

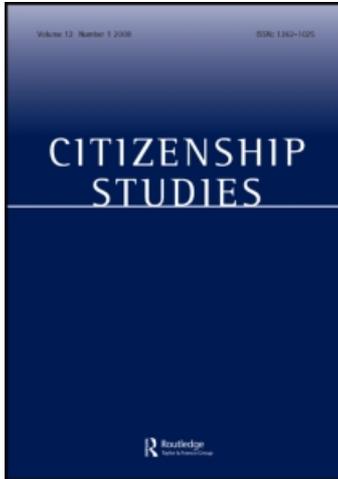
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A. Dirk Moses^{ab}

^a European University Institute, Florence, Italy ^b University of Sydney, Australia

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Official apologies, reconciliation, and settler colonialism: Australian indigenous alterity and political agency

A. Dirk Moses*

European University Institute, Florence, Italy/University of Sydney, Australia

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The burgeoning literature on transitional justice, truth commissions, reconciliation and official apologies tends to ignore the conditions of settler states in which ‘reconciliation’ needs to take account of indigenous minorities. The settler colonialism literature is worth including in the general discussion because it is exceptionally reflective about political theory (the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights) and ethnogenesis (the origin and viability of both settler and indigenous identities), challenging mainstream liberalism, in particular, to account for difference beyond platitudes about multiculturalism. This article highlights the postcolonial critiques of the Australian governments’ apology to the indigenous peoples of the country. The authors of these critiques seek to protect indigenous alterity from the Australian state, which they regard as irredeemably colonialist, especially in its liberal and progressive mode. The article suggests that Indigenous political agency transcends the resistance/co-option dichotomy presented in much of the apology’s commentary.

Keywords: citizenship; governmentality; identity; legitimacy; neo-liberal; political agency

Introduction

The burgeoning literature on transitional justice, truth commissions, reconciliation and official apologies which has appeared since the end of apartheid, Latin American dictatorships and the genocidal episodes of the 1990s is now impressively voluminous and varied (e.g. Olick 2007). In the main, however, its model of a traumatized society that requires one or more of the above-listed remedies is surprisingly rigid: an overturned dictatorship based on the political and/or ethnic–racial domination of one group over another now requires both ‘sides’ somehow to construct a viable society – together. Characteristic is the new book by Ernesto Verdeja, *Unchopping a tree: reconciliation in the aftermath of political violence*, which defines reconciliation in the following terms:

Reconciliation ... refers to a condition of mutual respect among former enemies, which requires the reciprocal recognition of the moral worth and dignity of others. It is achieved when previous, conflict-era identities no longer operate as the primary cleavages in politics, and thus citizens acquire new identities that cut across earlier fault lines. (Verdeja 2009, p. 3)

This conceptualization of reconciliation has much to recommend it, but is better suited to cases such as post-genocide Rwanda, where enemy identities are so recent and vociferous, rather than the less spectacular but more pervasive settler states of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA and Argentina, where systematic physical violence against indigenous

*Email: dirk.moses@usyd.edu.au

peoples concluded long ago with settler domination (Stover and Weinstein 2004). For these peoples, so often a tiny minority, the challenge has been to maintain their 'indigeneity' rather than to acquire new, shared, identities, which is often experienced as assimilation and group erasure. 'Reconciliation' is, therefore, a very different proposition in such settler states, whose common but varying identity and restitution dramas have stimulated a smaller and largely overlooked comparative literature (Pratt 2004, Patton 2005, Coombs 2006, Nobles 2008, Celermajer 2009). The settler colonialism literature augments the study of multiculturalism because it is exceptionally reflective about political theory (the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights) and ethnogenesis (the origin and viability of both settler and indigenous identities), challenging mainstream liberalism, in particular, to account for difference beyond platitudes about toleration (Iverson 2002, Levey 2008).

The Australian case is particularly instructive. Because, uniquely, neither the original British colonies in the late eighteenth or nineteenth century, nor the subsequent Australian Commonwealth (founded in 1901) signed treaties with indigenous groups, issues of constitutional recognition and land rights were ignored or repressed and eventually congealed with the question of reparations for racist abuse only in the last 15 years (Patton 2001, Morrissey 2006). And because these issues challenge the founding legitimacy of the colonial settlement, they have become the object of both intense public controversy and academic scrutiny. Indeed, the official Australian government apology to the 'Stolen Generations' of Indigenous children in February 2008 made international headlines and influenced the Canadian government's own apology to that country's first nations later that year (Diebel 2008). Rather than recount all aspects of the Australian case, I focus here on the apology, because it is seen as the crowning gesture of a 'reconciliation' process, and immediately became the object of sustained attention. Analysing the discussion about the apology and 'reconciliation' allows us to test how liberal and democratic political theory and anthropology can deal with indigenous difference.

This article highlights the postcolonial critiques of the apology and the associated 'reconciliation'. The authors of these critiques – mostly anthropologists – seek to protect Indigenous alterity from the Australian state, which they regard as irredeemably colonialist, especially in its liberal and progressive mode. This project insists on maintaining the indigenous/non-indigenous binary opposition, which the apology and 'reconciliation' threaten to erase in a sinister attempt to integrate Aborigines into the broader national community. Indeed, on this reading, the apology and 'reconciliation' represent but the latest technologies of state domestication and governance of Indigenous alterity; the guise of multiculturalism and progressive 'enlightened' thinking makes them all the more dangerous.

I will suggest that this reading is non-falsifiable in the sense intended by Popper, namely that it *presumes* the persistence of colonial domination, irrespective of legal and policy changes, by the tautological and essentialist reasoning that colonialism by definition cannot tolerate Indigenous alterity (Popper 1963). I argue that, notwithstanding the important insights of the postcolonial critique, it misunderstands the effect of the apology and ignores its reception among Aborigines, which was overwhelmingly positive. Postcolonial political theory can move beyond the stark alternatives of either 'resistance' or 'co-option' by heeding these Indigenous voices. In the final section, I suggest that Indigenous political agency entails conflict in a space that constitutes a national political community while recognizing difference. The options for Indigenous people are not resistance on the one hand and co-option on the other.

The apology and its background

An official 'reconciliation' process was inaugurated by the Australian Labor government in 1991 after its treaty negotiations with Indigenous groups broke down in the lead-up to the 1998 bicentennial celebrations of the British settlement in 1788. Indigenous leaders sought a treaty, assurances about sovereignty, self-determination, self-management, land rights and customary law that were too extensive for the settler-dominated parliament to concede. The government could not manage to gain the Federal Opposition's support for even a milder declaration and so, instead, it established a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to begin a 10-year process of consultation and education. At the same time, the reality of 'race relations' intruded into national politics. In 1991, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made Indigenous affairs a public priority, recommending, *inter alia*, 'reconciliation'. Then, in 1997, another report, called *Bringing Them Home*, about the various state policies of forcibly 'removing' mixed-descent Indigenous children from their families – in some cases until the early 1970s – provoked a storm with its claim of cultural genocide and call for reparations and official apology (HREOC 1997). Although state parliaments, churches and police forces duly apologized, the conservative national government steadfastly refused, citing 'practical reconciliation', i.e. the usual welfare regime, as its response. The intensive public campaign for a national apology eventually succeeded with the parliamentary gesture of the new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008. Successful 'reconciliation' seemed to be underway, if delayed by the 11-year hiatus of conservative rule at the federal level (Short 2008).

The terms of the apology were influenced by yet another feature of Indigenous life and politics in contemporary Australia: a parallel debate about the sexual abuse of children, as well as violence, alcohol, drugs and suicide more generally, in many remote Indigenous communities. Mounting public disquiet about these problems after a series of official reports culminated in the conservative government's military and bureaucratic 'intervention' into the communities of the Northern Territory (where the Commonwealth is sovereign) in mid-2007, a particularly radical manifestation of 'practical reconciliation' (Altman and Hinkson 2007). The temporal coincidence of the apology discussion with the 'intervention' debate, as well as his own inclinations and role as Prime Minister, meant that Rudd could not mention genocide in his apology speech, nor accede to Indigenous demands for reparations (Barta 2008).

Prime Minister Rudd's apology was short – only 360 words – but was followed by a long speech that elaborated its themes. The apology is reproduced here, as well as some of his speech, so we can assess its rhetoric of national inclusion, social repair and harmony, indeed redemption. These features tend to confirm the observations of postcolonial critics that the apology movement of the late 1990s enabled liberal settler Australians to work through their melancholic and stained national identity by inventing a new, cleansed one that now proudly incorporates Indigenous culture (Moran 1998, 2002, Gooder and Jacobs 2000).

On 13 February 2008, Rudd made this statement in the Federal Parliament and before members of Stolen Generations:

Today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations – this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia. (Rudd 2008)

In his subsequent speech, Rudd highlighted a member of the Stolen Generation whom he had come to know, Lorna Nangala Fejo, so as to personalize the fate of the otherwise nameless victims. No one doubted his sincerity and seriousness of purpose. As leader of the country, one of his concerns was not only the Stolen Generations but also the nation as a whole, and this agenda occupied equal space in his speech. The apology could not be 'abject', as conservatives feared (Henderson 2008). It had to undertake restorative work for the majority settler culture. Consequently, the gesture should 'remove a great stain from the nation's soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation ... open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia'. Reconciliation entailed practical measures to 'close the gap' (as the common parlance has it) in living standards – lest it been seen as 'glib compassion' (Albrechtsen 2008) – as well as herald a new era of respect of Indigenous peoples as equal partners in the national project. The apology, therefore, intended to puncture historical time by bringing 'the first two centuries of our settled history to a close'

and starting ‘a new chapter’ that embraced Indigenous people and their ‘great and ancient cultures’. Overcoming the racist exclusion of the past, the fresh start would entail unity: ‘Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, Government and Opposition, Commonwealth and State, and write this new chapter in our nation’s story together’ (Rudd 2008). Such was Rudd’s ambitious and perhaps theologically infused – he is a committed Christian – proposal for the ongoing reconciliation.

The postcolonial critique

Some Indigenous intellectuals outside Australia were unimpressed with the apology, not only because compensation was not in the offing, but also because it did not seriously question the terms of the Australian nation-state. This threshold for a successful apology is set very high: the ‘recovery of indigenous homelands’ by the reversal of land dispossession and granting of self-determination. These critics are inspired by the work of Native American scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred, who argues that ‘without massive restitution, including land, financial transfer and other forms of assistance to compensate for past harms and continuing injustices committed against our peoples, reconciliation would permanently enshrine colonial injustices and is itself a further injustice’. Because the Australian apology did not set out on this course, it ‘did not succeed transforming existing colonial relationships with indigenous people’. It was a ‘distraction’ (Alfred 2005, p. 152, Corntassel and Holder 2008, pp. 468, 472, 486).

This is essentially the position of the principled intellectual opposition to the apology and ‘reconciliation’ – academics in the postcolonial tradition. For them, apologies are more than a distraction; they are the latest technology of colonial domination. The means of oppression is no longer outright racism but the optimistic liberalism of multiculturalism that allows national elites and populations to think they have solved the problem of Indigenous (or minority) alterity. This style of argument is popular in North American anthropology in particular, which has made ‘late liberalism’ – the cultural correlate of neo-liberal globalization or ‘late capitalism’ – its object of inquiry.

Scholars working in a variety of fields are interested in how late liberalism rules without (much) outright violence. Its roots lie in the colonial past, where historians have pointed out that Europeans governed not only with outright terror but also by monopolizing categories of knowledge. Their dominance was ‘possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule’ (Dirks 2001, p. 9). Gramsci’s notion of hegemony – the production of the consent of the ruled – is a key category in this literature. In the North American context, the victory of the civil rights movement meant that liberal tolerance replaced racist violence in the 1960s, but African American anti-racist opposition was thereby negatively integrated into the new status quo that still remained structurally racist in many ways. From a counter-hegemonic perspective, only one form of opposition counts: one that insists ‘on identifying itself and speaking for itself, its determined demand for the transformation of the social structure, its refusal of the “common sense” understandings which the hegemonic order imposes’ (Omi and Winant 1986, pp. 69–70). Like some critiques of Rudd’s apology, political and legal change is often interpreted as a continuation of past domination and domestication of alterity unless a radical transformation is effected.

This style of reasoning has been combined with Foucauldian notions of governmentality, particularly the intimate relationship between humanism and oppression, to critique the modern state. In the colonial context, as Partha Chatterjee has noted, this relationship produces ‘the rule of colonial difference’ in which the postulated equality of

colonial subjects is forever deferred by the ruler's racist judgement that they are not sufficiently mature for self-government (Chatterjee 1993). In the case of the interwar French empire, for example, as the recent book by Gary Wilder argues, the icons of Francophone Négritude and anti-racism, Leopold Senghor, Léon Gontran Damas and Aimé Césaire, were unable to avoid complicity with 'colonial humanism', an implication about which they were acutely conscious. Ultimately, they were able only to present 'a politically moderate project to reform French colonialism' by seeking equality for Blacks within the empire's structures rather than break free and strive for outright independence (Wilder 2005, p. 253).

A worse dilemma faces Indigenous people in settler societies such as Australia. Unlike the independence that the French state could eventually grant its colonies, settler societies are constituted by colonists who come to stay and who cannot imagine decolonization. A prominent theorist of this formation, Lorenzo Veracini, notes that, unlike other colonial forms, the settler one is particularly dangerous for Indigenous alterities, because it does not attempt to maintain the racist colonizer/colonized distinction; on the contrary, it tries to overcome it by 'closing frontiers, extinguishing Indigenous autonomy, establishing nationhood' (Veracini 2007). Patrick Wolfe made a similar point earlier about the consequences of the Mabo High Court decision in 1992. Far from heralding a new and progressive stage in Australian law's recognition of Indigenous land rights, the decision was another stage in 'the sustained Australian state project of dissolving Aboriginal sovereignty into the larger Australian polity – a project whose contemporary bureaucratic incarnation relies heavily upon channeling Aboriginal resistance into officially detoxified arenas' (Wolfe 1992, p. 886, 1994). In this vein, the Welsh sociologist Damien Short has argued that the parallel reconciliation process of the 1990s was but the 'latest phase in the colonial project', indeed a form of 'internal colonialism', although he noted that Indigenous people highly valued symbolic gestures like apologies for past injustices (Short 2008, p. 147).

Multiculturalism presents the same danger as well, because, notes Veracini, it is 'easier than insisting on the need to decolonise settler colonial sovereignties ... and disturbing the foundational determinants of settler colonial polities' (Veracini 2007). This argument built on the well-known work of the Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage (1998) who had argued in *White Nation* that government policies of multiculturalism effaced genuine immigrant otherness by requiring it to become sociologically 'white' to qualify for citizenship participation. The American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli agrees. However rosy it may appear in theory, 'Australian liberal multiculturalism' is 'an ideology and practice of governance' that entraps Indigenous people in its snares by forcing them to perform domesticated renditions of authentic culture while excluding any genuine otherness – 'fundamental alterity' – that threatens its sensibilities. Liberalism is based on an irrational intolerance (Povinelli 2002, p. 5). A barely concealed impatience and irritation is evident with the unremittingly optimistic and self-satisfied tone of Australian multiculturalism, a tone apparent even in Rudd's otherwise sombre speech.

Alterity is not seen as a threat or challenge to self- and national coherence but is seen, instead, as compatible with an incorporative project, an 'investigation to absorption'. In short, in this liberal imaginary, the now recognized subaltern subjects would slough off their traumatic histories, ambivalences, incoherencies, and angst like so much outgrown skin rather than remain for themselves or for others the wounded testament to the nation's past bad faith. The nation would then be able to come out from under the pall of its failed history, betrayed best intentions, and discursive impasses. And normative citizens would be freed to pursue their profits and enjoy their families without guilty glances over their shoulders into history or at the slum across the block. (Povinelli 1998, p. 582)

Following Wolfe, Povinelli is particularly suspicious of the Mabo and Native Title regime whose legal imperatives amount to the 'resubordination of the Aboriginal society vis-à-vis European law and society', and is all the 'more insidious and cunning' than past colonial regimes because Indigenous of its progressive guise (Povinelli 1998, p. 591). And because alterity is distorted for the benefit of a renewed national imaginary, genuine political opposition is blunted: 'state multicultural discourses, apparatuses and imaginaries defuse *struggles for liberation waged against the modern liberal state* and recuperate these struggles as moments in which the future of the nation and its core institutions and values are ensured than shaken' (Povinelli 1998, p. 579, emphasis added).

But does what shaking core institutions, indeed 'struggles for liberation', actually entail? It is unclear. More teaching is required, wrote Povinelli in 2005 about the challenge of neo-liberal hegemony: 'we see that we have yet to produce, as we must for real change, a political pedagogy that does not guarantee economic continuity as the basis for social redistribution' (Povinelli 2005, p. 48). What 'real change' means concretely remains an illusive notion. The inability or reluctance to identify alternatives to the extant system of social redistribution may be a consequence of theoretical modesty about grand social theory after collapse of 'totality' as a theoretical category. But it may also be a problem inherent in a fetishization of alterity that is unable to produce a political theory that negotiates community and difference. We shall consider this proposition in the conclusion.

Another approach to alterity that highlights Indigenous resistance but is more grounded in the daily life of Aboriginal people was advanced in the 1980s and 1990s by Australian anthropologists like Gillian Cowlishaw. Rather than enlisting Aborigines in the struggle against globalization and neo-liberalism, she was interested in the production of specifically Indigenous communal and individual identities, especially in rural towns where there is interaction with the dominant white community. Her target was, *inter alia*, the traditional anthropological distinction between supposedly 'real' Aborigines who lived the traditional culture untouched by Europeans, and contemporary urbanized and semi-urbanized Aborigines who did not possess an authentic Indigenous culture. Through extensive fieldwork, she could show that Aboriginal identity emerged as an 'oppositional culture' to what she calls the 'implacable cultural domination' of small-town whites, with their 'coercive value consensus' of behavioural norms, including the civilizing efforts of well-intentioned 'do-gooders'. Indigenous people resisted their disapproving gaze by establishing their own 'arena of dignity independent of the judgments of the wider society' and by openly scandalizing it with public displays of 'unruly behaviour'. To the extent that such behaviour was self-destructive – through excessive alcohol consumption, perhaps – it was evidence of transmitted colonial trauma and thereby a product of white racism itself (Cowlishaw 1988, 1993).

A heated debate about romanticizing this 'oppositional culture' as an 'essentialized' identity ensued among Australian anthropologists, but no one doubted Cowlishaw's point about the social production of identity, irrespective of its evaluation (Rowse 1990, 1999, Hollinsworth 1992). Her supporters, such as Andrew Lattas, adopted the position of Jean-Paul Sartre that the essentialized identities of Indigenous people could not be equated with the 'blood and soil' rhetoric of fascism because of their powerlessness; to that extent, 'racist antiracism' (Sartre) was an entirely legitimate assertion of Aboriginal difference against the settler culture that threatened to overwhelm it (Lattas 1992, 1993). This position reflected the concern of some anthropologists that the promise of Indigenous self-determination was being undermined by governmental regulation and oversight, such that Aborigines would be eventually 'domesticated' and 'incorporated' into the state rather than 'independent' (Jennett 1987, Morris 1989).

We are presented with the hegemonic structures of the Australian state, and its various technologies of integration – including the apology – effacing their radical otherness of Aborigines. The logic of settler colonialism – namely the ‘logic of elimination’ – is being taken to its conclusion (Wolfe 1999, p. 167). What, then, did Indigenous leaders and ordinary folk, many of whom had travelled to Parliament House in Canberra to watch the apology on large public viewing screens, make of the apology? Did they experience it and associated rhetoric of reconciliation as an effacement of their agency?

Indigenous reactions to the apology

I quote their responses at length so that their voices are heard. They reveal a number of themes: first, that acknowledgement of their suffering was personally significant and, second, that they now felt part of the national story, which was future oriented and optimistic. They were engaging in both an Indigenous and broader national journey. Third, integration into the political community ‘the nation’ did not seem to entail the effacement of their Aboriginality. On the contrary, their new feeling of full citizenship enabled them to make distinctive and enduring claims.

The apology was not seen by Indigenous peoples as a universal panacea, of course. Indigenous leaders Lowitja O’Donoghue, Mick Dodson, Pat Dodson, Larissa Behrendt, Michael Mansell, and others insisted that it was not inconsistent with and should not put an end to the demand for material compensation (Coorey 2008). ‘The Fight [for compensation] Continues’, declared Indigenous journalist Amy McQuire 11 months after the apology (McQuire 2008). And there was ambivalence from other Indigenous people. Walangari Karntawarra said, ‘I still have mixed emotions. It will probably be a year later before things start to happen and people start to feel Aboriginal people belong’ (Jopson 2008). Edward Alfred Lovett, elder of the Gunditjmarra Nation, said

So how can I accept an apology without proper compensation for all the injustices, pain and suffering that I experienced as an indigenous person that resulted from government policies and procedures? Words alone can never make up for the loss of family and for what many of us suffered institutions. The word ‘sorry’ cannot mean anything to me as an individual without compensation for the pain and suffering that occurred during the colonization and dispossession of my people. (Lovett 2008)

John Moriarty, the famous artist who was removed from his family as a child, was upset that the apology omitted ‘cultural genocide’, whereas Mick Edwards doubted that any gestures would suffice: ‘How can you compensate for a broken mind?’ (Cooke 2008, Karvelas and Rintoul 2008). And, as usual, Noel Pearson bucked the trend, deploring the lack of reparations and making the same points as Povinelli and others about the emotional gratification for whites that the apology represented, while criticizing the blanket condemnation of the past, which he noted was much more complex than presented by moralized history in national apologies. Consistent with his other writings, he did not want Aborigines to think of themselves as endemic victims so they can extricate themselves from state welfare and fashion-independent existences (Pearson 2008).

On the whole, however, the official acknowledgement of the Stolen Generation was welcomed effusively by Indigenous people. Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, said that the ‘national apology will directly benefit members of the Stolen Generations by validating their experiences and the rest of society as a whole by building a bridge between all Australians’ (HREOC 2008). Michael McLeod explained the effect of the apology thus: ‘I never expected to hear that in my lifetime. Personally, this is part of my healing process – just the recognition on that level.

It's moving and it's hit me' (Karvelas and Rintoul 2008). The popular Olympic athlete, Cathy Freeman, echoed these sentiments:

saying sorry will mean so much to so many people. It is going to be a really proud moment for us. For my family, it allows some kind of healing and forgiveness to take place where there is less anger and bitterness in the hearts of people. It takes away the pain. We will never forget, but this allows us to forgive. In the Prime Minister doing this, we are seeing understanding and acknowledgement. (Koch 2008)

The reaction of Christine Fejo-King, an Indigenous woman from the Northern Territory and co-chairperson of the Stolen Generations Alliance, was characteristic:

For members of the Stolen Generations, their descendents and families, it was a day filled with high emotions. We shed tears of sadness and joy. We hugged with happiness and for comfort. And for many of us, it was the relief and peace we had been searching for, for so long... Saying 'Sorry' was the right thing to do. Past government policies and practices of removing Indigenous children have damaged so many peoples' lives. Saying 'Sorry' acknowledged the past, the trauma it caused at the time, and the hurt and suffering it continues to cause today. (Fejo-King n.d.)

Full membership of the national community now seemed like a realistic possibility. Brian Butler, who had led the earliest calls for the Inquiry in the 1980s, said that the apology meant that 'we can feel that we are part of Australia. We are part of society' (Irvine 2008). Noel Tovey, who had been removed as a child, concurred: 'It wasn't just saying sorry for what happened, but I'm sorry for 200 years, and now we are all part of Australia. It's the start of a new beginning. It's hugely important' (Patty 2008). Chris Sarra, head of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, agreed that the apology made 'a profound difference'. It gave 'people confidence that here is a government that is prepared to do things with Aboriginal communities rather than to Aboriginal communities' (Coorey 2008).

The theme of 'national healing' was prominent in Indigenous responses. According to Christine Fejo-King,

the Federal Government's apology to the Stolen Generations was not just about healing for Aboriginal people. It was also about the healing of our nation. It was a proud moment when we, as a country, were mature enough to recognise a dark chapter of our history, face it, and look towards a better future for all. The act of saying sorry laid an important foundation stone for all of us to move forward together. (Fejo-King n.d.)

Marcia Langton, Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, likewise addressed this theme:

The nation would be healed if we could consign this history to our past by admitting that it was wrong to take children from their families in order to prevent Aboriginal ways of life and traditions from continuing. I ask that all Australians understand this part of our history and recognise that such terrible wrongs must never be repeated. (Langton 2008)

For prominent Indigenous legal scholar, Larissa Behrendt, the apology was part of a reparative journey for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The apology is ... another step in the healing process for many Aboriginal people who are on the journey home after being removed from their families. It's also another step forward in the broader narrative that Australians want to tell themselves about who they are, where they have come from, where our country is headed, and what the political value of *home* means in Australia. (Behrendt 2009)

Although the apology apparently took the past as its object, the repeated references to new national membership and journeys, 'going forward together', 'new chapters' and even 'rebirth', implied that it trained people's eyes towards open futures. Aboriginal actor

Ernie Dingo said, '[It is] a chance to rejoice, rebirth . . . knowing that what has happened over the last 80 years has not been swept under the carpet' (Irvine 2008). Ray Fine told a journalist: 'My family had been affected directly and I felt like a chain had finally broke from us. There's still racism to deal with but hopefully from this day we'll go forward together' (Narushima 2008). Rhonda Dixon-Grosvener, from a family that had 13 members removed, remarked, 'To hear this and see this and be part of this in my lifetime, it's made me feel that maybe there is a new beginning for Aboriginal people in Australia'.

These themes of a better Indigenous and common Australian future were ubiquitous in speeches by Indigenous leaders. Christine Fejo-King said that the apology cannot 'erase the memories and experiences that scar many members of Stolen Generations':

But it's the start of a new chapter. Now is the time for us to write a new future for all Australians so that no child will grow up to be discriminated against because of their race or the colour of their skin. And all children will have the same opportunities to achieve and be the best they can. (Fejo-King n.d.)

Chris Graham, editor of the *National Indigenous Times* 2008, who overcame his deep scepticism about the apology after the event, summarized his new position thus:

Rudd's speech marks the end of ignorance and arrogance. The work, obviously, is far from done. And don't doubt for a minute that Rudd won't be at the centre of plenty of disputes as we move forward. But in apologizing to members of the Stolen Generations, Rudd has provided a roadmap to the future for this nation, built on mutual respect and understanding. Or in his own words, a 'new beginning'. (Graham 2008)

Professor Mick Dodson, a member of the Yawuru peoples, co-chairman of Reconciliation Australia, director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University and co-chair of the original National Inquiry, echoed these notions when he said that 'The apology to indigenous Australians is not about dwelling on the past, it's about building a future'.

The significant action being taken today by the Australian Parliament will provide a foundation of respect on which we can build a proper relationship and work together to make things better. It is only one piece of the complex puzzle of reconciliation, but it is the corner piece that sets us on our way. I am inspired by this apology as an act of true reconciliation towards indigenous Australia. It allows us to move forward with honesty, an acceptance of shame about parts of our history and with courage, pride, maturity and hope. It is delivered in an environment of determination that may just see us addressing the unfinished business of reconciliation, demonstrated in stark terms by the 17-year life expectancy gap between our children. (M. Dodson 2008).

His brother, Patrick, chairman of the Lingiari Foundation and the founding chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, likewise hailed the historical significance of the apology for opening up both an Indigenous and a common Australian future. 'A simple word has opened the door to a better future for all. . . . In this process we have the liberating potential to forge a unique national identity and purpose; one that rises above the tragedy of our colonial and racist history and enshrines respect for cultural diversity as a pivotal cornerstone of our nation's existence' (P. Dodson 2008).

Behrendt referred to both a national and an Indigenous agenda. For the former, now constituted by an Indigenous and non-Indigenous collective 'we', there were common tasks.

For the Aboriginal people I spoke to, it was uplifting to see that so many Australians did not share Howard's view, one that had dominated for so long, but instead clearly understood that they could not escape what happened in the past and should acknowledge that, without guilt, but with a positive view about how we can do better in the future. (Behrendt 2009, p. 84)

Indigenous political agency

What these reactions show is that the reading of the apology and ‘reconciliation’ as nothing or little more than the continuation of colonial domination misses the point that most Indigenous people thought the terms of their national inclusion had changed significantly. The Indigenous sense of participating in the Australian national story as respected equals now seemed palpable, an experience that indicates Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions could be commensurable rather than only inimical (Morton 2003). This sense is consistent with analysis that breaks down the stark binaries of the postcolonial construction of frontier relations. Thus, where Povinelli pitched white law against Aboriginal interests in Native Title claims, the record shows that the law actually had to negotiate between competing local Aboriginal claims. The salient relationship was not binary but triangular (Rowse 2003). Likewise, as Tim Rowse has shown, Indigenous people co-administer government schemes and are not just their passive objects (Rowse 1999), though the state doubtless stands in an asymmetrical position of power *vis-à-vis* Indigenous groups. Not for nothing has Frederick Cooper complained about the tendency to depict colonialism as constituted by ‘the two stick figures of colonizer and colonized’, while also criticizing what has been called ‘occidentalism’, the caricature of the west and the Enlightenment in terms as equally one dimensional as orientalism of the non-west (Carrier 1992, Cooper 2004, pp. 47, 130–140). In this vein, some scholars have called for ‘resisting resistance’, tempering the romantic attachment to liberation struggles with a closer adherence to the anthropological data before them (Abu-Lughod 1990, Brown 1996).

On the non-Indigenous side, the apology and reconciliation process has called it to critically reassess past treatment of Indigenous people and how the country ‘might reconstitute itself to overcome the exclusions that compromise its moral and political integrity’ (Muldoon 2005, p. 251). What Jeremy Waldron has called ‘a society’s undertaking not to forget or deny that particular injustice took place, and to respect and help sustain a dignified sense of identity-in-memory for the people affected’ has clearly impacted on Indigenous people (Waldron 1992, p. 6).

How, then, might the complex Indigenous sense of simultaneous national belonging and enduring difference be rendered theoretically? The Aristotelian metaphysics implicit in the position that the ‘substance’ (capitalism, neo-liberalism) remains the same irrespective of its ‘accidental’ manifestation (racist violence, multiculturalism) – Popper’s non-falsifiability fallacy – does not account for Indigenous reactions to the apology. And, plainly, the kind of postcolonial preoccupation with alterity alone has been unable to yield concrete entreaties beyond ‘resistance’ and an utopian calls for ‘transformation’, ‘decolonization’, and an order that somehow transcends ‘economic continuity as the basis for social redistribution’. To account for Indigenous political intuitions, it is necessary to think beyond the options of ‘resistance vs. co-option’.

In the Australian case, ‘agonistic reconciliation’, one that indefinitely defers a common identity in favour of contingent and unstable agreements, might be the appropriate term (Schaap 2005). Other scholars have argued, similarly, that a totalizing harmony is not the apology’s only implication. ‘Negotiated forgiveness’ would require ‘a dialogue between the parties and ultimately for the wrongdoer to accept accountability and responsibility for offending actions’ (Mellor *et al.* 2007). The apology is only a moment in the process of negotiation, then, suggesting the opening up rather than closing down of political discourse, as the determination of Indigenous people to insist *both* on their autonomous agency *and* participate in the collective ‘we’ of the Australian political nation indicated.

The apology 'should be understood as a willingness to work together without a presumption of having overcome the past' (La Caze 2006). Far from the apology, reconciliation and multiculturalism representing greater menaces to Indigenous people than the explicit racism of assimilation, as supposed by critics of liberal governmentality, they signal that, perhaps for the first time in Australian history, non-Indigenous Australians are according Indigenous Australians the respect necessary for agonistic pluralism.

Postcolonial critics may object that such a dialogue not only presupposes a non-existent power symmetry but also a nefarious incorporation of indigeneity into mainstream discourses. The Indigenous people quoted above indicate that the situation is far more complex than the either/or dichotomy of resistance/co-option. Indigenous people in Australia did not think that the apology simply reinforced old norms (i.e. neo-colonialism), but opened a space for those norms to be renegotiated into a now open future. Far from experiencing apology as a new version of an old relational trope (assimilation), their words indicate that it opened a new relational space in which they would participate as subjects or authors of the national narrative.

But perhaps the indigenous voices are mistaken. They talk about a journey, the beginning of a process, but the process is foreclosed by the terms of the apology speech. There is a sunset clause inherent in the very concept of reconciliation, an element that does not indicate an open-ended discussion. After all, the Federal Labor government that apologized is also continuing its predecessors' 'intervention', albeit in moderated form, to which many Indigenous leaders object in terms of human and Indigenous rights. At least one Indigenous leader called the move genocidal, and many others denounced it as neo-assimilation or worse (*Daily Telegraph* 2007). If the apology was in keeping with Avishai Margalit's prescription for a 'decent society' because it ended racist humiliation, the intervention's authoritarian terms is experienced by many Indigenous people as instituting a new form of humiliation. Although it is meant to reverse the 'benign neglect' that Margalit sees as a form of 'institutional humiliation', the intervention is also causing group shame and, therefore, humiliation (Margalit 1996, pp. 11–13, 143). In light of the intervention, then, postcolonial critics are right to express a degree of suspicion about the apology to the extent that it is taken to conclude reconciliation rather than inaugurate a searching critique of settler colonialism. After all, the policies of child removal were motivated as much by progressive liberalism as outright racism, both of which are in play in the intervention debate; indeed, the removal policies were justified as sort of intervention on behalf of 'mixed-race' children. Was the apology a form of 'cheap grace' that seduced Indigenous people, then, or has more room now been created for their agency?

It is too early to tell whether the apology has punctured historical time in the manner that the Prime Minister intended with this apology-speech act. But two other points can be made. The first is that Indigenous political agency could not be understood solely by the resistance/co-option binary before or after the apology. After all, Indigenous activism had, in part, led to it in the first place. Indigenous people have been mobilizing politically for their rights for many decades. Then, as now, they challenge the basic assumptions of the British settlement. Thus Dodson, a supporter of the apology and 2009 'Australian of the year', used his acceptance speech to suggest that 'Australia Day' – the national public holiday commemorating the landing of the 'First Fleet' in 1788 – be changed from 26 January because it marked the British invasion of the continent (Maley 2009). Moreover, Marcia Langton, an advocate of the Federal Government's intervention, also thinks that the Australian constitution needs to acknowledge Indigenous people so as to assure their 'honourable place' in the nation (Langton 2005). There is no inconsistency, then, between selectively affirming

aspects of Australian governmentality and challenging others. Indigenous political agency is not totally absorbed, or seduced, by the blandishments of the state.

Second, it is no longer self-evident that decolonizing Australia entails sovereignty and land restitution (as opposed to other forms of land rights) as claimed since the 1970s. In fact, a spirited debate is presently underway among Indigenous intellectuals about the meaning of 'indigeneity', Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood/peoplehood (Moses 2010). The resistance/co-option model does not account for this intra-Indigenous pluralism. In any event, the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary would likely persist even if full citizenship in terms of political participation and material conditions was reached, because Indigenous Australians also think of themselves as a distinct people (or peoples) (Adebanwi 2009). The self-understanding of settler states is gradually evolving as Indigenous people claim the rights in the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007), which represents a permanent challenge to their liberal universalism (United Nations 2007, Xanthaki 2007).

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