

# **Rethinking Australia's International Past: Identity, Foreign Policy and India in the Australian Colonial Imagination**

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the ways in which Australia's global connections during the colonial period have shaped its contemporary international political identity and the implications of such an approach for the study of Australian foreign policy and international relations (IR). This is particularly pertinent due to recent historiographical reconceptualization of nineteenth century colonial networks, which suggest Australia's connections to India are far more important than previously considered. These issues are explored through a case study of Australia's links with India prior to Federation, employing a discursive analysis of public debate on utilizing Indian indentured laborers in tropical Northern Australia.*

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## Introduction: Australia's National Identity and Foreign Policy

Australia occupies an ambivalent space in the world: a predominantly white, 'western' nation geographically located on the periphery of Asia. This has been termed by John Howard, among others, as a conflict between history and geography.<sup>2</sup> Howard, however, rejected this as a false choice when discussing Australia's position between the U.S.A. and China. Prior to Howard's era, Gareth Evans and Paul Keating attempted to shift Australia's international focus away from distant, great and powerful friends to further engagement with its region.<sup>3</sup> The discursive emphasis was shifted back by Howard, who wished to be the 'deputy sheriff' of the U.S.A., though successfully engaged in Indonesia and China.<sup>4</sup> The subject has been debated more broadly within Australia over the past few decades over the extent to which Asia represents a 'threat' or an 'opportunity'.<sup>5</sup> What is clear, however, is that Australia's position in Asia has been discussed throughout Australian history and is regarded as crucial to its foreign policy to this day. However, until comparatively recently, it was understood through colonial discourses, rather than an independent foreign policy. I argue here that analysis of Australia's colonial relations can provide insight into the way that Australian identity was shaped through its external perceptions of Other during this formative period. I suggest that a constructivist approach to IR and Australian foreign policy can benefit from examination of the colonial period in Australia, particularly if we

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/dr-howard-sees-nothing-but-opportunity-in-emerging-world-order-20120410-1wmzq.html>: date accessed 21 June 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce R. Vaughn, 'Australia's Strategic Identity Post-September 11 in Context', *Contemporary South-East Asia* 25, 1 (2004): 95.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/3908294>, date accessed: 25 October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See, Stephanie Brookes, "'Secure in our Identity": Regional Threat and Opportunity in Australian Election Discourse, 1993 and 1996', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 58, 4 (2012): 542–556.

consider Australian identity as postcolonial. The connection to India becomes particularly important in the context of recent historical reformulations of the nature of India's centrality to the British Empire. To further illustrate the usefulness of such a perspective, I present an analysis of discourse on the issue of the hiring of Indian indentured laborers to work in tropical Northern Australia.

## **International Relations Theory and Colonial Histories**

Traditional IR theories have broadly ignored the relations between colonies as outside of the scope of analysis. IR was/is based on the Westphalian state system, which did not cover the entirety of the globe until decolonization gathered pace in the 1960s. Where does this leave colonial histories in international relations? The answer, for most mainstream theorists, is nowhere. Neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist approaches offer no attempt to examine this period of Australia's, or India's, development. Darby and Paolini first noted in 1994 that within IR, prior to decolonization '...Asia, Africa and other non-European territories were seen to be outside the civilized world... Hence, imperial relations were not international relations.'<sup>6</sup> Colonial societies were not modern states as they did not hold their own sovereignty. The goal here is not to discuss the India or Australia as modern states, but how the Australian colonies were connected to India, and how this impacted on the Australian colonies gradual formation of their own 'white', 'Australian' identity within the geographical context of Asia. Thus, this article only attempts to contribute to the constructivist project in IR, through a postcolonial analysis which includes colonial histories. In this sense, it argues

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<sup>6</sup> Phillip Darby and Anthony J. Paolini, "Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism", *Alternatives*, 19, 3 (1994): 380.

against the ‘state as actor’ in IR approach, seen in conventional or ‘Wendtian’ constructivism.<sup>7</sup>

Though constructivist IR provides an opportunity to consider Australia’s colonial history as shaping its identity, only certain strands within this broad approach utilize such historical issues. ‘Wendtian’ constructivism, while placing emphasis on identity informing actors’ decisions, closes off the forming of identities as part of its analysis. Alexander Wendt has argued that a ‘theory of the states system need no more explain the existence of states than one of society need explain that of people’.<sup>8</sup> This again places the pre-state period outside of IR. However, as Maja Zehfuss has argued, state identities are more complex, contradictory and unstable than Wendt’s approach suggests.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Australia, ‘pre-state’ identity was formed through experience of its external relations and perception of other colonial societies it came into contact with, and that to understand Australia’s postcolonial identity we need to understand as well its international colonial history.<sup>10</sup>

This approach is not without precedent in IR. Postcolonial scholars examining Indian identity have argued it is necessary to examine the ideologies of the nationalist movement prior to independence in order to fully comprehend Indian foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’, *The American Political Science Review*, 88, 2 (1994): 385.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’, 385.

<sup>9</sup> Maja Zehfuss, ‘Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liason’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 7, 3 (2001): 315-348.

<sup>10</sup> Himadeep Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 9.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Phillip Darby and Anthony J. Paolini, ‘Bridging Postcolonialism and International Relations’, *Alternatives: Global, Local and Political* 19, 3 (1994): 371-295; Sankaran Krishna, ‘The Importance of Being Ironic: A Postcolonial View on Critical International Relations Theory’, *Alternatives, Global, Local, Political*, 18 (1993): 385-417; L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations:*

And yet, the idea that Indian scholars have 'colonized' postcolonial Australian identity has not previously been considered in the same manner within IR, though I argue the same issues are relevant. Some scholars have pointed out the difficulty in locating Australia's postcolonial identity. Susan Sheridan has asked 'is Australia postcolonial yet?', while Huggan suggested the question could just as easily be rephrased as 'is Australia *still* postcolonial?'<sup>12</sup> That these two questions could be asked simultaneously demonstrates primarily that Australia is unsure if such terms apply to it. These questions have been considered through literary, cultural and media studies, but IR has largely not engaged with this issue, and only extremely limited work has been done on Australian foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> Australia as a

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*Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Himadeep Muppidi, *Politics of the Global*; Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Latha Varadarajan, 'Constructivism, Identity and neoliberal (in)security', *Review of International Studies* 30, 03 (2004): 319-341 and Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (London, 1998) and Priya Chacko, 'The Search for a Scientific Temper: Nuclear Technology and the Ambivalence of India's Postcolonial Modernity', *Review of International Studies*, 37 (2011): 185-208.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing 1880s-1930s* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999): 166 and Graham Huggan, *Postcolonialism, Racism and Transnationalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007): 27.

<sup>13</sup> Some very limited work has been done on identity issues facing settlers in settler-colonial societies. While Phillip Darby's work has contributed significantly to postcolonial theory in IR, extremely limited work has been done Australian foreign policy. For an overview, see: Derek McDougall, 'Foreign Policy Studies in Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 55, 3 (2009): 375-393. For an example of a study utilizing postcolonial theory in the context of Australian foreign policy, see: Susanne Shech and Jane Haggis, "Postcolonialism, Identity, and location: being White Australian in Asia?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16, 5 (1998): 615-629. Simon Philpott mentions the importance of postcolonial discourses in Australian foreign policy depictions of Indonesia, albeit very briefly, see 'Fear of the Dark: Indonesia and the Australian National Imagination', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 20, 46 (2001): 381.

settler-colonial society is not often considered ‘postcolonial’ in the same sense of a state such as India. However, this may be likened to the popular perception that ‘gender’ issues only apply to women: Australian identity needs to be considered ‘postcolonial’ as its identity was shaped through its colonial history and within colonial discourses of ‘race’ and racial hierarchy.

More broadly, this historical/constructivist approach to identity can help us to understand what makes Australia’s region a ‘threat’ and the great global powers of the day ‘friends’. If Australia cannot trust any other state’s motivations, as neorealist theory suggests, why continuously ally with culturally western, white states, over the powerful states in Asia? For neoliberal institutionalist theorists, the answer may lie in democracy and free trade. But why, then, has Australia’s relationship with India so often been considered ‘neglected’, and prone to ill-fated attempts at ‘re-engagement’?<sup>14</sup>

As Walker and Sobocinska have argued, Australian representations of Asia are frequently overdramatised, as floods or storms. Asia’s ‘rise’ is seen falsely as a new phenomenon, and ironically, has been regarded as such throughout Australian history.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On this point with regards to Indo-Australian relations, see: For examples of this thread in scholarship on Indo-Australian relations, see: Meg Gurry, *India: Australia’s Neglected Neighbor, 1947-1996* (Brisbane: Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, 1996); Meg Gurry, ‘Leadership and Bilateral Relations: Menzies and Nehru, Australia and India, 1949-1964’, *Pacific Affairs*, 65, 4 (1993): 501-526; Marika Vicziany, ‘Australia-India Security Dialogues: Academic Leadership in the Diplomatic Vacuum’, *South Asia*, 23, Special Issue (2000):159-178; Marika Vicziany (ed.), *Australia-India: The Economic Links: Past, Present and Future* (Nedlands: Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, 1993); Nihal H. Kurrupu, *Non-Alignment and Peace Versus Military and War* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2004) and Rory Medcalf, ‘Australia and India: How to Advance’, at [www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-and-india-how-advance](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-and-india-how-advance), date accessed: 21 June 2012. Wood and Leach ‘Australian Engagement with India’.

<sup>15</sup> David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska, ‘Australia’s Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century’, Walker and Sobocinska (eds), ‘Introduction: Australia’s Asia’, (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2012): 1-24. For a

Thus, Australia's 'Asian encounter' is constantly looming: imbued with a sense of urgency but rarely leading to action. Rather, Australia constantly needs to (re)engage and/or (re)discover its region,<sup>16</sup> repeatedly finding political events in Asia to be 'unprecedented'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, there is a constant desire to engage the region to take the advantages of Asia, or the 'Asian Century', which is tempered by fear of failure. In contemporary politics, this has meant that Australian students need to learn Asian languages in order to be 'Asia literate',<sup>18</sup> and our businesses and museums needing to be 'China ready' for the impending 'flood' of tourists as China 'rises'.<sup>19</sup> These discourses reproduce orientalist stereotypes that have historically been at the foundations of Australian ideational anxieties over Self, Other and region. For these reasons, we need to consider the international influences on Australian identity during the colonial period to more fully understand Australia's perception of place in the world. As is argued below, India presents an ideal case study due to Australia's links to Britain's most important colonial 'possession'.

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discussion of representations of Asia, see: Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Sally P. Wood and Michael Leach, "Rediscovery", "reinvigoration", and "Redefinition" in perpetuity: Australian Engagement with India 1983-2011', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 57, 4 (2011): 526-542.

<sup>17</sup> Walker and Sobocinska use this term, referring back to extremely similar comments by PMs Andrew Fisher and Julia Gillard on the 'unprecedented' rise of Asia. Walker and Sobocinska, 'Australia's Asia': 1-3.

<sup>18</sup> This term was used in the Rudd governments report on its 2020 summit. See, 2020 Summit Report, [http://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/2020\\_summit\\_report\\_full.pdf](http://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/2020_summit_report_full.pdf): 370.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-09/are-australian-businesses-china-ready/4809802>, date accessed: 11 August, 2013.

## Australian Identity and Foreign Policy

Australian identity has recently been considered as an element of its foreign policy by numerous constructivist or critical theorists in IR.<sup>20</sup> Very few, however, have performed an analysis of colonial Australia's identity discourses, though such analysis has been performed by historians.<sup>21</sup> Anthony Burke's *Fear of Security* outlines the position of 'security' in Australian national discourse. Though much of his examination covers post-federation Australia, he does discuss the psychology of Australian settlement: Australia as a vast 'empty' island continent, situated geographically within touching distance of 'overpopulated' Asia.<sup>22</sup> Srdjan Vucetic outlines the shared 'closeness' felt towards the UK and the U.S.A., rather than the negative fear felt towards Asia. Thus, for Vucetic, the answer also lies in a shared identity that is inherently racialized: the 'Anglosphere'. Vucetic argues that this shared identity felt between the U.S.A., the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand is derived from a white Anglo-Saxon identity that arose through the nineteenth and the early twentieth

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example: Richard Devetak and Jacquie True, 'Diplomatic Divergence in the Antipodes: Globalisation, Foreign Policy and State Identity in Australia and New Zealand', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 41, 2 (2006): 241-256; Anthony Burke, 'Questions of Community: Australian Identity and Asian Change', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 45, 1 (2010): 75-93. Much work on Australia's contemporary challenges with asylum seekers discusses the 'White Australia' policy and colonial identities. See, for example: William Maley, 'Security, People-Smuggling, and Australia's New Afghan Refugees', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55, 3 (2001): 351-370; Peter Gale, 'The Refugee Crisis and Fear: Populist Politics and Media Discourse', *Journal of Sociology* 40, 4 (2004): 321-340 and Richard Devetak, 'In Fear of Refugees: The Politics of Border Protection in Australia', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 8, 1 (2004): 101-109.

<sup>21</sup> This is done with very different goals in mind, but the example is instructive. For a thorough account, see: David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Burke, *In Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Annandale: Pluto Press Australia, 2001): 1-34.

century.<sup>23</sup> This identity has shifted from one that is explicitly racialized to one that is explicitly anti-racist. It still exists in the foreign policy sense, as seen in the U.S.A.-UK 'special relationship' and Australia's support for the ANZUS treaty.<sup>24</sup> Burke and Vucetic make similar arguments in very different ways: fear plays the same constitutive role in Australian-Asian relations as trust does in Australian-Anglosphere relations.<sup>25</sup>

'Traditional', for want of a better term, conceptions of Australian identity and Australia's colonial past emphasise a masculine Anglo-Saxon/Celtic Australia. Colonial, nineteenth century identities of Australia have been discussed from several perspectives. John Hirst has focused on pioneer narratives of pastoralists and farmers, suggesting that they 'built' the 'nation'.<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Partington has focused on shared 'Britishness' as creating the national character.<sup>27</sup> Russel Ward accounts for the 'typical' Australian through narratives of the independent, loyal, courageous bushman.<sup>28</sup> Within these accounts, the stereotyped Australian is a rugged male living off the land, and little or no agency of 'Australianness' is given to aboriginals or women.<sup>29</sup> These approaches have been critiqued effectively by Richard White, arguing that all are invented, and reflective of the hopes, fears

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<sup>23</sup> Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> For a similar argument with regards to Indonesia specifically, see Simon Philpott, 'Fear of the Dark: Indonesia and the Australian National Imagination', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 55, 3 (2001): 371.

<sup>26</sup> John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', in John Carroll (ed.), *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for National Identity* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992): 14-37.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Partington, *The Australian Nation: Its British and Irish Roots* (Melbourne: Transaction Publishers, 1994)

<sup>28</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966)

<sup>29</sup> Jeff Archer, 'Situating Australian National Identity in Theory and Practice', in Geoffrey Stokes, *The Politics of Identity in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 28.

and ideologies of their inventor: rather than an ‘authentic’ Australian.<sup>30</sup> Within Australian Foreign policy discourse, there remains a sense that ‘we’ can trust those who are most like ‘us’: the ‘great and powerful friends’, the UK and the US.<sup>31</sup> The pioneer narratives above are the very early genesis of this approach. Inherent in viewing the US and the UK as more trustworthy than the states in Australia’s region is the idea the major powers in Asia (India, China, Indonesia) are less trustworthy. Thus, within elements of Australian policy, racialized identities have had lasting impacts on the policy options which Australia perceives as the best way to provide for security.

Thus, foreign policy positions are underpinned by national identity, which is constructed through Australia’s historically-rooted identity logic. These can be analysed through discourses of national identity: stories Nation States tell themselves about who they are and what they should be. Analysis of the history of these narratives can reveal their origins and enable us to better understand how they continue to play out in the present. This can also allow for far deeper understanding of Australia’s perceived place in the world than a purely positivist ‘scientific’ approach to material concerns. This paper seeks to examine just one small aspect of Australian history: the attempt by the Australian colonies to use indentured labourers from India. I have three specific goals: to examine how Australian identity was shaped through the Indian connection, to argue that Australian discourse on India reveals ambivalence in Australian colonial identity, though racialized fear in different forms was ultimately dominant and

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<sup>30</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981): viii. See also, Richard White, ‘Inventing Australia Revisited’, in Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (eds), *Creating Australia* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1997): 13.

<sup>31</sup> This has varied in emphasis over the course of different governments. For a discussion of ‘traditionalism’ in Australian foreign policy, see Michael Wesley and Tony Warren, ‘Wild Colonial Ploys? Currents of Thought in Australian Foreign Policy’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, 1, (2000): 9.

to begin to examine how colonial / postcolonial ideational issues affect contemporary Australian foreign policy.

## Colonial History and Foreign Policy

In order to examine the usefulness of understanding Australian identity and foreign policy through colonial history I analyse two issues. First, the historiography of colonial networks, which reveals Australia's colonial history is far more intertwined with its region that has previously been acknowledged in IR. Second, I analyse how these connections shaped Australian identity through a case study of discourse on Indian indentured labourers. Finally, to show the relevance of postcolonial issues to contemporary politics, I briefly consider contemporary India-Australia relations.

If we accept each state as having a unique and malleable identity which shifts in relation to its position in the international system, then historical processes of identity formation can allow for temporally deeper analysis of identity. Thus, I employ a discursive analysis drawing on two techniques. First, what David Campbell described as examining the political consequences of 'adopting one mode of representation over another' with regard to depictions of British India and Indian labourers.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, I also draw on Edward Said's work *Orientalism*, as discourse on India in this period relied heavily on colonial stereotypes of 'Orient' as Australia's 'irrational', dangerous Other.<sup>33</sup> Within Australia, the obvious Other in the formation of a new, Australian 'white' identity were the internal aboriginal peoples. However, once we consider recent advances in the historical conception of colonial networks, external Others become

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<sup>32</sup> D. Campbell, *Writing Security United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin 1995).

‘closer’ than previously acknowledged, and can be viewed as impacting on Australia’s perception of its place in the colonial experience and by extension, the world.

## **Between Geography and *which* History? The Historiography of Colonial Networks**

Recent historical research has examined India’s centrality as a ‘hub’ to the British empire. Christopher Bayly, Thomas Metcalf, Robert Blyth and Tony Ballantyne have shown the importance of India to the British empire as a ‘hub’, projecting power, goods and people around the empire, allowing Indians to act as ‘colonizing’, as well as ‘colonized’, peoples.<sup>34</sup> The Indian network flourished after the Indian Rebellion and faded after World War One.<sup>35</sup> Ballantyne has clarified the recentring of the empire by arguing for a different conception of the British empire. He writes that the empire had previously been viewed as a ‘hub and spoke’ system in which London was the ‘hub’ and various colonies were ‘spokes’.<sup>36</sup> Ballantyne

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<sup>34</sup> See Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Thomas Metcalf, ‘The Empire Recentred: India in the Indian Ocean Arena’, in Gregory Blue, Martin P. Bunton and Ralph C. Croizier, *Colonialism and the Modern World*, (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2002): 25-39. Richard Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj: India, Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858-1947* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The work of Christopher Bayly is also particularly informative to the perspective of this paper. See: Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1870-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden: Wiley, 2004); Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Christopher Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*: 1-6, 204-221; Blyth, *Empire of the Raj*: 2-8.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Ballantyne, ‘Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia’, in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 112-3.

describes the empire as a complicated web, consisting of 'horizontal filaments that run among various colonies in addition to "vertical" connections between the metropole and individual colonies'. India was a sub-imperial centre in its own right.<sup>37</sup> Metcalf takes this approach and expands upon India's role within it. He emphasizes the sub-imperial role of India within this system, writing that 'if not quite a "spider" sitting at the heart of the web, India [was]... more than just one of the many colonial "knots" that may be said to constitute that web'.<sup>38</sup> It has often been noted that Australia relied on India's shipping in its earliest years to survive.<sup>39</sup> However, the connections between India and Australia ran far deeper and longer than just these early food shipments – they continued, and indeed strengthened, as Australian identity was shaped.<sup>40</sup> If London was the most important city to Australian colonies in the twentieth century, Calcutta was surely the second most important. These connections allow the opportunity to study Australian perceptions of Self through the colonies' dealings with India, rather than just the more obvious connection with London, and how this affected the formation of Australian identity.

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<sup>37</sup> Tony Ballantyne, 'Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia', 112-3.

<sup>38</sup> Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*: 7-8. For some examples of transnational history involving Australia, see, for example: M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008) and Anne Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005). See also: Malcolm Allbrook, "'Imperial Family": The Prinseps, Empire and Colonial Government in India and Australia' (unpublished PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> For some examples, see Harold J. Finnis, 'Early Indian-Australian Relations', *Proceedings of the Australian Geographical Society*, 40, 1 (1963): 39-42 and Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance shaped Australia's History*, rev. ed. (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2001): 57-59, 62-63.

<sup>40</sup> For further historical detail on this period and the broader argument, see Alexander E. Davis, 'Sibling Rivalry: the India-Australia Relationship', 1858-1901' (Unpublished MA Thesis, Hobart 2011).

Australia's relationship with India is an ideal case study for how the external Other in Australian thought defined at this very early stage how Australia began to see its role in the world. Analysis of Australia's relationship with India, then, can begin to show us how and why Australia's national identity was formed as conceptually 'white' through colonial discourses. Fear in Australian society of the Other has mostly been discussed in scholarship with regard to China and Chinese emigration.<sup>41</sup> India, as the colonial 'hub', was never likely to invade in the military sense, but India's place in the empire created the possibility of Indians emigrating to Australia as labourers, as had occurred in other British colonies. Through these connections, we can also view Australia's perception of India's place in the empire, as an example of the colonial Other. India's position in the Australian colonial imagination reveals the early political, cultural and discursive space in which Australian identity was formed, providing historical and theoretical insight into Australia's contemporary identity, which in turn defines contemporary discourses of Australian foreign policy.

Debate on Indian labour centred on whether they should be allowed in the far north of the country, or not at all. Indian indentured labour had previously only been allowed into colonies with primarily indigenous populations such as Fiji, Guyana and Natal. This took place in the context of a broader debate: was Australia 'of Europe' or 'of Asia'? This debate can therefore be regarded as a pre-text of contemporary debates on Australian identity. To what extent was proximity to Asia a threat or an opportunity? The Othering of far away, potential, Indian labourers reveals Australian national identity being formed conceptually as 'white', while fitting into wider nineteenth century notions of racial hierarchy. Examination of this formative period of Australian identity reveals how the separate but connected states of the British empire affected the development of one another's international identity.

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901* (Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1979).

## Indian Indentured Labour in Australia and the Empire

It should be noted here, that some Indians did come to Australia as labourers. My concern, however, is with external influence of India on Australian identity, and so I will focus solely on the imagined Indian 'coolies'. Only a small number of Indians were allowed into Australia prior to 1901. From approximately 1862 to 1901, the possibility of allowing large numbers of Indian indentured labourers was debated heavily at the governmental level.<sup>42</sup> The Queensland Indian Coolie Act of 1862 facilitated the immigration of Indian labour to work in northwest Queensland on cotton and sugar cane plantations. The act was 'extended' in 1882 and repealed in 1886 without any migration ever taking place.<sup>43</sup> There was a considerable backlash against the prospect of Indian migration, resulting in these acts being repealed in 1886. South Australia also considered having Indian labourers work to assist with the development of the Northern Territory.

There have been extensive studies of the mechanics of Indian indentured labour and their experiences, the most influential of which is Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*. Tinker eloquently shows how the indentured labour system came to prominence after the end of the slave trade, and the appalling conditions to which coolies were subjected.<sup>44</sup> Approximately 1.3 million Indians migrated as labourers around the empire. 500,000 went to Mauritius, over 400,000 in the

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<sup>42</sup> Salim Lakha, 'Australia' in Brij V. Lal, Peter Reeves and Rajesh Rai (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006): 383-388.

<sup>43</sup> Salim Lakha, 'Australia', 383.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (Hansib: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a critique of the dominance of Tinker's work, arguing for greater nuance and understanding of Coolie labour in their own right, see Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', *Slavery and Abolition*, 30, 1 (2009): 93.

British West Indies, 150,000 to Natal and 60,000 to Fiji. On top of this, 4.25 million Indians went to Burma, Malaya and Ceylon.<sup>45</sup> The huge numbers of Indian labourers that were transported around the empire gave weight to the idea that Indian labour might be used in Australia, particularly when Fiji took on such labourers in 1880. Colonial perceptions of geography also added to this belief: Indian labourers were regarded as appropriate for a certain type of labour in tropical regions, and Australia's north was considered as part of this Asian tropical geography.<sup>46</sup>

### **'Coolie' Labour for Queensland: For and Against**

Queensland began dealing with the Indian government over a renewed plan to use Indian labour in the 1880s. Proposed regulations were sent in early 1882, which were then amended by India, but were not ultimately acceptable to the Queensland government. The legislation was delayed for a further three years by a dispute over Queensland's desire for the Indian labourers to be forced home after their period of indenture.<sup>47</sup> There were two points that the Queensland government was uncomfortable with. First, Queensland did not wish to pay the salary of the Chief Protector because the person in this role was to be chosen by India. Their second, and

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<sup>45</sup> Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860-1902: A Study Based on Ship's Lists* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co, 1991). Lance Brennan, John McDonald and Ralph Shlomowitz, 'The Geographic and Social Origins of Indian Indentured Labourers in Mauritius, Natal, Fiji, Guyana and Jamaica', *South Asia*, 21, Special Issue (1998): 39-71; David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 156-57.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, *Anxious Nation*: 23-25.

<sup>47</sup> Tinker, *New System of Slavery*: 271-2. This is not intended as a complete analysis of this historical issue. I have, however, completed such a discussion in my MA thesis. See Davis, 'Sibling Rivalry'.

major concern, was changing the regulations to prevent Indian labourers from staying in Queensland at the end of their indenture.<sup>48</sup>

Thomas McIlwraith, the premier at the time, emphasized the government's concerns over Indians staying in Queensland.<sup>49</sup> He argued privately in negotiations with Calcutta that the regulations had neglected to prevent Indians labourers who had finished their period of indenture from working outside of tropical and semi-tropical areas. Essentially, the Queensland government was trying to ensure that no Indians could become free to work within the colony as white inhabitants would. This perspective is confirmed later when this request was disputed by India. McIlwraith writes:

In making the amendments to which your Government has taken exception, this government was influenced solely by the desire to confine these labourers to tropical and semi-tropical agriculture... by compelling them to return to India at the expiration of their engagements... and thereby prevent them from mixing with the European population in the several towns in the colony.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, McIlwraith was concerned about Indians becoming a permanent part of the Queensland population, by referring to 'mixing with the European population'. This was further clarified when in the second letter he wrote of his concerns about the Indians staying in the colony, stating that '...you will at once see how necessary it is to guard against the indiscriminate employment of this labour by other than those for whose particular benefit it is to be introduced.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> McIlwraith to Buck, 21 June, 1882, in L/Public and Judicial Files (hereafter PJ)/6/12/567 in India Office Records (hereafter IOR).

<sup>49</sup> J. X. Jobson, 'Palmer, Sir Arthur Hunter (1819-1898)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 5 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974): 390-392 and Don Dingan, 'McIlwraith, Sir Thomas (1835 - 1900)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 5 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974):161-164.

<sup>50</sup> McIlwraith to Buck, 21 June, 1882, in L/PJ/6/12/567, in IOR.

<sup>51</sup> McIlwraith to Buck, 21 June, 1882, in L/PJ/6/12/567, in IOR.

‘Indiscriminate employment’, an extremely unusual phrase, implies that the Queensland government was concerned about Indians becoming a part of the general population and lowering the wages of local workers.<sup>52</sup> If the Indian labourers could not be sent home immediately, they would surely become a permanent feature of North Queensland.

In 1883 Indian labour became a divisive electoral issue. McIlwraith was challenged by Samuel Griffith, leader of the Liberal party. McIlwraith supported Indian labour on the condition that the labourers were confined to tropical agriculture and had no choice but to leave the colony after the term of their indenture. By confining them to one type of labour and enforcing their subsequent departure, McIlwraith tried to calm fears that hiring such labourers would cause significant drops in wages. Much Australian economic thought at the time was based on the belief that increases in migration might increase unemployment or force wages down.<sup>53</sup>

Griffith was opposed to all coloured labour in the Queensland, but particularly Indian. One Liberal party candidate for North Brisbane, William Brookes, was concerned that Indian labourers might bring diseases such as measles, smallpox and cholera to Queensland. Disease, however, did not scare him as much as the Indians themselves, stating that ‘If all their terrible epidemics were to come together they would not constitute so terrible a calamity to Queensland as the permanent establishment within our territory of coloured labour’.<sup>54</sup> According to newspaper reports, this particularly

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<sup>52</sup> McIlwraith to Buck, 6 May 1883, in L/PJ/6/69/455, in IOR.

<sup>53</sup> Fear for wages related to non-white immigration had long been a driver for trade unions to support discriminatory policies. See, for example, David Pope and Glenn Withers, ‘Do Migrants Rob Jobs?: Lessons of Australian History, 1861-1991’, *The Journal of Economic History* 53, 4 (1993):719-742 and Jenny Lee and Charles Fahey, ‘A Boom for Whom? Some Developments in the Australian Labour Market, 1870-1891’, *Labour History*, 50 (1986): 1-27

<sup>54</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 August, 1883: 5.

vitriolic comment against Indian labour was met with applause.<sup>55</sup> He went on to state that death from these diseases would be preferable to living with Indian labour, as the coolies would take any job for less pay, leaving the white colonists with no choice but to return home.<sup>56</sup>

Griffith also made public speeches in opposition to Indian labour, raising his fears that the employer of Indian labourers might die or become insolvent and that there would be 20,000 Indians 'wandering about', unable to feed themselves or work.<sup>57</sup> Were this scenario to occur, the government (civilized as it was) would have no choice but to pay to feed them. In this speech, starvation is portrayed as natural and common to Indian people, as Griffith notes the likelihood of this scenario, because, 'in one province of India alone three million of them died from famine lately'.<sup>58</sup> Griffith played the 'jobs' card as well – raising another fear that Indian labourers might take the jobs of white labourers. Griffith and Brookes may have been playing to the crowd in these cases, overstating their cases to appeal to their supporters. These public speeches were, after all, campaign events. This discourse on Indian labourers is reflective of an identity forming in Queensland that was inherently white, and exclusionary on this basis. Through Othering one group, a politician implicitly presents 'sameness' to the crowd they are addressing.<sup>59</sup> Griffith and Brookes construct the possible Indian labourers a mob, an indistinguishable mass of 20,000: aimlessly wandering northern Queensland, destroying civilization, taking 'our' jobs, riddled with disease, infecting white workers, stealing 'our' young girls, unable to feed themselves, draining state resources – parasitic on the state of

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<sup>55</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 August, 1883: 5.

<sup>56</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 August, 1883: 5.

<sup>57</sup> *The Queenslander*, 18 August, 1883: 34-36

<sup>58</sup> *The Queenslander*, 18 August, 1883: 34-36

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, *Writing Security*, 99.

Queensland. These statements construct, reinforce and sustain identity through the function of creating a security threat.<sup>60</sup>

Fearmongering may be an easy and well established way to whip up support from a crowd, but it cannot work unless the fears are already there in some form. The citizens of Queensland already had an identity, but the political and social climate of the time, through colonial discourses and prelisting fears of wage collapse due to heavy migration, made them ready to hear these words of Griffith and Brookes. India in Australia's external relations occupied the space of a threat, as well as that of a colonial partner. The imperial connection drew Indian people 'closer' to Australian thought. The paternalism and the stereotyping of Indians of these statements is not unusual for the time in the context of colonial discourses. They would be a burden that the Queensland people would have to carry. Queensland, though, did not have to bear this 'white man's burden' if they did not wish to. Brookes and Griffith empowered the Queensland electors with the choice to say 'no'.

Of course, the debate was not completely one sided: McIlwraith put his case forcefully as well, albeit without ultimately winning the support of the majority of the voting public. When addressing the issue in a town hall meeting he began by attacking the populism of Griffith, stating that 'popularity hunting politicians... have always found a strong point in starting bad feeling between the races.'<sup>61</sup> He countered Griffith's argument that Indians would take away 'white jobs' by pointing out that no white men would want to work in the sugar plantations.<sup>62</sup> They certainly would not do so on an indentured labourer's wage. Gilbert Smith wrote from Victoria to *the Brisbane Courier* to write of his experiences in India with Indian labour.

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<sup>60</sup> Campbell, *Writing Security*, 100.

<sup>61</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 8 August 1883: 4-5.

<sup>62</sup> It should be noted here that some did work on the sugar plantations in question, though at far higher wages than would have been offered to Indian labourers.

He assuaged fears by writing that Indians were hard-working, steady and would have no desire to mix with the white population.<sup>63</sup>

In private, however, McIlwraith had ensured that Indian labourers would be forced to leave after their term of indenture. McIlwraith ultimately wanted to hire the Indian labourers, pay them little, confine them to the tropics and remove them immediately following their contract: thus aiding the sugar growers without allowing permanent settlement. The argument between McIlwraith and Griffith was conducted within the discourse of colonial racial ideology. It was over the extent to which Australia should be 'white', and European, or the extent to which it was part of Asia and whether or not the Indian connection could be of value to (tropical) Northern Australia. Two broad constructions of these Indian labourers were possible: one purely as the irrational, threatening Asian Other, and another which, while still accepting the discursive construction Indian labourers as threatening, suggesting that economic opportunity mitigated this threat. Others found no economic opportunity, indeed the saw the opposite, an unnecessary threat to local wages.

The intersections between race and class here require some consideration. McIlwraith infuriated the working class by his attempt to bring in Indian labour and was defeated easily in the July elections.<sup>64</sup> The fear that white jobs may be lost to cheaper Indian immigrants was an element of Griffith's victory. It is telling that it was these particular Brisbane seats and this particular crowd which so happily welcomed the approach of Brookes and Griffiths. As argued by Stephanie Brookes,<sup>65</sup> Australia has long narrated its region through different perceptions economic opportunity and fear for its security. In this case, the inner-city population of Brisbane had little personal stake in the development of North Queensland, allowing narratives of

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<sup>63</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 3 July 1883: 3.

<sup>64</sup> Dignan, 'McIlwraith, Sir Thomas (1835 - 1900)'.

<sup>65</sup> Brookes, "'Secure in Our Identity'".

race to dominate their thoughts in the absence of any personal economic benefit. Griffith and Brookes won the two north-Brisbane seats on offer.<sup>66</sup> While North Queensland sugar growers would have benefitted, it was still felt necessary to insist labourers return home immediately after their indentures ended. Other aspects of the McIlwraith government's labour policy, its planned transcontinental railway and allegations of corruption in land grants also counted against it heavily in the election.<sup>67</sup>

India may have been Australia's colonial partner, but it was also perceived as threatening. Indian emigration was stopped by widespread opposition, from political leaders in Queensland and from the voters who elected them. When the vision of Australia as a 'white' nation, became institutionalised just over 15 years later the door was finally shut on Indian indentured labour to Queensland. Of course, the concept of a 'white Australia' was just that, a concept. The Australian colonies did have an indigenous population, but they were not shown the same level of respect as other non-white populations in the British empire. Queensland still took Pacific Island labour, but did so partly because it was far easier to enforce their departure.

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<sup>66</sup> Dignan, 'Brookes, William (1825-1898)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brookes-william-3066>, date accessed: 15 May 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Roger B. Joyce, 'Griffith, Sir Samuel Walker (1845 - 1920)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 9 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983): 112-119. Waterson, in his very brief history of McIlwraith's time in Queensland, does not discuss the electoral defeat in detail, and fails to mention the Indian labour issue. Rather, he lists 'regional separatism' – the north-south divide – which was partly caused by the Indian labour issue. See Duncan B. Waterson, *Personality, Profit and Politics: Thomas McIlwraith in Queensland, 1866-1894* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984).

## 'Coolies' for South Australia?

The possibility of Indian labour in Australia did not end with the fall of McIlwraith. South Australia undertook its own separate negotiations with the Indian government concerning the possibility of hiring Indian labour to work in the Northern Territory, which was then being managed by the South Australian government.<sup>68</sup> Attempts were made up until the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 to bring in Indian labour. South Australia was keen to provide sugar planters with an option to move to the Northern Territory by offering a steady stream of cheap workers. There was some continued support for Indian labour. An editorial in the *South Australian Register* asserted:

To say that it were better that tropical Australia should not be developed at all than that coloured labour should be introduced is as unreasonable as it is unpatriotic.<sup>69</sup>

The perceived threat to Australia from non-white immigration did not apply to the Northern Territory: there was simply no 'civilization' to be protected.

This conception of Australia aligns with beliefs about race and climate that were a key part of colonial discourses of the period. Between 1896 and 1901, Parsons remained vocal on the subject, writing several 'letters to the editor' of the *South Australian Register*.<sup>70</sup> In 1897 he questioned whether Englishmen could '...work the fields during an Abyssinian or Society Island Summer? The question of labour is one of race, climate, and natural laws.'<sup>71</sup> Again, he followed

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<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of this period, see Alan Powell, *Far Country: A short History of the Northern Territory, Centenary Edition* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000)

<sup>69</sup> *The South Australian Register*, 27 April, 1892: 5.

<sup>70</sup> The South Australian Register became just 'The Register' post-federation.

<sup>71</sup> *South Australian Register* (Adelaide, SA: 1839 – 1900), 2 September 1896: 6.

this with calls for Indian labour, stating also that it was the only coloured labour that he had ever advocated.<sup>72</sup>

One year later, Parsons wrote to the *SA Register* again, stating that he was in favour of the white Australia policy – so far as citizenship and permanent residence were concerned. He continued by clarifying that federation would not ‘alter the climate of the north coast of the Northern Territory,’ asserting that the state of the Northern Territory economy was disastrous, and that the necessary work could only be done by coloured labour. He finally noted that ‘[a]lways remembering that by making friendly arrangements for return it is quite possible to preserve a “White Australia”’.<sup>73</sup>

Parsons stated his case again in August of 1901, once the Immigration Restriction Act had been passed and his battle was surely lost, perhaps more to defend his own opinions than to bring about change:

Utilization of the land is the best title to rightful ownership. It is the only justification for a white race to retain the tropical area of Australia, to the exclusion of Asiatics from a vast outlet for their crowded and often starving populations. Australia geographically belongs to them, for Australasia is South Asia.<sup>74</sup>

Even once the subject was essentially settled, Parsons was in favour of Indian labour in the Northern Territory, through arguing that whites could only justify owning the land if they developed it. This was based in a different perception of ‘Australia’ – the tropical north is not part of Australia if it is not used – rather it is *Australasia*. ‘White Australia’ then becomes possible even if Northern Australia were inhabited by Indians because it is not *really* ‘Australia’. Parsons

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<sup>72</sup> *South Australian Register* 2 September 1896: 6.

<sup>73</sup> *South Australian Register*, 22 October, 1897: 6.

<sup>74</sup> *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 6 August, 1901: 3.

expressed through colonial ideology the position that Australia was more a part of 'Asia' than 'Europe'. As such, his perception of Indian labour issue was fundamentally different from those viewing the whole of Australia as outside 'Asia'.

'Shared history' has often been used in recent discourse to tie India and Australia together.<sup>75</sup> When we look at the prominence of India as a threat in Australian colonial identity discourse a greatly different picture emerges: the spectre of India hovered over Australia as its identity grew through the 1800s, drawn closer by India's central position to the British empire. If we consider this in context to Australia's contemporary relations with India, these ambivalences become even more important to Australia's contemporary foreign policy. In the postcolonial period, Indian and Australian diplomats in the 1950s and 1960 struggled to understand one another, largely due to colonial experiences.<sup>76</sup> This 'shared history' is ultimately colonial history, and is largely responsible for the contemporary relationship which disappoints so many Australian strategic thinkers and policy makers. This period needs to be interrogated if we are to understand postcolonial Australian foreign policy and identity.

## **Conclusion: Colonial Identities and Australian International Thought**

The ambivalence in Australia's colonial identity through federation with regard to India was based on conceptions of the Australian Self: as part 'Asian' and part 'European'. While the severe

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<sup>75</sup> For example, see Rory Medcalf, 'History of shared sacrifice unites India, Australia', at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/history-of-shared-sacrifice-unites-india-australia/story-e6frgd0x-1226756899027#> Accessed 27 January, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> On this point, see 'Leadership and Bilateral Relations: Menzies and Nehru, Australia and India, 1949-1964', *Pacific Affairs*, 65, 4 (1992): 510-526.

immigration restrictions placed on Indians in 1901 would suggest that India primarily was primarily viewed as threatening, other evidence suggests that the position of India in Australian colonial thought was more convoluted. India was a crucial lifeline to Australia in the early 1800s. In its distance, India could be a benign friend to Australia. However, the thought of Indian labourers physically entering Australia aroused racial fears in large sections of the Australian population, evoking imagery of the over-populated, underprivileged Orient invading the open spaces of the Australian colonies. Parsons and McIlwraith illustrate a separate school of thought that was slightly more inclined to view the Indian connection as an opportunity: considering indentured labourers to be a possible economic benefit to Australia. Parsons' approach is particularly important as he went as far as to argue that tropical northern Australia was more 'Asian' than 'Australian', concluding that this economic opportunity would not violate the White Australia policy. Thus, some were able to view Australia's geography as an opportunity for development, the overwhelming discourse was one of Indian labourers as a threat to Australia's 'white' identity.

Australia's national identity has historically been obsessed with 'race'. This issue has gradually been overcome (at least in an explicit sense) in Australian domestic politics as well as in its foreign policy. Though Australia's national identity has shifted from explicitly racist to explicitly anti-racist, the perceived policy options have been slower to shift than nationalist discourse. I argue that, while this explicitly racial approach to Australian national identity has been filtered out, the broader privileged position of the 'Anglosphere' manifests itself in the popular perception within Australia that distant great and powerful friends are the best hope for maintaining peace and security. In this sense, colonial discourses from the nineteenth century can be viewed as crucial in forming Australian national identity and therefore have had a lasting effect on the discursive and cultural space in which Australian foreign policy decisions are made. Australian engagement with Asia is still tempered by similar

constructions of threat and opportunity. The analysis of the historical foundation of Australian identity narratives can better help us to understand Australia's contemporary foreign policy. It is for these reasons in particular that we need to consider Australian identity, foreign policy and India-Australia relations as explicitly postcolonial.

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### **About the Author**

Alexander Davis is a PhD Candidate in international relations at the University of Adelaide. He has previously completed an MA in India's international colonial history at the University of Tasmania. His Phd is an examination the ways in which India's postcolonial identity has shaped its relationships with Anglosphere states.