

CUERG (COMMITTEE ON UNDERREPRESENTED ETHNIC  
AND RACIAL GROUPS) EVENT – CONVENTION MEETING

- Topic: Exploring Welcomes and Acknowledgement of Country  
 Leadership  
 Team: Cristina Lledo-Gomez, BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education (Chair)  
 Melissa Pagán, Mount Saint Mary's University  
 Joseph S. Flipper, University of Dayton  
 Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
 Presenter: Melinda Jolly, Dharawal/Tharawal Australian-Aboriginal woman (guest)  
 Respondent: Melissa Pagán, Mount Saint Mary's University

For some years now, the CUERG (Committee on Underrepresented Ethnic and Racial Groups) leadership had felt a discussion on welcome to and acknowledgement of country was long overdue within the CTSA. Whilst a number of CUERG members had taken up the practice of acknowledging country within the concurrent sessions of annual convention, there was no presence of this acknowledgement at the plenaries within the history of CTSA's annual gatherings. Since the usual face-to-face convention became an online event this year, the usual CUERG luncheon did not take place. Instead CUERG leadership decided to focus on exploring the implications of taking up the practice of acknowledging country within the CTSA. They thus invited Dharawal woman, Melinda Jolly, to explain its significance, and requested Melissa Pagán, a decolonial feminist ethicist, to respond.

After Vanessa White sang a gathering song, invoking the Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds, the chair, Cristina Lledo Gomez, made her own acknowledgement of country. Jolly then presented first, beginning with a map of her country, providing thus the context from which she spoke as an Australian Aboriginal woman. From the very start, Jolly did not make assumptions about the knowledge of attendees and explained not only the why but also the who, how, and what that could be included in an acknowledgement or welcome. She utilized the vivid image of a passport to explain the significance of acknowledgements and welcomes. She then presented a brief history of such practices within Australia, against a background of racism and oppression of non-white persons, supported by Australian law and policy. "By acknowledging the Land and its Custodians," Jolly thus highlighted, "you're acknowledging our sovereignty and our history" which was denied since "the invasion of our country". Still today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "continue to experience exclusion, discrimination and oppression," making acknowledgements of country even more necessary for a nation supposedly committed to reconciliation, and for a church similarly committed to its concept and practice.

For Jolly, acknowledging country is only the beginning. Turning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a parallel process of reconciliation for indigenous peoples, Jolly posited that Australia must move from the stage of truth-telling to penance, requiring each Australian to accept the wrongdoing themselves and take the next steps toward reparation. Attendees were privileged to hear firsthand from Jolly the deep trauma experienced by indigenous people, intergenerationally, mentally, spiritually, and

physically, because of colonization and invasion. Jolly warned against tokenistic practices of acknowledgment but also encouraged attendees to do all they could to reach out to their local indigenous so that they could practice its most appropriate form.

The event entered into a time of group discussions before Pagán launched into a fiery response about “the politics and ethics of recognition and acknowledgement of country in settler colonial contexts, like the United States,” and the implications and considerations of such practice within the CTSA. She started with the poignant question: “What are we acknowledging...on this land which is sacred and stolen?” Moreover, “[D]o we intend to facilitate its repatriation through action and reparation?” Or would we simply engage in such a practice to “make us feel better,” to imagine ourselves “being and feeling just”?

For Pagán, acknowledgements of country can imitate much of the anti-racism discourse, where statements of “outrage and dismay” regarding violence for example against Black Americans or Asians, provide the appearance of doing anti-racism work, but in fact “do not move forward to apologize” or to recognize the dignity and agency of indigenous as well as their claims to land and right to determine the way forward. Pagán reminded attendees that “colonization is not an event, but a structure,” a structure that engages in “the logics of elimination” of indigenous and non-white persons, borrowing terms from Patrick Wolfe. Within this context, Pagán explained, the indigenous can only become visible if they take up the “pathological” move of “identifying with the colonizer” and “assert[ing] themselves within a settler colonial context that is structured to ensure they continue to disappear”.

Utilizing the work of Glen Coulthard, Pagán suggested that the indigenous and their allies “adopt a resurgent politics of recognition,” concluding with an invitation to attendees “to practice decolonial forms of gender justice, to imagine and build non-exploitative relationships, and to reveal and resist the ghosts of coloniality in our present and past.” This involved questioning on a deeper level what it meant to take up the practice of acknowledging country within the CTSA without neither being tokenistic nor reinscribing colonial relationships. Moreover, pointing to the previous day’s plenary panel with addresses from Charles Curran, M. Shawn Copeland, and Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Pagán reiterated the challenge for CTSA to take concrete action rather than remain passive or simply create more elegant statements on the need for justice for indigenous and other persons facing daily racism and oppression.

Approximately sixty participants attended the online event, lasting for an hour and a half.

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