt included in that experience, in that whole experience. You took us to a totally different time. The way of preparing food, healing and all of these things that were practices, the practices that were used back then and still till now by the Indigenous people, it’s really interesting. It just makes us relate [to] and know that these people are here.” Melbourne FG

Others felt that the workshop was a rare opportunity involving hands-on activities and hearing directly from a First Nations person. Participants of the workshop expressed a genuine appreciation of the generosity of the presenter in sharing her Aboriginal culture, using phrases such as “interesting experience” and “very valuable”.

SSI MSOs expressed similar sentiments that the workshop was valuable not just as a means of learning information, but also due to the way it was delivered. They compared this workshop to previous ones they attended, and reinforced that it was interesting to see and understand the Aboriginal ways of living and with the opportunity to learn this in a positive light through experiential learning, with first-hand experiences.

2.2 Future learning and engagement

Participants' reflections of the workshop emphasise the importance of living in a respectful and non-exploitative manner with other people and non-human forms of life, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background, and specifically the need to form meaningful relationships between First Nations peoples and refugees. These concepts underscore place-based epistemology (Anderson and Bristowe, 2020). Linking land and cultural practices has significant implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and refugees, as it can foster a sense of connection to the land and its inhabitants, creating a sense of inclusion and knowing a particular place. The participants were aware of the obstacles posed by their limited understanding and wished to understand and engage with First Nations issues through building trusting and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Some participants mentioned that more workshops like the YarnCountry workshop, and lessons and lectures on specific Aboriginal topics, would be valuable opportunities for continuing learning and

engagement. In addition, they mentioned the promotion of cultural awareness through the use of SBS community radio, which is broadcast in community languages and which newly arrived refugees rely on for information and updates on community life and events. Another effective approach is to utilise existing community centres as a gathering place to share information about First Nations practices. This avenue is especially useful to organise meetings with community leaders of both Aboriginal and ethnic community groups. Migrant Resource Centres can also serve as venues, since they offer a range of services and information to refugees and migrants. A key aspect emphasised by focus group participants in relation to these potential learning and engagement pathways is for the delivery of information to be in refugees' community languages.

Although websites of settlement service providers like SSI were suggested by participants as platforms to host relevant content, some felt that websites can be challenging to navigate, especially for older people, and suggested instead using social media platforms like Facebook, podcasts and YouTube videos. However, this depends on individual preferences and capabilities for self-directed learning. For those who prefer to learn direct from First Nations people, workshops are seen as a viable alternative.

“Online resources are very important for a person who has the, I don't know, the skills to access technology, who is more of an individual learner and wants to read by themselves. For other people [they] probably want to learn from the people, the Indigenous, Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. That's the way I think about it. Workshops are always an option." Melbourne FG

"It can just be one aspect, for instance, a local nature reserve, perhaps, or a local national park, just one feature of it. You can make another one, and a whole string of them and have a platform, then I think it's about people knowing how to find that platform." MSOs FG

Other suggestions included organisation of trips to spend time with First Nations communities, which could be used to learn about their way of life in an experiential format, and visits to cultural festivals during the year as a form of cultural exchange.

"Festivals are where different cultures share and every culture brings their own way of dancing. Their culture, what they do traditionally in their cultures. You can share among those groups, bringing Aboriginal people and show us your practices. We can be part of the team, we can share." MSOs FG

To summarise, participants recommended two main ways to improve refugees' understanding of First Nations histories and issues. Firstly, through First Nations-led education that emphasises local First Nations histories and Country. Secondly, by facilitating intercultural exchanges, such as attending events or community gatherings that bring First Nations, refugees and other communities together. Participants expressed a positive attitude towards attending events facilitated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for refugees and other newcomers,

in order to meet and engage with them. They believed that gaining knowledge through such events can be turned into action by passing on this knowledge to family and friends. Along the lines indicated by Nobel-Ghelani and Lumor's (2022) idea of land-based education, these participants value the role of First Nations peoples in facilitating their learning to enable them to have clearer understanding of how to have respectful relationships with First Nations peoples.

Theme 3: Belonging through Country Exploring emerging relations, cultural knowledge and cultural relatability

Through knowing and experiencing Country and the cultural aspects of Australia's First Nations, connections between First Nations and refugees were able to be explored in this research. The discussions revealed how these connections are largely premised upon establishing an alternate relationship with land and the natural environment, and ethical and spiritual values that shape and inform the basis of many non-Western cultures. Through these connections, participants expressed gaining a sense of belonging to Country, on the land where they resettled. There were references made to feelings of happiness, peace, relatability and comfort in participating in the process of yarning on Country. Their responses indicated how the process of knowledge generation and sharing is an emotional experience leading to connection and a sense of belonging.

These expressions align with Aboriginal place-based knowledge, as the experience of cultural connection is often manifested through a sense of belonging with the natural environment and spiritual connectedness to land. This connection through land, which brings together the natural, the spiritual and the cultural, is an experience of interdependent existence with human and non-human forms of life. The refugee participants, in expressing their ideas of 'home', 'comfort' and cultural and spiritual connectivity on resettled land, also remembered aspects of their own culture and homeland and emphasised, in relation to this remembering, the need to learn more about the Traditional Owners of the land where they have now resettled. At the same time, many stated they needed to feel comfortable in maintaining their own culture and practices on the settled land.

3.1 Culture and the emerging relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

As previously noted, participants' previous interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had been limited, but they expressed a sense of connection resulting from those encounters. Participation in the YarnCountry workshop and the chance to interact with a First Nations-led facilitation further strengthened this sense of connection.

"I learned from you, Madison, about your tradition. It was a good experience for me. It was very interesting also. I didn't know about your tradition at all." MSOs FG

The feeling of connection seemed to spring from their understanding of First Nations' cultures and histories. According to one participant, knowing someone's origin is helpful in facilitating conversations and fostering a deeper sense of connection.

"It [interaction] soothes me. It makes me feel more connected with this person. When I know what his origin is, I can interact with him. It's hard to interact if we are ignorant of each other's origins." MSOs FG

This highlights the importance of acknowledging, understanding and respecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences that people bring to their everyday interactions, in order to facilitate more meaningful interactions.

In parallel, during the focus group discussion the concept of friendship arose frequently.

"Having and forming friendships can really help us to get to know each other better." Arabic FG

Participants indicated that refugees who have recently arrived in Australia have a keen interest in acquiring knowledge about Aboriginal practices and customs, as this has significance for refugees in terms of being welcomed and integrated into the community, both locally and in the broader Australian society. They expressed the importance of being welcomed by Aboriginal people because they have resettled on land that belongs to the First Nations Custodians, who are the Traditional Owners of the land. One participant expressed appreciation for recognising First Nations peoples, both present and past:

“We pay respect to Aboriginal people, and we need to learn more from them and also respect them as far as they are respected in all kinds of occasions.” Logan FG

Other comments emphasise learning about the interconnectedness of Aboriginal cultures and the natural environment, which is reflected in their respect for the land and its ecosystems. This understanding of place-based epistemology allows the participant to appreciate the importance of recognising and respecting First Nations cultures and traditions.

This translated, in the excerpt below, to a sense of increased appreciation and closeness to the natural world when being in a particular location, noting the beauty of the surrounding nature brought to their attention by the YarnCountry app. This in turn resonated with their attachment to their homeland and traditions alongside deepening their understanding of the attachment of Australia’s First Nations to their land and nature.

“Certainly, we have become closer to the earth and nature here ... it reminds us of the beautiful nature around us. The app is telling us, ‘Look around’, that it is really beautiful. We liken it to our land, our lives. It increased our love for our homeland and our traditions and increased our knowledge about the love and attachment of the indigenous people of Australia to the land and the nature in it.” Assyrian FG

Similarly, the following comments indicate how the workshop experience and the use of the YarnCountry app fostered greater appreciation of Aboriginal cultures and stronger ties with Aboriginal people.

“When I heard the stories, when I looked at the pictures, it touched my heart. I want to have this opportunity to be close to Aboriginal people.” Logan FG

“There’s no big technology. I felt that they were something natural and simple.” Arabic FG

As a refugee in a new country, another participant speaks about a sense of safety and security (discussed in detail in section 4.2), which they attribute to the First Nations peoples for welcoming and accepting them. Aligning with the literature that emphasises the role of cross-cultural dialogues in the creation of relationships between First Nations peoples and culturally diverse Australians (Sengmany, 2006; Stephenson, 2001), participants’ expression of gratitude suggests a level of understanding and respect for the cultures and histories of the place they have resettled in.

“We came here as refugees. So, we’re safe in this country. And we’re glad that the Indigenous community accepted us. Also, any time that we do the events, there are welcoming from the indigenous leaders. And it’s there in my heart or attached to me that that’s the way we’re supposed to value the indigenous community or respect them.” Logan FG

Likewise, another participant recalls watching the SBS TV show *Go Back to Where You Come From* and comparing the history and ongoing struggles faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with their own experiences of colonisation in Burma.

“One day, there’s a documentary *Go Back to Where You Come From*. In my mind, if Indigenous people told me, “Go back to your country”, I would accept that. But not the white people, not the white people. This is your [Indigenous people’s] country. I wonder why people told me [to go back to your country]. I say, “No, it’s not right. You are like our enemy in Burma. You take over all the places you are.” I just want to share it. I really connected with the indigenous community, maybe through such experience of mine or my community’s.” Logan FG

Underscoring this participant’s deep respect towards the Aboriginal people and their connection to the land, they would accept being told to ‘go back to where they came from’ by the First Nations peoples – but not ‘white people’ – on the principle that it is their country, and they have the right to determine who is welcome here.

3.2 Knowledge about Country and First Nations’ cultures as a form of connecting

The YarnCountry workshop provided participants an opportunity to engage and learn more about First Nations’ cultures and what it means to experience Country. This form of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing was embodied, experiential and sensorial, and helped to establish an initial point of connection between people and cultures. According to one participant:

“The way Madison was feeling the trees, it was just, for me, it was making me feel like I belong, like I’m a part of this, even though I’m not. I’m not originally from here, but there is a connection that I’m building with the land, with nature, with everything on this land. So, I think it connects in a spiritual way that I’d say I wouldn’t feel if I read a book, or if I read an article.” Melbourne FG

The participant acknowledges that the feeling of connection is difficult to express in words but describes it as a spiritual experience. This implies that connection with the land and nature is not just intellectual; rather, it is rooted in a person’s interactions with the environment to a deeper, intuitive aspect of their understanding of the world that goes beyond cognitive processing. As noted earlier, the preference for an experiential type of learning about Aboriginal cultural practices also points to the limitations of traditional education methods in creating a sense of belonging and connection with nature.

Other participants shared perspectives around the value and meaning of learning

about First Nations' cultural practices and how these are echoed in their own cultures:

"I feel like I'm home, literally. Like, it's just, there's a feeling of being in Australia and seeing you guys and I'm like, those are my parents, like, my uncles, aunties, because in my culture, I will never, ever, ever call you by your name, never, ever." Logan FG

"It was really wonderful being able to share cultures as well." Arabic FG

The first comment reflects the participant's culture, where elders are not addressed by their name but rather by a familial title such as 'parents', 'uncles', or 'aunties'. Being in Australia with Aboriginal people and sharing the similar cultural practices (like addressing Elders in the family not by their name but their relationship with them) makes them feel like they are with 'family', echoing a deep-seated cultural understanding of the importance and meaning of family.

A sense of belonging and closeness can also come from sharing stories that can lead to a greater understanding of commonalities across cultures.

"Every time you interact with people or share stories or things like that, of course this will make you feel more comfortable." Arabic FG

"It [the workshop] also, I think, brings the two communities closer, because definitely there are similarities, like with cultural practices, some way, like water, fire, other foods, maybe already, but we can find out more probably about it later. And then this

might bring them closer, and they feel like they belong in this country ... and this country is not totally a country that we never had any similarities with or that we left our culture there and we moved here, and now we have to adopt new cultures." MSOs FG

The knowledge of First Nations peoples and Country leads to cultural connections; at the same time, through the establishment of cultural connections, further knowledge of places, peoples and cultures can be explored. The importance of these simultaneously occurring processes were highlighted by the participants in recounting feelings of comfort, happiness and belonging.

"I believe that when someone comes to a country and he or she has a bit of background knowledge about the country and who the people are who own the country, what is the country like, or who are the people who lived there a long time ago or now, [knowing all this] helps to settle better and to feel comfortable. So that makes me feel much better. And that is why I think it's very important to have knowledge about the country and its owners. And then, after the workshop, I was actually very happy. This helped me have a sense of belonging to know things about the country which I didn't know before." Arabic FG

The person's knowledge of the country is not just intellectual but is rooted in their personal experience of being in Australia, interacting with the environment and its First Peoples.

Many participants described the deeper process of learning about Aboriginal cultures as a significant experience. Their responses gave a sense of a recognition and consciousness of deeper, older stories and knowledge of First Nations and the histories of the land that is determined, not by colonising definitions, but rather by an acknowledgement that there is more to land than being ‘settlers’ on it.

“Whenever you open the app and you start realising “How am I feeling now?” And you start asking yourself. And I think that’s very important. Because you give a minute to yourself. And you start to think about your emotions towards the land, towards wherever you are at the moment, which is very, very helpful. So, I found the app to be very helpful. It gets us to discover our emotions about the land. And people around us basically. It reminds us that Aboriginal people are the actual owners of the land.” Melbourne FG

One of the participants explains that it is essential to know about the culture and way of life of those around us, because we live in and share the same country.

“To know their culture or to know how they live, it is important because we live in this country and we’re getting mixed up with other people. So, it is important to know about them. It makes us more likely to have a sense of belonging and also to engage with others easily and feel comfortable.” Arabic FG

“When it comes to Australia, there’s a lot of similarities and you sort of feel like you’re home. You’re not in a strange, strange country anymore.” Logan FG

Participants also talked about two-way dialogue and how learning from each other and sharing knowledge enabled them to better understand and appreciate different perspectives and feel the connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have with their land.

“I’m a person who likes the connections; connecting communities together, learning from each other. That way, you feel belonged more, because you’re learning, you’re seeing how a person is doing everyday life and relating. It also works the other way, when Aboriginal people see the newcomers in the country, bringing their own cultures with them. It’s exchanging learning from each other.” Melbourne FG

Overall, these comments underscore the importance of embodied and experiential knowledge in shaping our understanding of the world and in creating a sense of belonging and connection with nature. This also suggests that personal experience and sensory engagement with the environment or Country are essential: to truly understand and connect with nature, one must engage with it on a personal and embodied level.

3.3 Cultural relatability and a sense of belonging

The knowledge of Country and an understanding of Aboriginal cultures, values and connections to land and natural environments, as discussed in previous sections, helped the participants explore a sense of cultural relatability. Many participants emphasised this commonality and expressed how this connection has helped them develop a deeper sense of belonging with First Nations peoples in Australia, and with Country on which they have resettled. This corresponds to what First Nations and other scholars, intellectuals and activists have articulated with regard to place-based thinking and politics; in particular, how it encourages imagining a just and peaceful coexistence and a transformed relationship with the land (Stanley et al., 2014).

The literature on place-based belonging suggests that a sense of belonging is sourced from diverse experiences, histories, relationships, cultural perspectives, situations and shared societal understandings within which intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions take place. In previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging* the focus has mainly been on social connections and how they impact on refugees' sense of belonging (Culos et al, 2022). However, the participants' experiences of the workshops suggest that place-based knowledges could offer authentic and meaningful engagement between First Nations peoples and refugee communities to deepen a sense of belonging to Australia. The workshops show how Aboriginal people actualise nationhood and belonging, enabling opportunities, however

partially, for participants to reconceptualise refugee identities and experiences.

In a number of comments, participants express similarities between First Nations cultures and their own, with a specific focus on the beliefs and customs. They share their fascination with the similarities they found, and how these shared beliefs create a sense of unity and connection.

“I felt that we have core things in common.” Assyrian FG

“I found that lots of things are common between us and them. We come from a very old culture too.” Assyrian FG

This demonstrates an openness to different cultural perspectives.

“That’s what I feel when I meet you. When you did the ceremony with fire and you were talking to your ancestors, this is the way we like it. This is the concept of celebrating. We connect to our ancestors [because] they were celebrating the same ceremonies, hundreds of years ago.” MSOs FG

This accentuates the similar ways in which the different cultures interact to create bonds, illustrated in the following quote, where the participant shares an example from their own culture:

“Aboriginal culture is similar to my culture, especially with animals. When you mentioned snakes that approach people for a reason. So, in my culture, it’s believed that if a woman’s pregnant, and she doesn’t know, there’s a specific sort of animal

or an insect will come around, that will definitely indicate that she's pregnant. We believe that the snake never bites that pregnant woman. There's a lot of similarities when it comes to Aboriginal stuff, and I'm so honoured to be a part of this culture and explore more." Logan FG

The sharing of these anecdotes highlights the common ground across cultures. Another participant stresses the common importance of consulting their elders to learn more about their own culture and beliefs:

"Maybe things are connected. We still celebrate religion, but I think from what I heard from my grandmother, there are things that will exist. And yeah, so it's interesting because what you're talking about, and I'll just use different words, but same, very much the same ways in which it's been used. I mean, that's such another unifying sort of, you know, common, shared value I think that we have. That's how I live. That's how you guys [Aboriginal people] live." MSOs FG



Theme 4: Sharing Cultures

Deepening a sense of belonging through shared experience of cultural vulnerability, feeling of cultural safety and mutual care for country

As participants gained insights into First Nations' cultures and connected with Country, they also delved into difficult experiences of insecurity and suffering and a shared sense of vulnerability experienced by First Peoples and refugee communities. Participants emphasised the need for cultural safety and cultural preservation as important aspects of belonging and a mutual responsibility to care for Country.

4.1 Shared experience of suffering and cultural vulnerability

Being exposed to a better understanding of First Nations histories and experiences of suffering, and connection to land, allows participants to open up and share aspects of their own cultural insecurity and vulnerability expressed in comments below.

“I know the suffering that the Aboriginal people suffer.” Arabic FG

“In our country back then we suffered a lot from the governments, and we think the Aboriginal people also suffered from the actions of the government. And we still are having problems. We suffered a lot.” Arabic FG

Despite the differences in their situations, there are similar experiences and challenges that seem to foster a sense of connection and unity between communities.

“What we lived and what we experienced is similar. We had to leave our country. But you were in your country, and you also had to go through unfortunate things.” MSOs FG

Participants expressed their own complex emotions about experiences of resettlement, talking about their sense of nostalgia and longing for homeland, and emphasising the emotional toll of leaving their country and cultural ties behind.

“We miss our culture, to be honest, we are happy and thank God we are here, we call ourselves lucky to be in Australia, but you do not know how much we miss our land.” Assyrian FG

Participants also reflect on the shared experiences and connections between the original inhabitants of a country and newcomers, particularly in relation to their connection to the land and the challenges they have faced.

“We are the original inhabitants of our country and we have come from small rural villages. We have an old and close connection to the land. We, our fathers, and our grandfathers have witnessed similar cases of what happened to you, we feel what you feel, especially because they [our ancestors] were also living in small towns for hundreds of years.” Assyrian FG

Experience of isolation and loneliness is a barrier to feelings of belonging. In several comments across the focus groups, participants express the importance of social interaction and cultural exchange to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness and improve mental wellbeing.

“Being isolated and if you stay alone, you will feel lonely and you will feel depressed also. So, you have to participate, to interact with people.”
Arabic FG

By participating in social activities and interacting with others, individuals can develop a greater sense of belonging, which tallies with the findings of the earlier phase of *Foundations for Belonging* research (Culos et al., 2022). Several participants noted that this sense of belonging can lead to feelings of comfort and happiness, combating feelings of isolation.

“If someone lives alone, they feel alone, they don’t have a sense of belonging. They feel that “Where did I come from?” When they enter the society, they become partners with people, interact with them, with stories, food or anything. Of course, this helps a lot because it gives you a sense of belonging, of comfort and happiness as long as you are alone.”
Arabic FG

“The more you get involved with others, with other cultures, the more you feel you have to get yourself. Belonging gets better because you don’t feel lonely. There are other people and you know them and you know their culture.” Arabic FG

Another participant stresses the significance of community, expressing their desire to connect with others. The participant indicates the importance, as someone who is alone with their daughter and family, of belonging to a local place-based community that provides support and companionship.

“And if we live for this place, we need to take care of this place, of course. And for me, our meeting is very important, because I need to study language, and I need to connect with people because I’m alone with my daughter and with family. It is very important for me now not to be alone. I need to start a new life.” Melbourne FG

4.2 Cultural safety and diversity

Alongside cultural vulnerability and insecurity, the need for cultural safety was emphasised by the participants. The participants acknowledged that they hold a deep sense of love and attachment for their own culture and land and that sharing stories and experiences with one another in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect was crucial. Additionally, observing First Nations cultures strengthened refugee participants’ notion of cultural safety, expression and confidence in practising their own culture.

“We have opportunities to live in Australia, but we love our culture and love our land.” Assyrian FG

“It’s not necessarily like to adopt the culture. Everyone has their own culture. But the most important thing is to share with each other, to share their events, to share our events because we live in this country, and we are all together.” Arabic FG

Taking this further, the statement below expresses the speaker's desire to educate others about their culture and to avoid negative stereotypes.

“I want people to know about my culture. When I mentioned I'm from Iraq, I don't want the first thing that comes to their mind is terrorist attacks. I want people to know that we have a completely different culture. They always assume I'm Arabic. I'm not Arabic, I'm from another ethnic group. It's not bad or negative that they assume I'm Arabic, but I don't want to have this assumption.” Melbourne FG

Some participants compare Australia to a house, suggesting that, as settlers, they must respect the rules and traditions of the country while also valuing and preserving their own culture. They emphasise the importance of remembering and passing down their cultural traditions to their children, but also acknowledge that these traditions may not always be practised in the same way as they were in their homeland. Some highlight the importance of feeling safe and secure in one's cultural identity, suggesting that living in a country that does not respect or support their culture would be a threat to their sense of safety and wellbeing. They emphasise the importance of cultural preservation and imply that individuals should be able to live and practise their culture freely and comfortably. In this regard, as expressed below, there is a general appreciation for the YarnCountry workshop, because it assured participants that it is acceptable to practise cultural traditions without feeling embarrassed or ashamed.

“In the workshop and the way that you [Madison] performed, your traditional rites increased my confidence and my love to continue my traditions without any embarrassment, and that is really nice, that is powerful.” Assyrian FG

Participants also note the importance of recognising and preserving the cultural practices of First Nations peoples. In this extended remark, a participant suggests that by understanding and appreciating Aboriginal cultural traditions, individuals can improve their sense of belonging and connection to the country. The following extended quote summarises the complex but hopeful views of preserving diverse cultures.

“If people think, watch or listen about the similarities in cultural practices, it helps them to actually improve their sense of belonging because they feel like, okay, those people who lived in this country for thousands of years, they still practise their culture. So, we might as well continue practising these things in Australia, in our new country. Also, I need to think about the children, the new generation, our children, I need them to know about it as well, the first owners, landlords of this country, because I think they [children] are missing out. We need to reach to them as well and pass some of what we talked about today to them as well, not only the adults, because they [children] are adopting the Australian culture, the very, the Western culture with ease and they like it. And I think they don't even care much about their own culture or about Aboriginal culture here. Since they are

very young, if they have something positive, or we can reach out to them, it will stay for probably, you know, life-long, and they go and find out more about it later on.” MSOs FG

Overall, participants emphasise cultural diversity and the value of respecting and preserving one’s own culture while also engaging with and learning from others. The emphasis on sharing stories and experiences suggests a desire to promote cross-cultural understanding and maintain one’s cultural identity while also being respectful of other cultural traditions in the broader community. It is clear that feeling safe and comfortable in one’s cultural identity is a key aspect of belonging.

4.3 Mutual respect for the land: An emerging action of ‘reconciliation’

In addition to the complex emotions involved in navigating new beginnings and opportunities, refugee participants also acknowledged the significance of Australia’s First Nations as the Traditional Custodians of the land and expressed a desire to understand and learn from their experiences. This aligns with the survey responses of refugees in the previous phases of *Foundations for Belonging* (Culos et al., 2021, 2022), and the response below highlights the similarities and differences between ‘landowners’ and ‘newcomers’ who have faced challenges in their lives.

“You are the “landowners”, and we are “newcomers”. But yeah, what we lived and what we experienced is similar. And we had to leave our country. But you were in your country. But then you also have to

go through unfortunate things. But we come together looking after each other and looking after countries. There’s a good strong sense of belonging there.” MSOs FG

The participant acknowledges that this common experience of adversity paradoxically serves to bridge geographical or cultural differences and underscores the importance of coming together and looking after each other as well as the land.

Participants also expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be welcomed by First Nations people of the land on which they have resettled and now live.

“It really makes it so much different for me for a First Nations person to say welcome to my country than any other authorities in Australia to say welcome to Australia. That makes a lot of difference for me because I’m being welcomed by a person who is from this land, originates from this land, from this country.” Melbourne FG

Mutual respect is a form of collaboration to help refugees overcome challenges in settlement. Valuing and acknowledging the Custodians of Country — and the ethical connections and practices they engage in — underlines the importance of coming together and looking after each other and the land.

The notion of allyship with First Nations peoples involves building relationships that are respectful not only with First Peoples but also with the land on which we live (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009). It can be argued that participants’ recognition of the mutual

respect for the land is an emerging action of reconciliation that stems from knowledge of the First Nations' cultural practices in relation to land and participants' emerging connections with First Nations people and Country. Their emphasis on interactions and relationships between refugees and First Nations peoples, and on the importance of newcomers' capacity to listen, accept, talk, learn, work together and respect each other, can be considered as pointing to reconciliation. As Kinev (2015, p. 211) argued, "reconciliation is realised when two people come together and understand that what they share unites them and that what is different between them needs to be respected".

"It really makes it [good] for a First Nations person to say welcome to my country ... because I'm being welcomed by a person who is from this land."

YarnCountry app data results

The use of the YarnCountry app aimed to provide participants with continuity between the YarnCountry workshops and the focus group stages of the research. Through the app, participants were prompted to provide contextually meaningful visual and written narratives of their experiences on Country. It reminded users of their emotional wellbeing by inviting them to record their emotions and reflect on how place and Country affect their mood. Even if users chose not to create a post, they could still participate in a communal knowing space that evolves as others share their experiences of how natural elements impact their being.

Between January and April 2023, the app recorded 140 posts; 61 of these posts were submitted by participants during the workshops, with the remaining 79 submitted at a later date. As all posts were anonymous, the number of individuals making the posts is unknown and it was not possible to clean the data.

All 140 posts included between one and three emotional 'tags'. In addition, there were 80 posts that included a photograph to explain the user's connection to the location, and 29 of those posts that had additional text annotations.

The emotion tags in the YarnCountry app helped participants anchor their experiences on the land and transform their embodied feelings about the workshop and the country into articulated emotions. This phenomenon aligns with existing literature on affect and emotion and their intersection with cultural geography. Of the 140 posts there were 381 emotions 'tagged'. Up to three emotional

tags could be recorded, and most posts include three emotion tags.

'Happy', 'Excited', 'Proud', 'Reflective', 'Safe', 'Empowered' and 'Content' all receive more than 25 tags with a small group of neutral or negative tags including 'Overwhelmed', 'Anxious' and 'Frustrated'. In addition to the positive sentiments suggested in the tags, it seems that there is a level of connection that can tentatively be distinguished from the positive emotions often felt in aesthetically pleasing natural environments with no deeper significance (such as 'Reflective' or 'Content').

The responses to Country are echoed in the words used in the textual responses. Some examples of the texts posted are:

'Peaceful waterfall. I felt how fast life is going and how OK nature is with that', posted 27/3/2023.

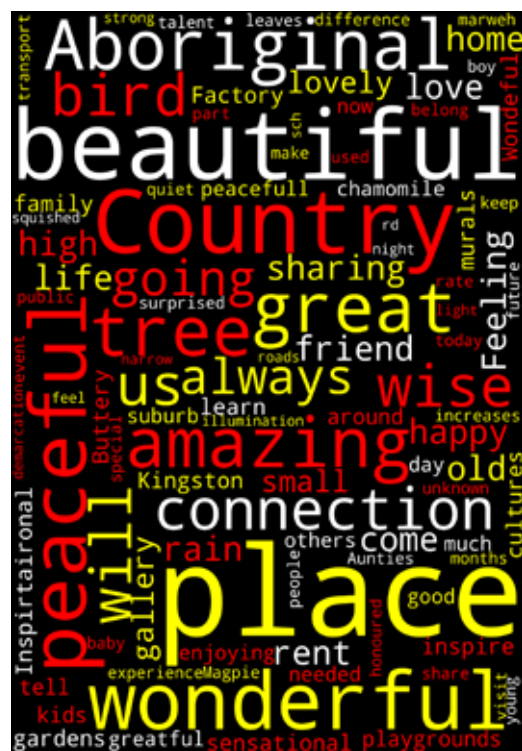
'In the gallery there are a few small sculptures reminding about the past', posted 27/3/2023.

'A wonderful place to explore', posted 13/4/2023.

'Lovely small Aboriginal island with gallery, where you travel for 5-8 minutes by free ferry from nearby', posted 27/3/2023.

The word cloud (Fig 2) is composed of common terms used in the 61 textual posts. Standout keywords ('place', 'Country', 'beautiful', 'home', 'peaceful', 'wonderful', 'connection') suggest participants were connecting positive emotional responses to aspects of their environment.

Figure 2
Word cloud of text posts in the YarnCountry app



The following are examples of posts with images and texts:



Very nice place, very peaceful (posted 27/03/2023)

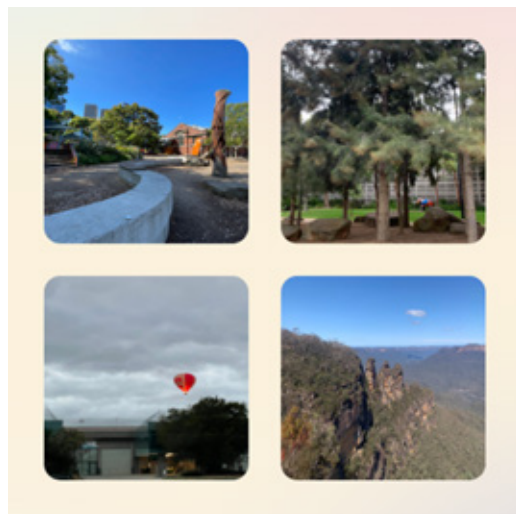


I always feel strong emotions under trees like this (Posted 31/01/2023)



what a beautiful place (posted 13/4/2023)
a wonderful place to come to for peace (posted 13/4/2023)
this place made me thinking about the life and connection between all of us (posted 2/3 /2023)

Below are examples of posts containing images only:



In summary, the use of the YarnCountry app may serve as useful bridging between person-to-person events like YarnCountry workshops and focus groups, creating continuity and a degree of immersion in the learning and/or research process. Prompted responses rooted in the local environment may have reinforced the learnings from the YarnCountry workshops regarding culture and Country, and embodied a First Nations approach to learning and conducting research.

In addition, through offering a different way of engagement to the workshops and the data from the focus groups, app posts indicate emotional ‘tagging’, photographic and verbal responses to place and Country, although it was not possible to link these to the focus group themes. In the context of *Foundations for Belonging*, while this emphasis on ‘place’ cannot directly be read as indicating a greater sense of belonging, the use of the YarnCountry app may provide a tentative indication of a growing awareness and relationship to the place and Country of resettlement.



Conclusion

Key findings

Foundations for Belonging aims to extend the understanding of settlement through research, gathering the perspectives of refugees and their everyday sense of belonging as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. This current research builds on three earlier phases of *Foundations for Belonging* published from 2020 to 2022. In this report, we present findings from exploratory research conducted in early 2023 focused on refugees' understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and histories in Australia.

The research found the following main intersecting themes:

- While refugees have limited prior exposure or engagement with First Nations histories and issues, they are interested in learning more about First Nations' cultural practices and traditions and having opportunities for meeting and cultural exchange with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Themes 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.2 and 3.1).
- Place-based knowledges, enhanced by First Nations-led experiential learning on Country such as the YarnCountry workshops and reflections of Country using the YarnCountry app, may be useful tools to build engagement and mutual respect for the land as an emerging action towards First Nations reconciliation among refugees (Themes 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2 and 4.3).
- Communication exchanges founded on the sharing of different cultural knowledges and practices can build culturally respectful, reciprocal relationships between refugees and First Nations peoples (Themes 4.1 and 4.2).
- Refugees' engagement with First Nations histories and connections to Country helps uncover similarities between First Nations cultures and their own — creating a sense of unity — which is likely to contribute to refugees' sense of belonging as they build a new chapter of their lives in Australia (Themes 3.3 and 4.2).
- Similarities and differences between First Nations histories, and refugees' histories, including experiences of suffering and connections to homeland and the land on which they resettled, allow refugees to share aspects of their cultural insecurity and vulnerability, particularly when First Nations histories are shared from a strengths-based approach highlighting Aboriginal ways of being, by a First Nations Australian (Themes 4.1 and 2.1).
- Refugees' knowledge of the continuity and endurance of Australia's First Nations peoples and cultures can imbue refugees, and their future generations, with a sense of cultural safety and continuity of their cultural traditions in the face of dominant Western 'settler' narratives in Australia (Theme 4.2).

This research advocates for a decolonising ethos to inform future institutional and systemic efforts to develop closer ties between First Nations and refugee communities, in order to truly build stronger foundations for belonging and reconciliation in Australia.

Recommendations

Government and policymakers

- As part of a suite of approaches to strengthen refugee integration, settlement policy in relation to key onshore programs, such as the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and the Settlement, Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program, should embed and strengthen knowledge and understanding among refugees of First Nations histories and issues.
- Settlement policy and programs at all levels of government should expand and incentivise community engagement, particularly at the local level and with a renewed focus on opportunities for refugees and First Nations peoples to engage on Country.

Settlement service providers

- Develop more systematic engagement activities between First Nations peoples and refugees across the major onshore settlement programs – the HSP, AMEP and SETS – throughout the settlement journey from initial orientation through to English language learning and broader community-based activities. These activities should focus on experiential learning and exchange of cultural practices and knowledges at the local level.
- Expand the development and implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) within settlement service providers to strengthen reconciliation initiatives between refugees and migrants with Australia's First Nations.

Migrant and refugee peak bodies

- Use existing research as groundwork to build future action research and advocacy, to uncover migrants' and refugees' understandings of Truth, Treaty and Voice as proposed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.
- Develop more opportunities for dialogue with peak bodies and communities that recognise the shared, yet different, experiences of exclusion between newcomers and First Nations peoples to better inform advocacy and policy towards Truth, Treaty and Voice.

Reconciliation groups (place-based)

- Facilitate opportunities for refugees and other newcomers at the local level to learn about and engage with reconciliation and allyship.
- Create ongoing, place-based engagement opportunities between refugees and First Nations communities, for experiential learning and engagement.

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