Apologies and the idea of reconciliation seem to be fairly new phenomena, at least in terms of their connection with the agency of nation-states. The perceived logic of symbolic redress and redemption involved in national apologies may not be new, but it is only in recent years that we have encountered what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2000:173) calls “an ongoing wave of collective apologies”, noting that:

Since the late 1980s an increasing number of collectivities throughout the world seem to face one another [sic], demanding, offering, denying or rejecting the explicit recognition of guilt for offences committed from a few years to many centuries ago. Any offer, any request, brings out another one. There is little indication that the wave is likely to stop in the near future.

While Trouillot’s purview is global, my specific concern is with Australia, where the issue of “collective apologies” follows the same contours of a company of problems connected with colonial history that characterise such apologies elsewhere in the world. I am interested in the postcolonial, nationalist project (Gooder and Jacobs 2000) that Australians generally call “Reconciliation”, or perhaps “Aboriginal Reconciliation”, the latter indicating that, in this case, the problems have to do with the relationship between “indigenous” and “settler” Australians (although the transcendence of those categories is very much at stake in the project).

Reconciliation in Australia was officially embodied in something called the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1992, after being recommended and enacted a year earlier. The Council had 25 members representing a cross-section of indigenous and non-indigenous interests, whose aim was “to build bridges for a better understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community”. ¹ Its vision statement was to achieve: “A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all.” The Council, whose formal work came to an end last year, eventually identified and publicised eight “key issues” during its ten-year life:
1. “Understanding Country”—underlining the sacred nature of land (and sea) to indigenous Australians;
2. “Improving Relationships”—putting right a long history of “violence, dispossession, racism and the failure of government policies”;
3. “Valuing Cultures”—getting Australians to see that indigenous people in Australia “have retained a strong sense of their own cultural identities”;
4. “Sharing History”—aimed at increasing the profile of indigeneity in Australian history, in terms of both pre-contact and post-contact developments;
5. “Addressing Disadvantage”—focusing on altering the fact that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the poorest, unhealthiest, least employed, worst housed and most imprisoned Australians”;
6. “Custody Levels”—pinpointed as a special issue following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that was set up in 1989 and reported in 1991 (among other things recommending the formal process of reconciliation);
7. “Destiny”—highlighting indigenous Australia’s desire for self-determination in order to foster “greater self-esteem, purpose and direction”; and
8. “Formal Document”—a “code word” call for some kind of treaty (or “compact”) to be established between indigenous and other Australians, highlighting that no such treaty has ever been established in Australia (even though “the High Court decision on native title [Mabo] in June 1992 rejected *terra nullius*, and recognised indigenous Australians’ prior ownership and native title”).

As time went by, reconciliation came more and more to be associated with calls for apologies for what many consider to be the most troublesome episode (among many troublesome episodes) of indigenous Australian history—namely, the removal of Aboriginal children (largely of mixed descent) from their natal homes in the name of assimilation, leading to what has come to be called “the stolen generations”.² In 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s National Inquiry into the Separation of Children from their Families submitted its report, *Bringing Them Home*. Among its recommendations was a call for relevant bodies—“governments, churches, police forces and welfare agencies” (Gooder and Jacobs 2000:230)—to apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To date, all Australian state and territory governments have indeed apologised to indigenous Australians for their part in the “stolen generations”, as have a variety of other organisations (some of which played no part in the process of taking children)—this in addition to the initiation of a National Sorry
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Day (first held on 26 May 1998) and the compilation of a plethora of individual, signed expressions of sorrow embodied in “sorry books” from across the nation. The current conservative Federal Government has thus far steadfastly refused to follow through in spirited fashion, in spite of a limp personal expression of “deep sorrow” by Prime Minister John Howard at the 1997 Convention on Reconciliation, and a later arrangement by which Federal Parliament (rather than the Prime Minister himself or the Federal Government) could be seen to perform an apology. These “insufficient” apologies were abject failures, perceived by reconciliation sympathisers as completely lacking in illocutionary force (Gooder and Jacobs 2000:239). Although the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s work ended in December 2000, reconciliation and the Federal Government’s need to register an apology are still very much in the news and have been collectively identified as one of the defining features of left wing political agendas. Equally, resistance to reconciliation and the apology is a defining feature of the right, especially the highly conservative “new right” (towards which Prime Minister Howard conspicuously leans).

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

In a sense, one question I raise in this paper is: “Does any of this really matter anyway?” I take my initial cue from Bart Simpson, who, in an episode of The Simpsons that happens to focus on a diplomatic incident between Australia and the US, is charged with making a formal apology to Australia. This is not a matter of great concern to Bart, who simply says: “I can handle that. I’m an expert on phoney apologies.” The question I really raise, then, is the extent to which any apology to indigenous Australia is similarly phoney. In this I echo Trouillot’s conclusions, which argue that there is little scope for genuine “transformative power” in the current epidemic of collective apologies. While apologies may be felt to be genuine performances, they are singularly unable to “convince any collectivity” of their worth. Hence Trouillot calls collective apologies “abortive rituals”—performances that are “meant not to succeed”. The non-performing “rest of the world” looks at such apologies and “chuckles”, saying to itself: “we never really meant this, did we?” For Trouillot, this is partly, if not wholly, a matter of “an inherent connection between hypocrisy and liberal democracy” (2000:184). Everyone who apologises “feels good”, but the feelings have no reach in terms of practical effect. Prime Minister Howard in Australia articulated this very same position in an attempt to downgrade the significance of reconciliation. Howard and his sympathisers now claim that they are not really interested in “symbolic” reconciliation. They
only wish to make the reconciliation process “practical” by putting time, money and effort into addressing the material disadvantage experienced by indigenous Australians. But it is also apparent that an apology would be very much a personal embarrassment to the Prime Minister (cf. Gray 1999).

Trouillot is primarily interested in collective apologies that are largely grass-roots and collective in a direct sense. His paradigm case for expository purposes is the Reconciliation Walk that began in Cologne, Germany, in 1996 and retraced the steps of the first Crusaders. During their march to the Holy Land, the walkers “apologised for the crimes committed in the name of Christ since the first crusade” in a performance that “may seem like repentance gone amok” (Trouillot 2000:172)—a description that might thoughtfully be applied to Australian people’s participation in National Sorry Day. However, such collective apologies have also been more directly characteristic of the Australian situation, with hundreds of thousands of Australians having taken to the streets of Australia’s major cities over the past two years in the name of reconciliation. In this situation, however, there is a direct link between such mass collective apologies and individual apologies that are uttered by those who can speak from representative positions, such as and most prominently the Prime Minister. Indeed, the grass roots reactions of Australian reconciliation walkers have largely been a response to the perceived threat to the reconciliation project by Australia’s Head of Government. This reminds us of what is at stake: an organic relationship between the state and the people, between Australia and people who are Australians. It is one of the drawbacks of Trouillot’s position that, while seemingly aware of the status of individual apologies as representatively collective, he presents no analysis of the relationship between people and state in their construction.

Others, however, have made the nation-state the key focus of their inquiry when looking at reconciliation issues in Australia. Gooder and Jacobs (2000), for example, see the whole matter of apologising in Australia as part of a psychic effort to “postcolonise” national identity. For them, Australians (qua Australians) suffer from a history of colonisation and settlement, in the sense that indigenous Australians present to them a kind of belonging that is older and more profound than their own, or we might say, more traditional. This sense of unsettlement is compounded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suffering that is understood to be the legacy of the very same process of colonisation. Hence identification between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia is forged on the basis of “settler melancholia”. It appears, they say, that this group, whom they call “sorry people”, i.e., people who are “non-indigenous, mainly white, mostly from an Anglo-Celtic background, and largely middle class”,

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feels itself called upon to play a special part in the process of reconciliation. In the aftermath of the nation’s most recent attempts to recognise indigenous Australians and their suffering under colonial conditions, such settlers have assumed not only feelings of guilt but also the mantle of responsibility for assuaging such feelings. They do so on behalf of themselves and of the nation. These guilt-afflicted settler Australians feel the legitimacy of their national subjectivity to be compromised. They begin to experience a form of settler melancholia. The proliferation of apologies from settler “sorry people” is a symptom of this melancholia (Gooder and Jacobs 2000:232).9

This position may be broadly consistent with what Trouillot (2000) says about the highly personal, individualistic character of penitence in collective apologies, but it ties Australian citizens to a vision and representation of the nation as a larger body. Indeed, Gooder and Jacobs refer to reconciliation as “a self-evident nation-building project”, citing the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s own words “about the “marvellous opportunity” reconciliation provides for “all Australians to be participants in a worth-while nation-building exercise”’ (2000:233). Hence, it is easy to see why the most visible human sign of the nation—Prime Minister Howard—has been so roundly criticised for his lukewarm embrace of the reconciliation idea. To use a word that he is fond of using himself, the Prime Minister looks decidedly “un-Australian” to those who would say sorry.

There have been a number of other, related commentaries on matters associated with reconciliation that take this or a similar line. Most notable among them are those of Lattas (1990), Wolfe (1994) and Povinelli (1998), which elaborate on “the latent spirit of reconciliation” that Gooder and Jacobs (2000:236), following Moran (1998:110), call “settler envy”. Moran originally identified this alleged envy in the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s Key Issue Paper, Sharing History, which states:

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. A common misconception is that Australia is the youngest continent—only 206 years old—whereas in reality it is one of the oldest; both in terms of geology and continuous human history. It is only through indigenous Australians that non-indigenous Australians can claim a long-standing relationship with a deeper understanding of Australia’s land and seas, in a way possible to other nations who have occupied their native soil for thousands of years (Clark 1994:28, cited in Moran 1998:110).

The alleged envy, then, is of a kind of profundity that settlers are said to lack, but which indigenous peoples have in abundance. According to Lattas
(1990:67), this sense of lack is discursively constructed by intellectuals, who peddle their truths about settler deficiency “within a field of power relations that have an interest in discovering and monopolising the authenticity which we are ascribed as lacking”. At the same time:

Those discourses which claim to satisfy our need for an identity are often organised around the figures of the artist, the writer, the historian, the priest and the explorer. Those figures are the bearers of nationalism in our culture. They are also the merchants of authenticity, often peddling nationalism surreptitiously under the cover of authenticity. Increasingly, authenticity has become a carefully packaged construction of Aboriginal identity and culture which they colonise and market as our truth (Lattas 1990:67; also see Lattas 1991, 1992).

It would appear that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was born to join the ranks of these “peddlers of truth and authenticity”.

For Wolfe, this would bring the reconciliation agenda within the scope of what Renato Rosaldo (1989) has called “imperialist nostalgia”—“that curious phenomenon whereby colonising agencies often celebrate native society as it was before they came and destroyed it” (Wolfe 1994:127). Envy is hitched to appropriation, where the latter is for the benefit of the nation and not for the dispossessed. The Australian “nation”, says Wolfe, came into being in 1788 as the result of an initial invasion of indigenous Australia. This invasion was repeated over and over again and eventually called the sovereign state (as opposed to the colonies) of Australia in 1901 (the date of federation). In its current form, the invasion takes the form of giving to Aboriginal people the subject position of “repressive authenticity”, as when, for example, a remote and exotic totemic design from the Warlpiri people of central Australia was placed at the symbolic centre of the nation in Canberra with the building of New Parliament House in 1988. Yet, as Wolfe points out:

…the Western Desert locale from which the design originates is some three thousand kilometres from Canberra, whilst those to whom such events really are central—the dispossessed Ngunawal on whose country the national capital has been planted—go symbolically unregistered…. Thus the continuing dispossession… of historical Aboriginal subjects is effaced by the valorisation of an authenticated extrahistorical Aboriginality…. Hence the romanticised indigenous stereotype simultaneously performs two vital ideological services—positively, it grounds the national narrative in the local soil; negatively, it effaces the disruptive counter-narrative embodied by the dispossessed (Wolfe 1994:126-27).
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Povinelli (1998), like Wolfe (1994:121-23), connects this process of “domesticating the primitive” with the Australian High Court’s Mabo judgement. It has often been pointed out that native title in Australia is a kind of remnant title, which is therefore unlikely to render complex land rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, except in those circumstances where they can claim to have been least affected by colonisation and dispossession (because the Native Title Act 1993 demands that native title be articulated by extant laws and customs that can be shown to be continuous with indigenous traditions). However, Povinelli finds in this a link to the political psychodynamics of shame and sorrow characteristic of collective apologies. She refers particularly to the utopian vision of a multicultural “collective moment of shame and reconciliation” in which “the nation will… be liberated into good feelings and institutions” (1998:581), forged in large part by liberal faith in democratic institutions’ capacity to tinker at their margins to achieve equity and inclusivity.

Alterity is not seen as a threat or challenge to self- and national coherence, but is seen, instead, as compatible with an incorporative project…. In short, in this liberal imaginary, the now recognised subaltern subjects would slough off their traumatic histories, ambivalences, incoherences, 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 1998:582).

Mabo became implicated in this fantasy at the moment it renounced terra nullius in terms of revisionist history, especially when it referred to Aboriginal dispossession as “the darkest aspect” of Australian history, leaving a legacy of “unutterable shame” to the nation (Povinelli 1998:585-86). Yet, says Povinelli, to recognise Aboriginal “laws and customs” through this kind of recognition is self-serving in the extreme, since it seeks to repair only “the torn images and institutions of Anglo-Celtic Australians—the real addressees of the court” (1998:586). Hence, the true thrust of Mabo and the Native Title Act 1993 is to “distract national consciousness from the law’s actual aim: the resubordination of the Aboriginal society vis-à-vis European law and society” (1998:591). Povinelli maintains that “shame allows the law to perform the adjustments necessary to recuperate its authority and values” (1998:597), creating at the same time “an experience of intimacy” between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians (1998:598). For Povinelli,
this experience is based on a quite serious misrecognition of the alterity of Australia’s indigenous “others”, who, when they fail to live up to the standards of liberal, democratic traditions, become an embarrassment to their erstwhile sympathisers (1998:599-610). She concludes that official “intimacy… advances national hegemonic projects rather than subaltern standards or dreamings” (1998:610).

This, though in a more equivocal vein, is the same conclusion reached by Gooder and Jacobs with specific reference to “the postcolonial apology” in Australia. Settler fantasies of atonement, they suggest, have distracted from the perceived need for material recompense or compensation (2000:244). Moreover, they say that the alleged melancholia that drives the apology process is inherently conservative and narcissistic: conservative in the sense that it seeks restoration of a “lost object” (the national ideal) and narcissistic in the sense that an “apology is an utterance that awaits a response of forgiveness”, which in turn “works to eradicate the consequences of the offence and restore some form of social harmony” (2000:244). Finally:

We might note how inappropriate the term “restoration” is in colonial contexts…. The mutual participation of indigenes and settlers in an apology marks not a return to a once-held moral order, but the forging of a new one…. [The] indigenous subject is here asked (despite the past that reconciliation brings into view) to affirm the sorry people’s sense of themselves as being “worthy of love”. In the case of the postcolonial apology, settler Australians ask that they no longer be seen as belated arrivals, as illegitimately present, as colonial. In apologising, settler Australians ask indigenous Australians to see them more as they would like to see themselves: as settlers who properly belong, who have a kind of indigeneity. We might ask whether a situation such as this, where settler subjects are no longer seen as “settler”, is actually a little too postcolonial? For at the heart of every apology is a set of truths which should not and cannot be forgotten. And at the heart of indigenous peoples’ political power in Australia, as elsewhere, is the claim that they were here first, that they belong. What might be the implications of “dispossessed” settlers acquiring their own indigenised sense of belonging? Does this mark the beginning of reconciled coexistence, or inaugurate a more penetrating stage of occupation? Indeed, when the settler nation fantasises about coexistence, is it engaged in remembering or forgetting? (Gooder and Jacobs 2000:245).

A COUNTER-CRITICAL RESPONSE

These critical responses to reconciliation and its attendant “wave” of apologies are almost entirely negative in tone. It seems to me that they largely stem from a certain theoretical outlook that is not only...
“poststructuralist”, but also profoundly pessimistic—at least in terms of the alleged potentialities of any nexus between the Australian people and the Australian state. There are a number of levels at which this pessimism is pitched. First, there is a marked tendency to invoke neo-Freudian (often Lacanian) scenarios in which, for example, melancholia is invoked and interpreted along lines of pure self-interest—as a function of “ego defence”. Second, the ego—or self—in this case is interpreted as a wholly collective phenomenon, which is some kind of composite of power and discourse, invariably named “the nation” or “the state”. In classically post-Marxist, Foucauldian fashion, complex tributaries of power somehow amalgamate into the kind of collective personage extolled by Durkheim as the *sine qua non* of “society”. However, the Marxist emphasis re-emerges in the sense that this personage is one who exclusively dominates its lower orders: hence, discourse is simply the new ideology. Third, the nation or state extends its Durkheimian character by appearing to be transcendental, coming into being at some mythical point in history and maintaining itself through a process of “the more it changes, the more it stays the same”. Hence, the nation and its supporters, in spite of their manifest good intentions, must remain inherently conservative. Finally, there is a supreme kind of confidence that the social form of the nation-state is wholly relative to the history of the West. Australia comes into being with the British assumption of sovereignty in 1788 and manages to reproduce a “deep structure” of “invadedness” (Wolfe 1994) through all its chameleon-like surface changes. The renewal of this structure is in all key respects inherently different from the kinds of social formation exhibited by any other, including that represented by classical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. Hence, the ultimate outcome is the extension of “North Atlantic liberal” subjectivity (Trouillot 2000:178)—with all its contradictions, illusions of autonomy and bad faith—into the indigenous realm. So, while Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders can only emerge as losers by being party to any collective apology, they suffer the added indignity of playing the loser role in ritual performances that were never properly intended to be efficacious. They become party to a symbolic abortion—a miscarriage of justice.

I have analysed the thrust of some of these and related critiques elsewhere (Morton 1998) in terms of the projection of rebellious academic subjectivities into Aboriginalities conceived wholly or primarily, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of their resistance to Western hegemony.\textsuperscript{10} Indigeneity as resistance hence functions like an alibi, as in any objectivist analyses that occlude the observer’s role (Bourdieu 1977). Such poststructuralist positions are, I argue, highly essentialist in character, even as they eschew recourse to other forms of essentialism (particularly those characteristic of “repressive
authenticity”). Of the authors cited above, my position is closer to that of Moran, who, while giving limited credit to those analyses I have called "pessimistic”, retains faith in the possibility that we can think about “forms of coexistence which do not have to assume all the old baggage of nationalism” (1998:120). Indeed, he cites my own argument (Morton 1996), made in relation to the Mabo judgement, that indigenous Australians stand to gain in both status and power by continuing to engage the nation in its redemptive projects (Moran 1998:115-16). In particular, while the state and its citizens (including indigenous citizens) may well appropriate a form of positive, “liberalised” Aboriginality to themselves, there is no reason to believe that nothing of consequence will flow in terms of indigenous rights (see Frow and Morris 1999). “Appropriation”, “assimilation”, and “colonisation” (to which we might here add “incorporation”) are words whose meanings have been skewed and compromised partly by an intellectual over-investment in the nation as an agent of negative reciprocity. Yet, the nation is also the locus of demands for human rights—admittedly a “liberal” concept (cf. Moran 1998:117-18), but one which significantly runs counter to more predatory trends inherent in state and allied apparatuses.11

HISTORY AND MYTH

Here I wish to concentrate particularly on the question of relativism, for this anthropological notion of “difference” significantly underlies pessimistic views of reconciliation. Arguments which claim historical specificity for reconciliation in terms of post-Enlightenment liberal subjectivity (Povinelli 1998, Trouillot 2000) or historical/cultural incommensurability between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia (Povinelli 1998, Wolfe 1994) take it for granted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, as representative of any pre-capitalist identities, are fundamentally incompatible with those of (post)modernity. At some level this may well be true, as indicated by Povinelli’s (1998:599-610) discussion of the disappointment and “abjection” that occurs when indigenous Australians fail to live up to given standards of civility or rationality or even spirituality (Povinelli 2000:525). Similarly, it is indisputable that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders face a future in which the “eternal truth” of their invadedness (Wolfe 1994) will continue to mark them off as partially alienated from ways of life that were once uniquely their own, but which are now only available through the distorting lenses of (post)colonial history. But the notion of “loser” in such portrayals can border on a kind of intellectual totalitarianism when it is not set beside the opportunities that have arisen, and continue to arise, out of historical encounters between indigenous and
non-indigenous Australians. And what is largely at stake is the very character of that historical encounter itself—the “truth” of history.

In this respect, I want to make two observations about ways in which indigenous and non-indigenous Australians possess traditions that are commensurable. These observations relate, on the one hand, to the character of history itself and, on the other hand, to the character of the human subject who lives that history. I will deal with history per se first.

I believe that, in practice, it is almost impossible to disentangle history and myth. Inga Clendinnen, in her recent Boyer Lectures, has enjoined us to discover “good history”—“true stories of the making of Australia”. Such history, she avers, using terms that have become popular during recent public debates about reconciliation, is neither “Black Armband” nor “triumphalist white-out history” (1999:103). Still, she acknowledges the problematic relationship of such history to the present and the future, saying:

…while the past is past, it is not dead. Its hand is on our shoulder. As for what is to be done—I end with the words of the great British historian, E.P. Thompson: “This is not a question we can ask of history. It is, this time, a question history asks of us” (1999:103).

This, then, is tantamount to an admission of the impotence of pure history. If steps are to be taken towards the future, if things are to get done, if history is to inform practice (which is its oft-noted justification), then there must be some other ingredient injected into the past. That ingredient cannot come from the past itself, even though it may be inextricably entangled with history. It comes from the present, projects a future and gives history its value. Hence all history, insofar as it reflects contemporary values and projected futures, is articulated by narrative truth. It takes on the character of myth.

The question is complicated because this nexus has universal as well as particular import. Peter Sutton (1988), for example, has demonstrated that there are strict parallels between “classical” Aboriginal mythology and the use of foundational history (Neumann, Thomas and Eriksen 1999) in “post-classical” Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal myths, particularly those that are the focus of land politics, he argues, are more informed by history than we have been inclined to think. The stories or ‘dreamings’ are very often identified with known historical figures and their vicissitudes reflect the lifetime fortunes of those actual persons. People have traditionally found their identities in these stories: they are owned, and their proprietary nature is part of a political landscape, thus corresponding to the anthropological
Aboriginal history construction is a statement, moral and political, about the suffering, resilience and persistence of a colonised and displaced people, but it is also a search for a background and underpinning to what must now be assumed to be an indefinite state of future difference. In this sense it is the creation, as much as the explanation, of a separate identity.... In these terms [“post-classical” Aboriginal] history construction is remarkably similar in function to the Dreaming. The past is also the present, as one of its aspects. The past is not transcendent or remote, but underpins and echoes present and continuing reality. Just as the Dreaming is the person, in one facet of its complex nature, the Aboriginal person is likewise the historical Aborigine—not merely the survivor but the embodiment of the scarifying process of conquest, dispossession, resettlement, missionisation and welfareism (Sutton 1988:261, my emphasis).

Indeed, indigenous subjectivity is now largely defined in terms of an amalgamation of The Dreaming and colonial/post-colonial history. But this is naturally not an exclusively Aboriginal matter. The “Aboriginal person” of whom Sutton speaks is the same person who is party to the affirmation or denial of reconciliation through interactions with non-indigenous agents.

Yet the overlap between The Dreaming (as myth) and the colonial past (as history) is in the main obscured. In ordinary Australian English we have to do battle to try to force a resemblance, mainly because of the way in which “tradition” has been defined and compromised. In spite of a generation or more of scholarship that has sought to examine the organic relationship between the transcendence of tradition and the temporality of history, the public imagination still tends to position tradition exclusively as eternal repetition. Anthropologically speaking, the notion is aligned with a now largely (if not exclusively) discredited idea of culture as transmission from elders to juniors, so that any break in the process of transmission is defined as a “loss of tradition”, while “Aboriginal culture” is inevitably practised by the anthropological species Homo superorganicus (Wolfe 1994:109), a creature whose life is based primarily on self-perpetuating cycles of kinship and religion. Correlatively, history is defined in terms of the inventive agency of “juniors” (“the new generation”) at the so-called “cutting edge” of societies that exist in time. The encounter between “tradition” and “history” is then mapped on to stories of assimilation, which Jeremy Beckett famously alluded to in his oft-quoted conclusion to his essay on constructing a national Aboriginality:
Aborigines, like native Americans and others, face the unending task of resisting attempts, on the one hand to cut them off from their heritage, and on the other to bury them with it as “a thing of the past” (1988:212).

Hence myth and history do not simply become separate entities. Their organic relationship is actively denied. Furthermore, *history then becomes the only way to tell the truth and myth is, by definition, false*. Paradoxically, history then becomes the timeless repository of Truth—a claim that is enough to alert us that its mythic dimensions have been obscured.

Current debates about “black armband” and “white-out” histories invariably involve claims for and against each other in terms of truth and falsehood. Exactly how many Aboriginal people were massacred during colonisation—relatively few or a great many? Were Aboriginal children taken into care truly “stolen”, or were they “rescued”? Did indigenous people in Australia vigorously resist the invasion or did they collapse before a vastly superior power? Was this power morally as well as technologically superior or was it purely predatory and destructive of innocence? Is the traditional character of indigenous society to blame for current disadvantage or is this the result of colonisation? Were Aborigines the first conservationists, or were they responsible for extensive environmental change? Such arguments will never be settled by the empirical facts of history, even as those facts are lost, uncovered, invoked and denied over and over again. They will never be settled because, as everyone tacitly understands, even as they subscribe to the mythical truths of history, they are not, in the main, arguments *about* history. They are arguments about current policies affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and about the projected futures of those people, arguments about reconciliation and the need (or lack of need) for apologies.

The writers whose work I described and criticised earlier are not immune from creating mythic history. Indeed, intellectuals, as Lattas correctly notes, are among the primary purveyors of such Truth. In reconciliation and the enactment of apologies it is less a question of remembering or forgetting, as suggested by Gooder and Jacobs (2000), and more one of remembering and forgetting. The polarised alternatives represent either a downgrading of Anglo-Celtic Australian history and a magnification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history or the inverse situation. In both scenarios, one side’s gain is the other side’s loss—although the spectrum between extremes is broad. The commentators I scrutinised earlier undoubtedly lie on the side of magnifying indigenous history and downgrading colonial history, but, apparently unlike those dedicated to reconciliation, their binary logic is more thoroughgoing. They see reconciliation as a *continuation*
of colonial history. Indeed, they are prone to see anything “white” in this context as a colonising exercise that is, by its very nature, opposed to anything “black” (Morton 1988:366-67), except that ideas about liberal subjectivity have displaced more racialised tropes. Within this discourse, the liberal subject possesses such defining character that true reconciliation between indigenous (non-liberal) and indigenous (liberal) Australians is simply impossible. Indigenous Australians can only enter the national fold by losing their true history and identity, with their assumed alterity within a multicultural framework actually being a vitiation of what Povinelli calls their “subaltern standards or dreamings”.

DIFFERENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

But just how different are indigenous Australians? We are led to suppose that the liberal subject is uniquely Western and, by implication, that the idea of a “natural human being” or “natural person” with universal import, the same notion of “human being” that is at the centre of notions of human rights for example, is nothing more than a fiction produced by the globalised environment of (post)modernity. For instance, Trouillot suggests that the wave of collective apologies “both reveals and impels new stakes in the construction of collective subject positions and identities” (2000:173). He suggests that in order to be legitimate, contemporary collectivities must recognise themselves as being more than just accountable agents. They must also be moral subjects (2000:177), judged and witnessed by an imagined and virtual international community that “functions like a Greek chorus” (2000:181). Moreover, “the model for the construction of this new kind of particular is a folk composite of the individual subject of liberal discourse” (2000:178)—the autonomous “self”.

It is a liberalism of rights rooted in the individual. The collectivities projected in these apologies are not merely subjects. Rather, they are subjects with specific attributes that evoke in turn or together the subject of the market, the subject of civil or criminal law, the ego of psychology, and indeed, the ultimate subject of liberal individualism, an individual united by the memory of past actions yet unburdened by any history that precedes its consciousness. (Trouillot 2000:179, my emphasis)

So, in the contemporary world climate, being brought into the fold, as in becoming “reconciled”, means to become a part of a certain liberal tradition with a distinctive way of reading the past. Those who fail to measure up would be excluded from order itself—illegitimate in terms of their possession of non-liberal, “subaltern standards or dreamings”.

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Such anti-liberal conception, most starkly portrayed by Povinelli in relation to the Australian situation, does not give indigenous Australians much room to move. Acceptance of an apology becomes a kind of kiss of death. Yet the discursive move presupposes most of what it argues or implies. Certainly, indigenous Australians place a very high premium on individual autonomy\(^{17}\) and they have developed many social forms that depend profoundly on the assertion or affirmation of this autonomy as a normal condition of human subjectivity. These forms include mechanisms for redress and compensation, some of which have been readily likened (by indigenous peoples themselves) to what is needed to make relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians properly “square” (Rowse 1999). Autonomy is not incompatible with relatedness, and is indeed seen as an essential aspect of relatedness (Myers 1986). So, while there may be other reasons why we might hesitate to say that these indigenous forms of personal autonomy are fully liberal in character, this need not blind us to significant overlaps in indigenous and non-indigenous conceptions of persons and their relationship to “society”. Moreover, it is clear, I think, that many of these overlaps are ethical or moral in character.\(^{18}\) By the same token, it is evidently a mistake to see Western forms of individualism as the be-all and end-all of Western relationships, to be contrasted with more collective forms of being in other societies. This position, which became something of an anthropological fad when it was popularised by Clifford Geertz (1983), has been justifiably criticised as rendering a highly partial view of both the West and “the rest”.\(^{19}\) In fact, the idea of individuality as “united by the memory of past actions yet unburdened by any history that precedes its consciousness” might be taken as a near-adequate definition of the kind of mythic thinking that the West characteristically projects onto others allegedly “out of time” (Fabian 1983).

There are implications here for our understanding of reconciliation as allegedly based on melancholia. For example, if we concede that the ego is a key player in calls for apologies, must we also concede that its defensive postures simply call forth envy in the face of Aboriginality? Narcissism is a complex social-psychological structure that also supports feelings of sympathy and compassion, even as it also supports an unacknowledged tendency towards aggression, which is often projected onto others who refuse to conform to the narcissist’s idea of what is good. It is certainly the case that narcissism can only support relations with others through elimination or assimilation: full tolerance of difference is not part of its scope, because its orientation is one of identification with others. The alleged late 20th century extension of collective identity based on the self-generating liberal subject, to which Trouillot refers, must also be an
extension of this narcissistic logic—the extension of the ego. It is not incidental that, in reconciliation, we are often told that it is not simply a logic of guilt, but also a logic of shame born of sorrow, sympathy and compassion which drives rituals of apology (Gaita 2000). Yet the analyses surveyed earlier in the paper say absolutely nothing about these more positive sentiments, preferring instead to interpret reconciliation in terms of narcissistic pathologies. This is not to say that the pathologies do not exist, and I believe they do exist. Rather, it is to say that they co-exist with other forms of narcissistic identification which simply enjoin subjects to look to others as they would look to themselves. Not unnaturally, such citizens expect the nation’s representatives to act in accord with this orientation.20

Making wrongs right—surely the essence of reconciliation for many, if not all—therefore contains a certain levelling impulse. It aims to achieve balanced reciprocity, which in Australia draws the issue of reconciliation into the realm of the nation’s much vaunted and self-conscious egalitarianism: Aborigines should be given a “fair go”. Trouillot supposes that reconciliation has two fundamental, but contradictory, axes. In the first place, there is the aspect of ritual display, which produces a kind of “hit parade of victims and penitents” (2000:183). Yet this display is by no means thoroughly disingenuous: as Trouillot says, reconciliation “walkers are true believers. They mean their apology”—to which we may add that they may also feel their apology, so that the rituals themselves coordinate displays of sentiment as well as action which have a kind of clinical efficacy. Healing is the central aim of reconciliation for both penitent and victim, and healing is the central motif in what has come to be called “symbolic” reconciliation. But what about “practical” reconciliation?

This is where Trouillot identifies the second, contradictory axis. He says:

The very concrete matter of reparations does matter [in reconciliation projects], at some times more than others. Yet there is an inherent irony—as well as many practical obstacles—in framing that issue in the language of collective apologies. The very discourse of liberal individualism, the tropes of which allow for the projection of apologetic collective subjects, is fundamentally opposed to the recognition of collective rights, including therefore reparative “affirmative” actions. (2000:183, my emphasis)

We need hardly be reminded of this problem in the Australian situation, since the language of egalitarian individualism is constantly invoked by those who feel that Aboriginal people receive undue privileges in any kind of affirmative action. Indeed, as writers like Barry Morris (1997) have shown, there is a profound co-dependence between “naturalised” racist
images of Aboriginal people and the espousal of egalitarian ethics or the idea of “equality of opportunity”, whose bearer is assumed to be another instantiation of liberal subjectivity. Aboriginal people, it is often said, should be given the “same” opportunities as other Australians. But this rhetoric is hitched to more than one style of “anti-racism”, and it is espoused both by those who are for and against reconciliation, as well as both those who are for and against the idea of affirmative action. So, reconciliation is not, as suggested by John Howard, a symbolic distraction obscuring a practical task. It is one form of symbolism, tending towards the “good vibrations” of Aboriginal tradition, deemed by one group to be effective in mobilising for a practical task. Bad vibrations issue from elsewhere, in the game of mythic histories from the heirs to Hobbes rather than the heirs to Rousseau. Correlatively, the purported contradiction of liberal subjectivity is not in itself responsible for opposition to affirmative action, since everything depends on the type of history recognised by the subject in question. Perhaps, in the refusal to recognise either “black armband” or “white-out” history, it is true that certain individuals are “unburdened by any history that precedes their consciousness”. But we have seen that mythicising history is neither uniform in character nor something specific to Western forms of consciousness. Rather, it is something against which Aboriginal people can calibrate their own sensibilities and through which they may seek redress.

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Trouillot believes that apologies can be read ritually as performances that have both demonstrative and transformative aspects. Their transformative aspect depends fundamentally on a dual identity relation across temporal planes, easily met on pragmatic grounds in individual apologies. Yet in collective apologies, identity is always questionable. It is hard to establish on formal grounds, hard to assume on pragmatic ones…. Until and unless the liberal formulas now fundamental in the changing constitution of collective subjects manage to convince the populations on both sides that identity obtains in ways that make the performance meaningful, collective apologies will have little transformative power…. They are abortive rituals (2000:185).

It is certainly true that people in Australia are currently unsure of the implications of collective apologies, just as it is true that people are unsure of the grounds for projecting sentiments of compassion, sorrow and regret across generations. Arguments about ritual apologies do tend to revolve around uncertainty about the ability to close the distance between past and present.21 Similarly, sentimentally fixing up the past does not, in itself, fix
up the present, where inequalities remain intrinsic, co-existing alongside “freedom of choice” and “equality of opportunity” (cf. Trouillot 2000:183). But does this really make the rituals abortive in the sense described by Trouillot?

Reconciliation rituals are intended to include indigenous Australians in the nation, although this raises the question as to the terms by which this might happen. One might say in this instance that inclusion is recognition that indigenous Australians are actually part of the human race, a concept that is itself saturated in the symbolism of Western liberalism and which (as pointed out earlier) underpins the very idea of human rights. We are surely not surprised to find that, under “post-colonial conditions”, the idea of indigenous Australia is assimilated to forms of status that are consistent with this dominant discourse and that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people are increasingly being appreciated as “human beings”, requiring the rejection of a history in which that fact was greatly in question. The contemporary question is whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be allowed to play the game that the rest of the human race is playing, competitive as it is, or whether they will remain outside it. A positive appreciation of Aboriginality, the fellow feeling attendant upon it, and the regretful acknowledgement of Australian traditions that sought to eliminate Aboriginality—all essential to the reconciliation process—are the terms which allow for the inclusive possibility by which an equality of “being human” can be achieved. In that sense, reconciliation is not in itself abortive; as part of a broader programme (at least in terms of public rhetoric described well enough by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation), it offers the only possibility of bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the fold as indigenous Australians, while simultaneously surrendering some element of indigeneity to others. Symbolic as it is, this status of indigeneity is simply not negotiable and represents a vital good to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In itself, it is not altogether practical in a utilitarian sense, yet it operates in tandem with calls for practical measures to address indigenous disadvantage and potentially adds power to those calls.

We live in a time of increased geographic reach—globalisation—that carries with it a related trend of increasing the historical depth of national identities—localisation (Friedman 1994). Nobody should be surprised to find that (post)modern nations strive to maintain unity, even as they are dedicated to international governance and internal forms of pluralism. There is nothing intrinsically new about the projection of such “collective egos”, including their “retrojection” into mythical or foundational histories and archaeologies. For indigenous Australians, the question is whether or
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not they will be properly admitted, simultaneously, to a global “human race” and the national citizenry. Currently, the complaint remains that they are de facto, if not de jure, outside both. The process of inclusion and incorporation is ongoing, because:

reconciliation needs to be seen as a process, something which has a time scale of generations rather than years, not something that can be hurriedly concluded by statements of apology or draft documents. These are only appropriate if they are seen as part of ongoing historical understanding, recognition and reparation—points of beginning or landmarks on a long march, not the journey’s end (Attwood 2000:259).

Of course, abortive rituals are not beginnings—they are endings. Unlike Gooder, Jacobs and company, I see no point in playing midwife to postcolonial endings before they have had a proper chance to begin.

NOTES

1. This quotation and the summary that follows relies on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s pamphlet Reconciliation and its Key Issues.

2. See the relevant chapter of Barkan’s The Guilt of Nations (2000:232-61). Apart from matters covered by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s key issues, Barkan also draws explicit attention to the debates over the “stolen generations”, Australia’s national flag, repatriation of cultural property and the return of human remains. For an excellent collection of articles illustrating the breadth of Australian public debate over reconciliation issues, see Grattan (2000). For a thoroughgoing analytical history of the “stolen generations” issue, see Attwood (2001). Attwood captures the centrality of the “stolen generations” question as follows: in the 1990s, “the stolen generations narrative, which had previously been a collective memory for Aboriginal people, now became a symbol of the history of the colonisation of Australia for non-Aboriginal Australians as well, standing for a broader more complex past. On the one hand it constituted for indigenous people a condensation of their experience of dispossession and displacement, on the other it provided settler Australians a focus for their sense of shame as the descendants of a white Australia responsible for this history” (2001:206).

3. The Council’s final report to Federal Parliament is available at www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/2000/16/. A new body called Reconciliation Australia has now been set up to carry on the momentum of the Council’s work. Details about Reconciliation Australia can be found at http://www.reconciliationaustralia.org/.

4. The conservative (Liberal-National Coalition) government was returned to office in the recent election (2001). Pauline Hanson, one of the key figures in the new right’s push since the mid 1990s and leader of the One Nation
party, quipped that Prime Minister Howard won the election by adopting most of her policies.

5. These mass marches are not the only reconciliation rituals that have been organised in Australian communities. See, for example, the various “rites of reconciliation” described by Graham St John (2001), mainly in relation to the nexus between Aboriginality and environmentalist or “new age” agendas.

6. However, Australia’s recent governor general, Sir William Deane—the representative of the queen, and therefore the effective Head of State—was a vigorous, highly visible supporter of the movement. He retired from office in 2001. John Howard’s treasurer, Peter Costello, is also a supporter of reconciliation and joined the march held in Melbourne.

7. For example, see Trouillot’s brief discussions of apologies (2000:180-4). Apologies by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton are noted; but, while Trouillot is highly aware of the role played by the “international community” in witnessing apologies, he says nothing about the witnessing of “representative” apologies by a nation’s citizenry. I will return to Trouillot’s discussion of international witnessing of apologies later in the essay.

8. “Data on the social profiles of those pro- or anti-reconciliation are hard to come by, but it is often assumed that the pro-lobby is not only a middle-class minority, but also a minority of moralising liberals [who] find self-worth through self-abnegation and a sense of their own moral superiority” (Mulgan 1998:185). Mulgan himself favours a liberal attitude that speaks of “accommodation” and “compromise” rather than “reconciliation” and “consensus” in order to create “a framework of peaceful mutual adjustment” (1998:193). It should become clear later how and why I have some sympathy with this position, but I am also aware that it can be charged with being a “fantasy space” in which “the traditional” (indigenous) and “the modern” (non-indigenous) can “coexist without conceptual violence or producing social antagonisms” (Povinelli 1999:21). I should therefore state that I would not envisage “mutual adjustment” without there being, implicitly or explicitly, “conceptual violence” and “social antagonisms” as part of that ongoing process. Conflict that comes through “moralising” is but a fractional part of this.

9. Attributed melancholia is not the exclusive possession of the “non-indigenous, white middle-class”. Povinelli, for example, speaks of indigenous Australians themselves being “the melancholic subject of traditions”: that is to say, persons with “a desire to identify with a lost indeterminable object” (1999:23)—their “traditional culture”. However, she distinguishes between the two forms of identification: “Non-Aboriginal Australians enjoy ancient traditions while suspecting the authenticity of the Aboriginal subject. Aboriginal Australians enjoy their traditions while suspecting the authenticity of themselves” (1999:31). Unfortunately, this formula does not take into account the mirror effect of non-Aboriginal Australians suspecting their own authenticity when they question Australia’s colonial history. Neither does it register Aboriginal suspicion of non-Aboriginal authenticity.
10. Also see Brown’s useful piece, “On resisting resistance”, where he argues that anthropologists’ “attributions of resistance become an important rhetorical tool… [for reassuring] ourselves that the pursuit of what might seem to be esoteric ethnographic detail is really a form of high-minded public service”, and that such attributions provide an intellectual climate in which “everyone but the writer can be accused of harbouring a bourgeois consciousness” (1996:729-30).

11. Also see Moran’s (2002) general historical account of Australian settler nationalism, where he concludes that, while “indigenizing settler nationalism is open to the accusation that it is a form of window-dressing”, it is “indisputable … that the more sophisticated forms of [such] nationalism do represent a significant change, and provide a moral resource for the extension of indigenous rights and claims” (2002:1036). Of course, effective window-dressing does not necessarily mean that inferior goods are to be found inside the shop.

12. The Boyer Lectures are an annual intellectual event in Australia. Usually (but not always) delivered by a single prominent person through ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) radio.

13. “Black armband history” was coined by conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey to describe those histories most critical of Australia’s colonial past. “White-out history” is a phrase coined to counter Blainey’s popular words. “White blindfold history” is a common variant of this counter-punch.

14. “Dreamings” (collectively “The Dreaming” or “The Dreamtime”) have become internationally famous in recent decades through the sale of Aboriginal art. This art is, significantly, invariably marketed as being primarily about “groundedness”—about belonging to “the land”.

15. For general accounts illustrating the nature of such polarised historical debates in Australia, see, for example, Attwood (1996) and Manne (2001).

16. This does not deny the need for objective history. It simply qualifies the manner in which that history is processed. History is a kind of memorialisation, and, as Attwood states in relation to the stolen generations issue, “memory is collective and presentist” (2001:211), so requiring the skills of narrative analysis to arrive at its meaning.

17. See particularly the seminal work of Myers (1986), primarily based on fieldwork with Pintupi people (many of whom had grown up in the bush) in the 1970s. Others have since confirmed Myers’ findings in other parts of indigenous Australia.

18. As was recognised, for example, by Marcel Mauss in his classic comparative study of the gift exchange relationship (1969).

19. See, for example, the multiple critiques, positions and references in Morton and Macintyre (1995).

20. “Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s
voice or subject-position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (LaCapra 1999:722). I would argue that, within the range of responses to reconciliation in Australia, there are many that are in accord with LaCapra’s injunction.

21. See, for example, John Howard: “Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control. But we do have an obligation and responsibility to overcome their legacies for our fellow Australians” (2000:90). However, it is not as if the Prime Minister believes the past to be irrelevant, since he describes Australian history as an “overall story of great … achievement” (2000:90). It is this blind contradiction that leads many to believe that he is not serious about reconciliation, because reconciliation would require him to at least occasionally wear a black armband.