

Reconciliation literacy: understanding the relationship between reconciliation contact zones and Aboriginal policy

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relationship between reconciliation media, ranging from Indigenous creative expression to government-sponsored Indigenous monuments, and the formation of Australian Indigenous identity. Rethinking contemporary definitions of Indigenous identity means looking beyond the ideological and visual agendas of reconciliation and at the way in which the definition of 'Aboriginality' is being redefined by the quest for reconciliation between 'black' and 'white' Australia.

Aboriginal Australians have been objectified based on their skin colour and 'blood', by their culture and connection to the land. Today, Indigenous Australians are (de)aboriginalised by discourses of reconciliation to justify Aboriginal land as a space of belonging for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This (de)aboriginalisation process, however, perpetuates three problems within Australian Aboriginal affairs: (i) it reproduces oppositional binaries between 'black' and 'white' Australia, (ii) it restricts the Indigenous right to self-determination, and (iii) it centres on visualising Aboriginal culture in the mainstream rather than mediating the human rights conflict occurring between remote and urban Indigenous communities.

By analysing reconciliation media campaigns, such as 'See the Person, Not the Stereotype', I argue that Reconciliation Australia's original intention to create unity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians using newer visual mediums, such as the internet, in turn assimilates the Aboriginal person within 'white' Australian culture. In other words, rather than reconciling the relationship between Indigenous and non-

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Indigenous Australians, the visualisation of Aboriginality reconciles the ‘white’ person’s anxiety over his/her past atrocities.

In this paper I call for reconciliation literacy: the ability to read, comprehend and identify the implications that reconciliation language, visual and/or oral, has on Australia’s national identity.

Introduction

As a foreigner, it has been hard to locate Aborigines on any level, least of all in person. Yet, when one becomes aware of their absence, suddenly in a way they are present.
(Langton 2003: 114)

At Reconciliation Place in Canberra, Australia, voices sing and Aboriginal songs play when people walk past motion-sensor sandstone monuments. As a visitor from the United States, I find that other tourists like myself visit these sites of commemoration and leave with the impression that Indigenous reconciliation is set in stone. Up the road from these commemorative sites, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy remains a historical site of protest for Indigenous communities. The visual and ideological disparity between the celebration of a shared journey at Reconciliation Place and the lingering anger that remains at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy reveals the gaps in Australia’s official recuperative rhetoric. There is a need to re-examine the relationship between these cultural reconciliation sites and the larger socio-political inequalities that still exist in Australia today (Sears and Henry 2002). Rethinking healthy futures for Indigenous populations in Australia means locating and critiquing significant ‘contact zones’ of reconciliation in contemporary Australia. Contact zones are public spaces, both physical and virtual, that re-establish and *reconcile* a relationship with the Australian past, the land and the Indigenous populations (Healy 2008). Australia’s cultural reconciliation campaign is a type of contact zone, one that, I argue, cuts out the larger discriminatory policies, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), from the picture frame. In this paper I show that, although reconciliation contact zones are important ways of acknowledging Indigenous culture in contemporary Australia, they often ‘cover up images we want to forget’, and contemporary policies such as the NTER that should not be ignored (Healy 2008).

According to Marcia Langton (2003: 120), the definition of Aboriginality has been negotiated by: (i) local Indigenous Australians, (ii) the symbolic and fictional constructions created by mainstream media, and (iii) the dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Reconciliation art projects, such as Reconciliation Place, follow the third method of defining Aboriginality proposed by Langton. In the effort to reconcile the relationship, however, the definition of Aboriginality inscribed in 'contact zones' like Reconciliation Place monumentalises and redeems Indigenous culture for the tourist gaze and further distances spectators from the current conditions in which Indigenous Australians reside (Dodson 2003: 34). There is a need to examine how contact zones – spaces of remembrance – also force people to forget (Rigby 1996: 3).

The examples of reconciliation contact zones I describe in this paper utilise a rhetoric of sameness, popularly known as 'closing the gap', to forgive and forget the past in order to build and promote equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This rhetoric gives the Australian population a preferential meaning of reconciliation, that is, the utopian ideal that forgiveness and equality will heal past violence and guarantee an equal future for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This preferential visualisation of reconciliation in urban areas, however, is only a fragment of the larger issues at hand (Freud 1962). Reconciliation rhetoric represses past and present contemporary human rights conflicts and ignores the diversity within the Indigenous population (Price and Price 2011). One has to question why tourists do not hear about the Northern Territory Emergency Response when visiting reconciliation contact zones.

I do not intend to say that the reconciliation campaign is harmful, as the campaign for reconciliation in Australia has helped produce cultural awareness about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Instead, I hope to call attention to the important reconciliation contact zones that displace past injustices and ignore current controversies. In this way, I call for reconciliation literacy, the ability to think critically about what these contact zones add to reconciliation discourse and how it relates to the current

lived lives of Indigenous Australians. Moreover, I show that the historical narratives of imperialism, mourning, myth and forgetting have not left Australia's public memory, but have *resurfaced* in various contact zones created by Australia's reconciliation campaign.

Staging Aboriginality: campaigns directed by white Australia

It is as if we [Indigenous Australians] have been ushered onto a stage to play in a drama where the parts have already been written. (Dodson 2003: 37)

The contemporary mediations of Aboriginality produced by Reconciliation Australia, a non-profit organisation established in 2000 to build and promote harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, function as audiovisual extensions of the 'local' identity crisis that began when European settlers first migrated to Australia in 1788. Although the events and media projects created by Reconciliation Australia seek to create harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the symbolic and cultural projects do little to re-establish a new relationship between the two (Reconciliation Australia 2010b).

In 1995 National Reconciliation Week was established to fund events and projects that seek to 'repair' and close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The 2011 theme, 'Let's Talk Recognition', encouraged Australian citizens to vote 'Yes!' on the proposed 2012 referendum on recognition of Indigenous people in the Australian constitution (Reconciliation Australia 2011). These reconciliation campaigns, however, turn Australia's reconciliation process into a stage where various reconciliation actants, ranging from media campaigns that educate non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal culture to businesses that adjust their structure according to Reconciliation Action Plans, perform idealised forms of 'Aboriginality' for a non-Indigenous audience. In other words, the reconciliation campaign has resulted in an explosion of contact zones. These contact zones appear in almost every sector of public life. They appear as advertisements inside trams, as videos on reconciliation websites (eg *Unfinished Oz*), as art magnified on Qantas planes and more. Although the ubiquity of these contact zones makes the importance of Indigenous heritage visible, they also

perform idealised and non-realistic versions of Indigenous experiences for the Australian population.

In 2009 the programmers for National Reconciliation Week created various posters and videos to address the week's theme 'See the Person, Not the Stereotype'. The poster depicts two faces, one Indigenous and the other appearing to be non-Indigenous, with a statement that forces the viewer to confront racial prejudice: 'Which one of these men is in a gang?' And the end line reads, 'We're hoping you couldn't answer that' (Dodson 2009). The actors used in the 'See the Person, Not the Stereotype' advertisement are also placed into an oppositional template that turns them into racial objects, not individual subjects (Langton 2003). The image of the seemingly urban Indigenous person lacks specificity and heterogeneity, which denies Indigenous diversity and assumes that Indigenous experience is the same for all Indigenous Australians. By equating the two 'different races' with the same social status, this advertisement underscores the government's assumed failure of Indigenous self-determination from the Howard era and accepts the inevitable assimilation of Indigenous culture into mainstream 'white' culture (Behrendt 2011). Although this advertisement gives the public visual 'contact' with reconciliation, its form erases cultural difference.

Unfinished Oz, an Indigenous literacy project created by Reconciliation Australia, launched a video and radio advertisement called the 'Fresh Eyes Campaign' on the tenth anniversary of the Bridge Walk for Reconciliation. The audiovisual contact zone featured familiar Australian faces and eyes, such as Ernie Dingo, Paul McDermott and Jack Thompson. Similarly to 'See the Person, Not the Stereotype', the video intercuts between extreme close-up shots of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians talking about how the 'true' project of reconciliation is about 'moving forward' and celebrating the similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians ('Reconciliation Australia fresh eyes' 2010).

The dialogue in the video encourages a future of idealised 'unity' and represses past and current violence. It is also important to note that each person in the advertisement wears a pair of 'coloured' contact lenses different from their 'natural' eye colour in order to underscore

the way that people must see things ‘differently’, that is from the ‘other’s’ perspective. By switching the eye colours, however, the advertisement superimposes the colonisers’ gaze over Indigenous perspectives and reveals how the subtlest gestures perpetuate racial differences. It also underscores the inherent contradiction present within reconciliation contact zones: on the one hand they celebrate a future of equality and, on the other, they confirm racial binaries.

Reconciliation Australia’s goal to educate the public about Indigenous Australians has also encouraged businesses to adopt Reconciliation Action Plans in order to restructure the way Indigenous culture is visualised to the public. For example, in May of 2009, Qantas refreshed their Reconciliation Action Plan and added a new section to their business called ‘The Spirit of Reconciliation’ (Qantas nd b). This section focused on bringing ‘Aboriginal culture on board’ through Indigenous employment, partnerships, the *Australian Way* magazine, and inflight entertainment. Unlike Reconciliation Australia’s advertisement, ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’, which sought to assimilate the image of the traditional Aboriginal Australian into ‘white’ Australia, Qantas’s ‘Spirit of Reconciliation’ preserves Australia’s oldest culture through tourism art (Qantas 2009). The organisation responsible for promoting Indigenous ‘culture’ on Qantas airlines, however, is Corporate Communications, a department in the ‘Tourism Australia’ sector of the Australian government. By putting Indigenous culture in the hands of Corporate Communications, Qantas Airlines’ reconciliation contact zone perpetuates Marcia Langton’s second definition of Aboriginality, the stereotypical construction of Indigenous people by mainstream media, and further distances spectators from understanding the present-day experiences of Australia’s diverse Indigenous population.

Qantas has also added traditional Indigenous art to the exterior aesthetic of its latest aviation technology. The cover of the 2009 Qantas Reconciliation Australia Action Plan features the ‘Yananyi Dreaming’ Boeing 737-800 aircraft, decorated with Indigenous designs by Rene Kulitja (Qantas nd a). Rene describes her dreamtime as embodying her ‘traditional place’ in the land. She says, ‘my picture tells about the landscape, the animals and the ants of Uluru’ (Qantas nd a). Her art was magnified ‘100 times’ and transposed on the exterior of the Qantas Boeing, and is now called what Qantas refers to as a ‘Flying Dreamtime’. The translation of

traditional artwork onto a modern plane, however, commodifies Rene's spiritual connection to the land for the tourist gaze. Felicity Wright explains, 'whereas settlers see an empty wilderness, Aboriginal people see a busy spiritual landscape, peopled by ancestors and the evidence of their creative feats. These divergent visions produce a tension, one that spills over into the world of Aboriginal art' (Wright 2000: 42). Thus, in an effort to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, this contact zone, Qantas's 'Flying Dreamtime', becomes subject to the 'fictionalisation' that occurs in mainstream tourism – it loses cultural meaning. As a result, tourists and airport dwellers misrecognise Rene's dreamtime as a 'general' signifier of Aboriginality, rather than her personal and intimate connection to the land. These reconciliation 'contact zones' are misrecognised.

In 2010 Reconciliation Australia released the first Australian Reconciliation barometer, which measures the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Reconciliation Australia 2010a). The barometer's website notes, 'the barometer explores how we see and feel about each other, and how these perceptions affect progress towards reconciliation and closing the gap' (2010a). According to the barometer report, however, trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has not improved since Prime Minister Rudd's national apology in 2008. Why is this? The study's approach to measuring reconciliation was flawed and asymmetrical. For instance, the barometer asked what non-Indigenous Australians are willing to do for Indigenous Australians, but it did not ask Indigenous Australians what they are willing to do for non-Indigenous Australians. People were asked whether or not they agreed that 'Indigenous people are open to sharing their culture with other Australians'. The barometer did not ask, however, whether or not non-Indigenous Australians were open to sharing their culture with Indigenous Australians. The barometer's rhetoric speaks to the flaws of the barometer report itself, which is a tool used to measure Aboriginality in relation to 'white' Australia, rather than asking questions about what needs to be done to improve relations.

Reconciliation contact zones have not significantly changed or altered the Australian national consciousness. One of my respondents said, 'Frankly, reconciliation, although symbolically

important, is considered a lot of hot air by some people when put alongside more pressing problems of Aboriginal people' (anonymous professor, La Trobe University, email interview, 28 April 2011). Perhaps, if these contact zones did not embed themselves within existing postcolonial infrastructure, such as tramlines and tourist outlines, their underlying intentions could be put under closer scrutiny.

Reconciliation contact zones as sites of misrecognition

My purpose in this paper is to examine the misrecognition that occurs at reconciliation contact zones. To take us back to the beginning of the paper I would like to reiterate the way western strategies of remembrance, such as the creation of monuments and statues, have influenced inaccurate interpretations of Indigenous events. For example, Reconciliation Place, a permanent art installation consisting of seventeen Indigenous sculptures, acknowledges and commemorates positive and important events that commemorate 'white' Australia's contribution to Indigenous reconciliation. For example, *Referendum sculpture* at Reconciliation Place memorialises the 1967 referendum, the decision that gave Indigenous Australians the right to vote (Lampart 2007: 3). The statue, however, creates a perspective that hides the failed implementation of the referendum shortly after its passage (Short 2008: 5). When the 1967 referendum was passed, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians were convinced that it would secure equality and self-determination for Indigenous Australians, but in fact it only gave the Australian government the right to regulate and impose 'white' law on Aboriginal history and culture (Short 2008: 20). Kevin Gilbert, an Aboriginal activist, said at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1967 referendum, 'If the Referendum hadn't been passed, we would have been further advanced because "white" Australia would not have fooled the world into thinking that something *positive* was being done' (quoted in Lampart 2007: 3). This sculpture underscores what a blunt instrument western law can be when representing Indigenous issues. *Referendum sculpture* as well as the other sculptures at Reconciliation Place thus cover up and cause visitors to forget the way Australia's government continues to legislate policy that assimilates Indigenous people with mainstream culture (Dodson 2003: 38).

While reconciliation contact zones portray a harmonious picture of Indigenous Australians, government policy paints a picture of Indigenous Australia as pathological (Waterford et al 2007). The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which is a series of law enforcements and social welfare provisions implemented by the government in August 2007 to protect women and children from the sexual abuse reported in the *Little children are sacred* report (NT Board of Inquiry 2007), has done more harm than good (Australian Human Rights Commission 2007). In 2007 the Australian Human Rights Commission produced a *Social justice report* conveying the controversial form of the intervention. It stated:

The most significant problem with the new arrangements identified by the Little Children are Sacred Report is the lack of capacity for engagement and participation of Indigenous peoples. This manifests as a lack of connection between the local and regional level, up to the state and national level; and as a disconnect between the making of policy and its implementation. (Australian Human Rights Commission 2007)

The NTER ignores the fact that many successful bottom-up community and network-based enterprises, which have grown in reaction to substance abuse, have helped support and improve the arts, tourism and natural resource management industries in the Northern Territory. If the government continues to enforce a top-down model that seeks to ‘stabilise, normalise and exit Aboriginal Australia’, Indigenous communities in Australia will lose their culture and kinship structures, which are crucial to their existence (Waterford et al 2007). What about the communities that are not violent in the region? Why do they have to suffer from top-down regulations?

Language enables and also disempowers (Foucault 1980: 11). If the language uttered within Reconciliation Australia’s contact zones gives agency to ‘white’ Australians or ‘Balanda’s’ world only, how will the fictionalisation of reconciliation’s progress end? How will people know that things are still wrong? Although the subtle visualisation of ‘Aboriginality’ in urban Australia promotes Indigenous culture as being valuable for all Australians, the art and discourse displayed within the contact zones paint over the continued violence. Instead of trying to translate, measure (eg the barometer), or superimpose ‘white’ language and law over

Indigenous culture, Reconciliation Australia should focus on funding campaigns that promote the positive community-based enterprises created by Indigenous Australians that address and have fixed problems such as substance abuse (Pascale, Sternin and Sternin 2010). Reconciliation literacy demands a recognition and remembrance of difference and heterogeneity; without it, the reconciliation campaign will continue to fictionalise progress and force people to forget. Thinking critically about the depiction of reconciliation at various contact zones does not mean debunking its cultural intentions, but understanding how even the most harmless depictions designed to help us remember can cause us to forget that new policies that support Indigenous diversity are greatly needed. The politics of reconciliation exist far beyond the picture frame, into the way we, as humans, choose to create, preserve and archive aspects of society's culture and repress others.

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