The Impact of Whiteness on the 1991-2000 Australian Reconciliation Process

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In 1991, the Australian Commonwealth Parliament unanimously passed legislation that instituted a ten-year process of reconciliation. The process aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001. One of the most successful outcomes from this reconciliation process was the significant level of support for reconciliation amongst non-Indigenous people. This was dramatically illustrated by the hundreds of thousands of people who marched for reconciliation across Sydney Harbour Bridge, and in cities and towns throughout Australia, in 2000. However, this substantial support from many non-Indigenous people obscured a number of issues regarding the involvement of non-Indigenous people in the reconciliation process. In this paper, I will explore several of these issues, including a nationalist view of reconciliation, a limited understanding of history, and an appropriation of Indigenous culture and identity. I will argue that these issues greatly contributed to ensuring that the reconciliation process did not achieve its aim of reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by 2001.

Keywords: Indigenous, Whiteness, Reconciliation, Nationalism

Introduction

In 1991, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth) 1991 (CAR Act) was unanimously passed by the Australian Parliament. The CAR Act established a formal ten-year process of reconciliation, which aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001. The CAR Act also created the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) to facilitate the reconciliation process. The process had three broad goals: to educate the wider Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues; to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and; to investigate the desirability of developing a document of reconciliation, and if considered desirable, provide advice on the content of such a document.2

During the ten-year reconciliation process, one of the most successful outcomes was the significant involvement of numerous non-Indigenous people in the process. This involvement was demonstrated in several ways including an increased knowledge of some Indigenous issues amongst some non-Indigenous people, the development of a ‘people’s reconciliation movement’, and the spectacular Reconciliation Walks in 2000. However, despite these prominent demonstrations of non-Indigenous involvement in reconciliation, the aim and goals of the process were not successfully achieved by the conclusion of the process in 2000.3

This disconnection between the involvement of non-Indigenous people and the failure of the aim and goals of reconciliation can be explained by the substantial impact on the reconciliation
process by practices of whiteness, which were largely obscured due to the significant involvement of non-Indigenous people. In this article, I argue that these practices of whiteness substantially contributed to the failure of the aim and goals of reconciliation. In particular, I discuss two interrelated practices of whiteness: first, the emphasis on the importance of a single Australian national identity, culture and history and second, the marginalisation of several issues concerning Indigenous people such as sovereignty, land rights and a treaty.

**Emphasis on a Single Australian National Identity, Culture and History**

One significant practice of whiteness that impacted upon the reconciliation process was the emphasis on the importance of a single national identity, culture and history. There are numerous illustrations of this practice within the reconciliation process, including the use of historical events, language and CAR publications.

The timing of many reconciliation activities were designed to connect with particular historical events. Peter Gale, in 2001, said that ‘Indigenous people are represented as part of the nation as citizens, with an emphasis on the significance of the 1967 Referendum, and the inclusion of Indigenous people as part of the Australian nation’. Thus, national reconciliation events, such as the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention, Corroboree 2000 and the Reconciliation Weeks, were specifically held on the anniversaries of the 1967 referendum. Further, as stated earlier, the formal reconciliation process was to conclude by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001.

Language was also utilised to create and encourage a single national identity, culture and history. Indigenous people were referred to as ‘the nation’s first peoples’, as ‘first Australians’ and as the ‘first peoples’ of Australia. Such language has been criticised by former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Chairperson, Geoff Clark, who argued, in 2005, that this language restricts the ability of Indigenous people to advocate for specific Indigenous rights, such as land rights and a treaty.

CAR publications also encouraged the development of a single national identity, culture and history. For the first several years of the reconciliation process, several CAR publications argued the desirability of Australia being ‘one nation’. Following the 1996 Federal Election, and with the advent and subsequent notoriety of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation political party, the term ‘one nation’ disappeared from official reconciliation literature. However, CAR continued to advocate for a ‘united nation’. Another example of this encouragement by CAR publications comes from its booklet *Sharing History*, published in 1993:

> A shared sense of history has the potential to be an influential agent of reconciliation ... By actively sharing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history and culture, non-indigenous Australians are able to lengthen and strengthen their association with this land ... The reconciliation process seeks to encourage non-indigenous Australians to deepen and enrich their association with this country by identifying with the ancient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in Australia ... It is only through indigenous Australians that non-indigenous Australians can claim a long-standing relationship with and a deeper understanding of Australia's land and seas.

However, this nationalist attempt by the reconciliation process to ‘lengthen and strengthen’ non-Indigenous peoples’ connection with Australia by merging Indigenous and non-Indigenous
peoples’ identity, culture and history would also blur the distinction between ‘Indigenous’ and ‘non-Indigenous’, thus restricting any challenges to the existing power relationships.

As part of this nationalist project, the formal reconciliation process attempted to appropriate Indigenous culture into the wider Australian culture. Several rationales were stated for this appropriation, including the allegation that ‘Aboriginal cultural property will enable non-Aboriginal Australians to heal the alienated self, become reconciled with the land that they inhabit, regain a lost mythopoeic realm and acquire a hitherto lacking spiritual continuity’.9

There are numerous examples of this cultural appropriation. These include: non-Indigenous people in Alice Springs asserting they had rights to country as they had acquired some basic Indigenous knowledge; an author claiming his being born in Australia granted him access to a ‘Dreaming story’; and singer John Williamson stating he felt like a ‘white Aborigine’.10 Ronald Wilson, the Deputy Chairperson of CAR from 1991 to 1994, spoke of non-Indigenous Australians having ‘pride in indigenous art, music and writing which now forms part of our culture’.11 David Malouf, a non-Indigenous writer, who co-authored CAR’s Declaration towards Reconciliation with Jackie Huggins, argued there should be ‘a convergence of indigenous and non-indigenous understanding, a collective spiritual consciousness that will be the true form of reconciliation here’.12 Moreover, Germaine Greer, a noted author and academic, argued:

Aboriginality is not a matter of blood or genes ... it follows that whitefellas can achieve a measure of Aboriginality ... if we think of Aboriginality as a nationality, it suddenly becomes easier ... acquiring Aboriginality is to a large extent the getting of knowledge.13

Several Indigenous academics, including Marcia Langton, Tony Birch and Sonja Kurtzer, have criticised this non-Indigenous appropriation of Indigenous culture in areas such as art, place names and literature.14 Further, they have argued that non-Indigenous people selectively appropriate those aspects of Indigenous culture that are non-confronting and non-threatening to their understandings of Australian identity, culture and history. Thus, Langton argued that non-Indigenous people often favour Indigenous art that they can label as ‘authentically primitive’ and is not ‘too self-conscious, maybe too political, worse still, “part-Aboriginal”, or a domain in which cultures clash’.15 Similarly, Kurtzer has pointed to the significant level of non-Indigenous interest in ‘non-threatening’ Indigenous literature such as Sally Morgan’s My Place (1987).16

This appropriation of Indigenous identities, cultures and histories by the wider non-Indigenous society hampers any attempt to achieve substantive and genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in which non-nationalist issues such as sovereignty, land rights, power relationships and treaties are recognised and addressed.

A related outcome to the emphasis on sharing identities, cultures and histories was the view, held by many reconciliation supporters, that reconciliation was a process that would deliver a final settlement of history; a final outcome of justice. Indeed, many non-Indigenous people believe closure will be achieved when the Prime Minister apologises to Indigenous people; there will then be no moral connection between the past and the present.17 However, this concept of history and justice, in which all disputes would be forever resolved, is not only completely unrealistic, but aims to ‘eliminate’ all of the important distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.18
CAR’s *Declaration towards Reconciliation*, released at Corroboree 2000, is an example of this approach to reconciliation. It contained the following statement concerning an apology: ‘As we walk the journey of healing, one part of the nation apologises and expresses its sorrow and sincere regret for the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apologies and forgives’.19

The inclusion of this apology in the *Declaration towards Reconciliation*, which was conditional on Indigenous people expressing forgiveness, clearly illustrated the notion that reconciliation involves a final settlement. The reconciliation process encouraged this notion of a final settlement, of closure, by predominantly emphasising the importance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people developing relationships and partnerships, rather than on the need to explore the moral issues of the contemporary repercussions of the invasion, massacres and genocide. Non-Indigenous people would apologise for past injustices and Indigenous people would accept the apology and forgive non-Indigenous people for these injustices. However, as Peter Digeser has argued:

> What is surrendered through the act of political forgiveness is the ability to use past wrongs or debts to make future claims. Victims and transgressors, creditors and debtors are reconciled through forgiveness in the sense that past wrongs and debts remain in the past … the past has been settled and overcome. Political forgiveness is, in part, a promise not to use the past against the future.20

**Marginalisation of Several Non-nationalist Issues**

Another significant practice of whiteness that impacted upon the reconciliation process was the marginalisation in the process of several non-nationalist issues of concern to Indigenous people. These issues included sovereignty, a treaty, self-determination, the addressing of power relationships and land rights. It is important to note that not all Indigenous people supported the inclusion of these issues in the reconciliation process. For instance, Evelyn Scott, the Chairperson of CAR from 1997 to 2000, opposed linking the campaign for a treaty with the reconciliation process. However, it is unclear whether this opposition from some Indigenous people was to the actual issues themselves or merely the connecting of these issues with the reconciliation process. Further, as will be detailed below, a significant number of Indigenous leaders did want these issues discussed as part of the reconciliation process and the failure of the process to recognise this was largely a result of the impact of whiteness upon the reconciliation process.

The marginalisation of these key issues was evident from the beginnings of the formal reconciliation process. The process was proposed by the Hawke Government following their reneging on commitments made to Indigenous peoples in the 1980s to implement two key Indigenous non-nationalist demands: national land rights and a treaty.21 The Hawke Government received significant support for its proposal to develop a reconciliation process from numerous non-Indigenous individuals and organisations, yet received less support, and occasional criticism and opposition, from a number of Indigenous people, who saw other issues, such as land rights and a treaty, as more relevant to them.22 However, the Hawke Government largely marginalised these concerns from Indigenous people and proceeded to develop and implement the reconciliation process.
The exclusion of these non-nationalist issues was also evident in the numerous educational resources developed by CAR throughout the ten-year reconciliation process. These resources included the *Study Circles* project, a quarterly publication, *Walking Together*, brochures, reports, videos, media promotions and information supplements for newspapers and magazines. The resources generally failed to adequately discuss a range of issues, such as sovereignty, a treaty, power relationships and self-determination, which fell outside the national parameters of the reconciliation process.23

Further, there was considerable concern from several Indigenous leaders that any documents of reconciliation developed by CAR should fully address issues such as sovereignty, a treaty and power relationships. Indigenous leaders Geoff Clark, Pat Dodson and Gatjil Djerrkura, for instance, raised these concerns following the release of the *Draft Document for Reconciliation* in June 1999. They argued that any document of reconciliation should be a formal agreement between Indigenous peoples and governments that specifically discussed issues such as Indigenous rights, a treaty, self-determination, customary law, land, power relationships, sovereignty and constitutional recognition.24 Similarly, many Indigenous leaders, including Michael Mansell, Mick Dodson, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Charles Perkins, criticised the proposed Preamble put to the Australian public at the 1999 Constitutional Referendum for failing to acknowledge any specific Indigenous rights.25

Despite these arguments from many Indigenous leaders, however, the final *Declaration towards Reconciliation*, released in May 2000, did not fully address the specific measures proposed by these Indigenous leaders, such as Dodson, Clark and Djerrkura. Indeed, CAR intended the document to be purely an ‘aspirational statement’.26 It contained no substantive commitments to issues that Indigenous people had long been campaigning for, including land rights, a treaty or genuine Indigenous self-determination and was far removed from what many Indigenous people were advocating for both before and during the reconciliation process.

Additionally, the Declaration contained nationalist phrases such as ‘we, the peoples of Australia’, ‘go on together’, ‘we share our future and live in harmony’ and ‘united Australia’.27 The Declaration also did not mention sovereignty and although the term ‘self-determination’ was used in the Declaration, it was coupled with the phrase ‘within the life of the nation’.28 As Leonie Monk has argued, the term ‘self-determination, while upheld in the Declaration Towards Reconciliation, was not part of the process of arriving at a document, and [had] largely been included as a political catch-phrase’.29

Also, as discussed above, the Declaration, which represented ten years of work by CAR, only offered a conditional apology: it did not unambiguously and unconditionally offer an apology to Indigenous people. This conditional apology cannot be seen as belonging to a substantial reconciliation process. Indeed, it fell well short of a genuine apology, which should be offered with no conditional expectations that the offended party will automatically forgive the offender.30

Finally, other CAR documents released in 2000, including the *Roadmap for Reconciliation* and the four national booklets on reconciliation, proposed numerous actions, yet similarly failed to substantially address many longstanding concerns of Indigenous people.31

Some members of CAR, including its Chairperson, Evelyn Scott, and Deputy Chairperson, Gustav Nossal, argued against the negotiation of a treaty following Corroboree 2000. Scott stated that discussion of a treaty at that time would ‘hurt rather than help take us forward’ and that
further education was required.\textsuperscript{32} She stated that ‘the treaty will not be advocated in the council’s final report (to parliament in December) because we are talking about reconciliation in Australia’.\textsuperscript{33} Nossal claimed that the issue was ‘divisive’ and could damage the support for reconciliation gained through the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk.\textsuperscript{34} Another CAR member, Ray Martin, also criticised the push for a treaty. In rejecting a treaty, Martin argued a nationalist line by stating that Australians would not accept ‘the idea of special rights or privileges’.\textsuperscript{35}

In December 2000, though, near the conclusion of the formal reconciliation process, CAR’s Final Report recommended the negotiation of a treaty.\textsuperscript{36} Interestingly, this inclusion was, according to former Chairperson of ATSIC, Lowitja O’Donoghue, largely a result of the efforts of then ATSIC Chairperson Geoff Clark, with the leadership of CAR, Evelyn Scott and Gus Nossal, opposing the reference to a treaty.\textsuperscript{37}

The non-nationalist goals of some Indigenous people, such as sovereignty, self-determination, power relationships, land rights and treaties, illustrated that many Indigenous people were not satisfied with the nationalist framework of the formal reconciliation process. Further, as these non-nationalist goals critiqued the nationalist framework by suggesting possibilities of an Australia without a single history, culture and identity, they were consequently marginalised, ignored or criticised as being ‘divisive’.\textsuperscript{38}

These reactions resulted in scepticism about how genuine non-Indigenous people were in their claims to desire a better future with, and for, Indigenous people. Historian Henry Reynolds, for instance, in 1992 argued, ‘we [non-Indigenous peoples] would like to recognise the Aborigines as the indigenous people of Australia but we don’t want that recognition to have any consequences that matter’.\textsuperscript{39} Similarly, Australia’s only Indigenous federal parliamentarian at the time, Democrat Senator Aden Ridgeway agreed, stating that, ‘non-Indigenous Australians are keen to embrace the rhetoric of reconciliation, so long as it doesn’t require them to take effective action to share the country’s abundant resources and political power’.\textsuperscript{40} Conservative political commentator Christopher Pearson similarly argued, ‘from a sceptical perspective, it’s tempting to see reconciliation predominantly as a way for parts of suburban white Australia to feel good about itself at minimal personal cost’.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The aim of the 1991-2000 formal reconciliation process to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000 did not succeed. A substantial cause of this failure was the impact on the process by two interrelated practices of whiteness: the emphasis on the importance of a single national identity, culture and history and the marginalisation of several issues concerning Indigenous people such as land rights and a treaty. These practices of whiteness also significantly contributed to the failure of all three broad goals of the reconciliation process. The education goal, despite some successes, was not fully achieved as the process predominantly did not educate the wider community about the broad range of Indigenous issues. The failure of the socio-economic goal was largely due to governments and the wider community not understanding the strong connections between addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and non-nationalist issues such as land rights and self-determination. The practices also resulted in
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minimising the success of the document goal as the documents of reconciliation developed by CAR generally failed to address a number of issues of concern to Indigenous people.

The reconciliation process largely failed to recognise that historical factors, such as the invasion, colonisation, massacres, genocide and theft of land, wages and children, and their continuing contemporary repercussions, ensure that there will continue to be conflicts and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

These conflicts and differences cannot be simply addressed and resolved through a nationalist framework, but rather require an approach that would recognise, accommodate and respect them. This approach would allow issues such as Indigenous rights, sovereignty, self-determination, a treaty and power relationships to be acknowledged, addressed and protected.

Notes
1 All papers in this collection have been subject to double-blind peer review in accordance with DEST requirements.
2 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth), 3-4.
8 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Sharing History (Canberra: AGPS, 1993), 1, 28-29.
10 Ibid., 171-72.
16 Kurtzer, 187; see also Marcia Langton, ' Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation’, in Grossman, 116-117; Jackie Huggins, 'Always was Always will be’, in Grossman, 65.
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34 Saunders and Rintoul, 1.


